

The Many Faces of Liberty

Whether she's walking or standing, hair flowing

or gathered in a cap, she's always a lady.

IN HIS Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln movingly described the United States as a nation conceived in liberty. American history certainly demonstrates the appropriateness of this description, and so does U.S. coinage. From the nation's founding to the modern era, images of Liberty have been central to American coin design. This month's celebration of Independence Day provides a fitting opportunity to explore the symbolism of Liberty on U.S. coins.

Liberty's place on American money dates back to the establishment of the U.S. Mint in 1792. Things could have turned out very differently, though, because an early proposal would have placed Presidential portraits on coins. After significant legislative debate, with expressions of concern for what some considered a monarchical practice, Liberty was chosen as a more appropriate symbol for the new nation. Each American coin was required to carry an emblematic image of Liberty, along with the word LIBERTY.

For the next century and a half, nearly all U.S. coins featured allegorical representations of Liberty. Most portrayed a portrait bust of a female figure, with variations in features and hairstyle. She is sometimes seen with a liberty cap—an ancient symbol of emancipation—and on some she is wearing an Indian headdress. There were a few departures from the portrait style, with images of a seated Liberty appearing on several silver coins.

Beginning in the early 20th century, Liberty was depicted in a wider variety of poses and garments. She holds a shield and an olive branch on the Standing Liberty quarter,

► The obverses of an 1803 Draped Bust (top) and 1859 Indian Head cent show two of the many treatments of Lady Liberty on American coinage.



approaches the rising sun while draped in a flag on the Walking Liberty half dollar, and strides forward bearing a torch and an olive branch on the Saint-Gaudens double eagle (\$20). She wears a spiked crown on the Peace dollar and a winged cap—representing freedom of thought—on the Winged Head Liberty dime (also known as the “Mercury” dime). These classic designs are widely considered to be among America's finest examples of numismatic art.

Over the course of the last century, allegorical images of Liberty have been replaced by portraits of ☉

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prominent Americans. Indeed, except for the Statue of Liberty on the New York state quarter, the only symbolic images of Liberty in recent decades have been on commemorative coins and bullion pieces.

Still, Liberty remains a vital part of American coin design. The word appears on the obverse of every modern U.S. circulating coin, displayed more prominently than ever. Allegorical images have been contenders for two recent dollar coins. A 1977 pattern, never actually used for coinage, features a classically inspired image of Liberty with flowing hair. Liberty also was considered for the current golden dollar, and, in fact, the winning design concept was officially described as “Liberty represented by a Native American woman, inspired by Sacagawea.”

With this blend of reality and allegory, 21st-century American coin design has come full circle. Although our present coins have moved away from symbolic representations, their designs nonetheless remain emblematic of liberty. The nature of the images may have changed, but the people portrayed on coins, with their contributions to American society, embody the same spirit of freedom that always has graced U.S. coinage.

The symbolism of liberty permeates our coinage, providing a unified, conceptual framework encompassing many diverse designs. As you watch patriotic fireworks light up the sky this Fourth of July, keep in mind that numismatic symbols of our country and its values are a part of our everyday lives.

Learn More . . .

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