

Eagles Continue to Soar

Featured on a wide variety of coins and in diverse poses, our country's national symbol enjoys a position of prominence.

HIS FOURTH of July brings good news from nature: the bald eagle, after decades of being in jeopardy from pesticides and pollution, soon may be removed from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's list of threatened or endangered species. Of course, from a numismatic perspective, bald eagles always have thrived.

After America achieved independence, a new icon was needed for the emerging nation, and the bald eagle was a natural choice. Native to North America, the bird had long represented courage and strength. The Mint Act of 1792 required that an eagle appear on the reverse of all coins larger than a dime (with the other pillar of American iconography, an allegorical image of Liberty, on the obverse). In another reflection of the bird's importance, the \$10 gold piece—the largest denomination authorized—officially was known as an “eagle.”

For more than a century, eagle designs on American coins were more folk art than ornithological studies. The raptors were shown in various unnatural poses, such as supporting a shield or using their beaks to hold a ribbon or a wreath. Some design elements even had international implications—the birds usually were depicted holding an olive branch and a cluster of arrows, representing peace and war, respectively. By facing toward the olive branch and away from the arrowheads, these eagles symbolically indicated that America preferred harmony, but was prepared for conflict.

Over time, eagles on coins came to be portrayed more realistically. The movement began with two, short-lived



▲ The Mint Act of 1792 required all coins larger than a dime to feature an eagle on their reverse. Examples include (from top) a 1906 gold \$10, a 1918 half dollar and a 1971 Eisenhower dollar.

Not Actual Size

19th-century issues, the Gobrecht dollar and the Flying Eagle cent, which featured the same motif.

The pace of change picked up during the artistic renaissance of the early 20th century, when three gold coins and the Peace dollar featured full-length profiles of standing eagles. Two additional eagles flew across the reverses of the Saint-Gaudens double eagle and the Standing Liberty quarter. Perhaps the most impressive bird appears on Weinman's Walking Liberty half dollar, filling the coin's circular space with its outstretched wings.

But this burst of realism didn't last. Some eagle designs were victims of economic circumstances, as production of gold coins and silver dollars ceased in the 1930s. Contemporary art movements also influenced numismatic design: the Washington quarter, introduced in 1932, featured an art-deco eagle. The tiny eagle on the Franklin half dollar was just an afterthought, placed beside the Liberty Bell to comply with legal design requirements. And the Presidential Seal, featuring a traditional Heraldic Eagle, was chosen for the reverse of the Kennedy half dollar.

Since then, eagle imagery has evolved in interesting, symbolic directions, representing American values and achievements. On the Eisenhower and Susan B. Anthony dollars, an eagle is shown landing on the moon, holding an olive branch of peace. Scenes with allegorical eagles are especially common on commemorative coins: one breaks free of chains on the 1994 Prisoner of War silver dollar; another holds a quill pen on the 1987 Constitution gold half eagle; and still another wields sculptor's tools on the 1991 Mount Rushmore gold half eagle. Other recent designs include a family of eagles on “American Eagle”

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gold bullion coins, and eagles soaring above various American vistas on proof platinum coins.

Today, ironically, the eagle's revival in nature coincides with a move away from eagle motifs on coinage. For nearly a decade, the eagle on the Washington quarter has been replaced by the designs of the 50 State Quarters® Program. The half dollar circulates only rarely, and the Sacagawea dollar's eagle is annually outnumbered four-to-one by the Statue of Liberty on the reverse of the Presidential dollars.

Fortunately, though, the eagle's presence on American money will soar in 2008, when the U.S. Mint will issue a three-coin, "Bald Eagle Recovery and National Emblem" commemorative program. As these new coins join dozens of other eagle designs from the past two centuries, numismatists and citizens will continue to find eagles on America's coins and in her skies.

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