

# A Numismatic Hail to the Chiefs

*Coins and paper money bearing Presidential portraits reflect our country's rich numismatic history.*

**A**merican Presidents have profoundly affected the nation's money. Presidential decisions have guided the economic policies behind coins and currency, and Presidential images have graced a wide variety of numismatic items. This month, as citizens choose a chief executive, let's look at the numismatic legacies of some previous elections.

**1789.** George Washington was an obvious choice for our first President. He later was eulogized as "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." He's also first in U.S. numismatics, having appeared on American money more often than any other historical figure. In another first, his portrait on the 1900 Lafayette commemorative silver dollar inaugurated the use of Presidential images on coins. The quarter issued for his 200th birthday in 1932 still is used today, and he's also on the con-

temporary \$1 bill. Besides paper money, so many medals and tokens bear Washington's likeness that an entire book is devoted to them—*Medallic Portraits of Washington* by Russell Rulau and George Fuld.

**1800.** Thomas Jefferson's election marked the first time in American history that power passed from one political party to another. During his administration, a numismatic item played an important diplomatic role, as Lewis and Clark presented Indian Peace medals to native leaders during their expedition. Jefferson appears on the medal's obverse, with an image of friendship symbolized by clasped hands on the reverse. This historic design is the basis for two current U.S. Mint productions: Jefferson's Presidential medal, and the reverse of a 2004 nickel.

**1860.** Abraham Lincoln was elected on the eve of the Civil War. That conflict's economic chaos led to several monetary innovations, including federal paper money, bronze small cents and copper-nickel 5-cent pieces. Lincoln was the first president to appear



The Washington Monument and quarter, two of the many tributes to our first President.

on a circulating coin—the 1-cent piece issued in 1909 for the centennial of his birth. Other numismatic tributes include the contemporary \$5 bill, and a 1918 Illinois commemorative half dollar with a pre-election image of a beardless Lincoln.

**1896.** William McKinley defeated William Jennings Bryan in a contest dominated by the issue of monetary standards. Bryan, in his famous "Cross of Gold" speech, advocated free coinage of silver to mitigate the plight of farmers and debtors. This means that the Morgan silver dollar is far more than a popular collectible—it actually represents a political chasm that once divided our nation. During the 1896 campaign, satirical "Bryan Money," typically large silver discs patterned after American coins, mocked the pro-silver platform. Bryan's defeat led to the adoption ☉



President Abraham Lincoln first appeared on the cent in 1909.

COIN PHOTOS: ANA MUSEUM/JOHN NEBEL

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## GETTING STARTED ■ *continued*

of the gold standard in 1900, and McKinley appeared on two early 20th-century commemorative gold dollars after his assassination in 1901.

**1904.** Theodore Roosevelt became our youngest President when he succeeded McKinley and was elected to his own term three years later. Roosevelt took a personal interest in coinage, enlisting noted sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens to design the acclaimed gold \$10 and \$20 pieces coined from 1907-33. He also supported sculptor Victor David Brenner's idea for a Lincoln coin. Roosevelt himself is on American coinage as part of the 1991 Mount Rushmore commemorative program.

**1924.** Calvin Coolidge was the only living President to appear on U.S. money. Because his term coincided with the 150th anniversary of American independence in 1926, Coolidge appears beside George Washington

on the obverse of a commemorative half dollar. (Ironically, Washington opposed placing current Presidential portraits on money.)

**1932.** Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected during a severe economic depression and banking crisis. Early in his Presidency, he ended the production and circulation of gold coins. Since then, gold is coined only for commemorative purposes—including, ironically, a 1997 \$5 piece honoring FDR. He's also on the current dime, introduced after his death in office and marking his involvement with the March of Dimes to combat polio.

Because money reflects society, it's not surprising that Presidents have played such prominent roles in the evolution of our coins and currency. These connections enhance numismatics by linking today's collectibles to the individuals and issues that shaped America's past.

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