

Coins in the Classroom



Classical Coin Communication

Communication is one of those many human interactions that is not only critical to a functioning society, but also so prone to misunderstanding or misinterpretation. People communicate to each other through many different means, with the most effective methods often depending on the particular circumstance or what technology may be available at the time. The purpose of this lesson is to introduce students to ways in which coin collectors communicated before the computer era as a metaphor for investigating ways in which people may communicate when apart.

PURPOSE The purpose of this lesson is to introduce students to ways in which coin collectors communicated before the computer era as a metaphor for investigating ways in which people may communicate when apart.

BACKGROUND Present scholarship suggests that the first coins were struck by the Greeks in Lydia, which is now modern Turkey, in about 650 BCE. As the use of coins became more commonplace, their designs evolved into more elaborate and distinctive monetary and artistic expressions of the culture. Coins became a useful and convenient form of money and the number of cities producing these coins expanded greatly. A large number of circulating coins with varied designs resulted from this expanse and likely piqued the interest of cultured Greek citizens who were well known for their great appreciation of the arts. Although numismatic references in Greek literature are not common, it is perfectly reasonable that an educated and refined Greek citizen would include coins in their collection of art and other novel curiosities. Indeed, archeological excavations have uncovered collections of artifacts that suggest a purposeful accumulation of coins for study or display, separate from daily monetary use.

Over the many centuries, collecting and studying coins has increased in popularity, however, during much of that time numismatics was an activity of the wealthy and scholarly. Only in the last two-hundred years or so has collecting coins been a hobby where those with modest means could participate. In other words, for centuries it was the hobby of kings

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for a reason; numismatics was expensive, required an education, and sufficient leisure time.

As the passion for studying coins evolved, it was natural for numismatist to want to share their discoveries, thoughts, and especially, their coins, with other collectors. Today, that process is relatively easy and can be quite rapid. We now have scanners, digital cameras, efficient postal delivery, email, discussion boards, numerous numismatic books, and the Internet. If we want to share ideas with other collectors, many choices exist. As you might imagine, that was not always the case.

As coin collecting grew in the 18th and 19th centuries, so did the desire for numismatists to communicate with each other. Today if we wanted to show another collector a recent acquisition, we might scan the coin or take a photo and send the image to our fellow collector. However, these options were not available to the numismatists of yesteryear. Photography was only in its infancy by the mid to late 1800's and imaging coins remained an expensive proposition well into the 20th century, thus early collectors needed to find other ways to share images of their coins.

Essentially, these numismatists had to develop an effective and efficient method of communication. One such method was a written description of the coin. Collectors would describe the basic physical information about the coin, such as size, weight, and composition. In addition, collectors would also need to describe the design elements of the obverse, reverse, and rim. Finally, a report on the coin's state of preservation, or what we refer to today as the coin's grade, would be made. Much of this information required a familiarity with the hobby, which included an understanding of the specialized language of the field. As standard references became prevalent, a short-hand version of the description began to suffice. Where an elaborate and delightful 30 word description may be necessary to fully describe a coin in 1820, a sterile, abbreviated, five word description might be used today. The difference in the two descriptions is primarily in what is commonly understood by modern collectors and the vast array of inexpensive numismatic literature and references available to assist them.

Even with early collectors, a written description was not always sufficient or the most appropriate. Since subtle differences in apparently similar coins were common, the coin's image was a valuable communication tool. Early collectors often used line drawings or illustrations from wood or metal engravings to provide a clearer definition of the coin's imagery. An advantage of these methods was that they could be reproduced relatively economically and included in books and other publications. A disadvantage is that a modest artistic ability was needed for line drawings and specialized skill was required to create



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the engravings. Nonetheless, these illustrative methods were of great value.

