

# The Lure of 20th-Century Silver

*Produced almost 100 years ago, these artistic pieces*

*continue to capture collectors' hearts and imaginations.*

**C**OINS ARE more than mere pieces of metal. Their physical properties and economic functions are important, to be sure, but there also is the aesthetic component to coin design to consider. Among American coins, the silver pieces introduced in the early 20th century are widely admired for their excellent imagery. The Winged Head Liberty (or Mercury) dime (1916-45), Standing Liberty quarter (1916-30), Walking Liberty half dollar (1916-47) and Peace dollar (1921-35) not only are miniature works of art, but also outstanding numismatic collectibles.

The early 20th century saw unprecedented change and innovation in American coin design. The transformation was completed with new designs for the silver dime, quarter and half dollar in 1916, and for the dollar in 1921. All were created by noted sculptors. Adolph Weinman, whose work adorns many federal buildings in Washington, D.C., designed the dime and half dollar. Quarter designer Her-

mon MacNeil was known for his sculptures of Native Americans, while Anthony DeFrancisci's creations included the *Independence Flagstaff* in New York's Union Square in addition to the dollar.

The new silver coins featured fresh interpretations of classic numismatic themes. Liberty wears a winged cap representing freedom of thought on the dime and a spiked crown on the dollar. She also strikes new poses: standing with a shield and olive branch (symbol of peace) on the quarter, and striding forward draped in a flag and holding branches of oak and laurel on the half dollar.

Three of the reverses portray naturalistic eagles: in flight on the quarter, with wings open on the half dollar, and standing on a rock inscribed PEACE on the dollar. The dime's reverse features a *fascies*—bundled rods and an axe head, symbolizing strength through unity—beside an olive branch.

Like most public art, these designs are reflections of their times. The 1916 issues feature olive branches of peace juxtaposed with symbols of power and patriotism. They represent a nation on the verge of entering World War I, hoping for peace but prepared for conflict. Five years later, the dollar expressed hope that such conflict was a thing of the past.

Two of the coins quickly underwent significant changes. In 1917 the quarter's reverse was rearranged, and Liberty's breast was covered with armor on the obverse. The 1921 Peace dollar is distinctive because production difficulties led to significantly lower relief for subsequent issues. All four designs eventually were replaced with historical portraits, marking the end of allegorical images on America's



▲ The 1921 Peace dollar symbolizes the hope for a world free of conflict and war.

circulating coins.

These issues might be gone from circulation, but they certainly haven't been forgotten by hobbyists. One popular collecting approach is to acquire a single example of each design for a type set. All are easily available in circulated grades. Uncirculated coins vary in price: Mercury dimes and Peace dollars can be found for \$25 or less, Walking Liberty halves in the \$50 range, ☉ and Standing Liberty quarters for around \$150. Date/mintmark collecting is significantly more challenging, with some issues scarce and expensive in all grades. Whatever your collecting method, uncirculated coins with few scratches or blemishes, strong strikes showing fine details and high-quality luster are most desirable.

All four of these silver coins are worthwhile additions to any collection. They evoke an important time in American history, demonstrate the possibilities of numismatic art and ☉



▲ The Mercury dime, Standing Liberty quarter and Walking Liberty half dollar convey different images of Liberty.

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illustrate the fun involved in coin collecting. In small, silver packages, they represent some of the best numismatics has to offer.

Several reference works contain useful and interesting information about these coin series. *Official American Numismatic Association Grading Standards for United States Coins*, edited by Kenneth Bressett, and *Making the Grade* by Beth Deisher explain the intricacies of grading.

You'll also find history, date/mint-mark analysis and collecting advice in David Lange's *Complete Guide to Mercury Dimes*, J.H. Cline's *Standing Liberty Quarters*, Bruce Fox's *Complete Guide to Walking Liberty Half Dollars* and Q. David Bowers' *Buyer's Guide to Silver Dollars and Trade Dollars of the United States*. Roger Burdette's *Renaissance of American Coinage: 1916-1921* explores the artistic development of the era's coinage.

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