When collectors wanted to communicate with one another on an individual basis and a drawing was not an option, there were other ways to image their coins. One such way was to lay a sheet of tracing paper over the coin and gently rub a piece of charcoal on the paper. Although the quality of the images varies on the skill of the collector and the relief of the coin, often decent likenesses would result. A second common method to exchange coin images was to make an impression of the coin using foil. This method required the use of a hand press, but was simple to accomplish. A collector would purchase or make a small press similar to those used to emboss correspondence, or using a modern perspective, a notary public hand seal. The “seal” elements were replaced with rubber or other similar material that would not damage a coin’s surface. The coin was placed in the press and a sheet of metal foil was placed over the coin. The press was closed and the foil took a faithful impression of the coin. So good were these impressions that minute imperfections or differences in the dies used to strike the coins could be distinguished. These foil models were then sent to fellow collectors and provided an excellent means to communicate to each other about their coins. Of all the “old fashioned” ways of imaging coins, foil impressions were the most advanced and the most fun!

Modern collectors use computer scanning or photography as a means to exchange images. So advanced are these forms of imaging as a means to communicate between buyers and sellers, that often scant or even no textual description accompanies the coin, other than price, of course. While an image without text may indeed be numismatically lazy, it does underscore how communication between collectors has evolved over the centuries and how the importance of accurate coin likenesses or images has remained a staple of numismatics. Regardless of the advances in technology, the most effective numismatic communication combines words and images to allow collectors to converse clearly. The value of this combination, of course, is not just limited to collecting coins.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. Ask your students to define communication and describe why clear communication between people is important.
2. Have your students list discuss in what different ways people communicate with each other. Challenge your students to think of communication methods other than verbal or written, such as using visual images or even secret codes.
3. After you have talked about various ways to communicate, ask your students to list which they believe are the most effective and clear



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ways for people to communicate. Help them to conclude that the best form of communication may depend on what needs to be conveyed.

MATERIALS NEEDED

1. Coins from various countries in the world as well as coins currently circulating in the United States. World coins can be purchased inexpensively from most local coin dealers for a few cents each or even by the pound.
2. Pencils and writing paper.
3. Tracing paper cut into approximately 3 inch squares.
4. Aluminum foil cut into approximately 3 inch squares.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Place the students into small groups in which they can work and dispense to each student several coins of the world or United States coins.
2. Have each student select one of their coins and write a description as if they were verbally illustrating the coin for someone who has never seen such a coin before. Be sure to have them include detailed information about the size, color, and design elements, or any other information that will communicate to the reader about the coin.
3. Ask the students to trade descriptions with another student in their group. After each student has read their respective description, challenge the students to select which the coins from their partner's coin group was described.
4. Now ask the students to select a different coin and create a drawing of either the obverse (heads) or reverse (tails) side of the coin.
5. Have the students trade drawings and see if they can determine which of their partner's coins was drawn.
6. Ask the students to select a third coin and create a rubbing of their selection. A rubbing is made by placing the tracing paper over the coin and gently rubbing the pencil lead over the tracing paper. An image will appear as the lead is distributed over the tracing paper. Alternatively, artist's charcoal can be used in lieu of a pencil.
7. Invite the students to exchange coin rubbings and guess each other's coin.



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8. As a concluding communication exercise, ask each student to select a final coin and place a piece of aluminum foil over the coin's obverse or reverse. Then have the students rub their fingers firmly over the foil and watch a detailed image appear.
9. Have the students make another exchange and choose the coin that matches the foil image.
10. While still in their groups, ask the students to compare and contrast the four different communication methods and which would they choose to use and why.

RESOURCES

1. Standard Catalog of World Coins (1901-Present), by Chester L. Krause and Clifford Mischler. Published annually, this is the primary general reference for modern world coins. At nearly 2300 pages and containing over 48,000 coin images, it is a wonderful resource for using coins in the classroom. Other editions are available for earlier centuries.
2. A Guide Book of United States Coins, by R. S. Yeoman and edited by Kenneth Bressett. Published each year, this book is the standard reference for United States coins and provides basic information coin specifications and designs.

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