

Reading America's Coins

In the land of E Pluribus Unum, coins and their inscriptions often convey interesting messages.



COINS ARE widely admired for the artistry of their designs, but imagery is only one part of their identity. The most basic form of communication—words—also is a vital part of every coin. Engraved letters and numbers tell you a good deal about a coin's "story": who authorized it, when and where it was made, its historical significance, what it's worth, and more.

You can learn a lot by understanding the inscriptions, mottoes and other writings on U.S. circulating coins. Some legends, like UNITED STATES OF AMERICA on a coin's reverse, provide important identifying information. Others describe our country's history and values. The inclusion of LIBERTY on the obverse—sometimes prominently, sometimes subtly—goes back to the earliest days of the Republic. IN GOD WE TRUST, which appears on all contemporary U.S. coins, dates from the Civil War. The motto E PLURIBUS UNUM, Latin for "Out of Many, One," refers to the union of the states, but it also describes America's diverse culture.

On a more practical level, a coin's economic role requires that its value be apparent. Most denominations are expressed as short phrases (like FIVE CENTS or HALF DIME), with a few abbreviations (such as "25 C" or QUAR. DOL.) and even some fractions (including $\frac{1}{100}$ on early cents). A few U.S. coins were not denominated and instead relied on size to indicate value. Interestingly, the dollar sign (\$) has not been used on U.S. coinage, though

it will appear on Presidential dollars starting in 2007.

A coin's text also reveals its origins. Dates and mintmarks indicate when and where a coin was manufactured, though not always precisely. Early coins often were made with outdated dies, and 1964-dated issues were



▲ Inscriptions found on U.S. coins convey denominations and designers' initials, as well as the nation's morals, values and dreams.

struck through 1966 to deter hoarding during a coin shortage. The minting facility can be identified on most coins by a mintmark (or the lack thereof on some Philadelphia issues), though occasionally in recent decades—again to discourage hoarding—mintmarks have been omitted.

Beyond the details of their production, coins, like most works of art, typically are signed by their designers. Artists' initials or monograms have appeared regularly, if not sometimes controversially. Victor David Brenner's "V.D.B." was considered too prominent on the first Lincoln cents in 1909. And when John Sinnock's "JS" was placed on the Roosevelt dime, some imaginative observers suspected a Communist plot to honor Joseph Stalin!

A few coins go beyond basic inscriptions to elaborate on their subjects. Every state quarter has the state's name and date of admission, and most also include a motto or description. Jefferson nickels display and identify the President's home "Monticello" on the reverse, and recent Westward Journey nickels commemorate the Louisiana Purchase and Lewis and Clark Expedition. Silver dollars issued after World War I had the hopeful inscription PEACE on the obverse. The forthcoming Presidential dollar will be a miniature, metallic biography, displaying the honoree's name, order of service and dates in office.

Most inscriptions use familiar fonts and characters in familiar places, but there are exceptions. Roman numerals appear in the denomination of the Liberty Head (or "V") nickel and the date 1907 (MCMVII) on the \$20 gold piece. IN GOD WE TRUST is in Gothic lettering on the Morgan dollar, while LIBERTY is a facsimile of Jefferson's handwriting on nickels struck since 2005. Inscriptions sometimes appear on a coin's "third side"—its edge—as well, including the future Presidential dollars.

Unusual expressions also make occasional appearances. "TRVST" on the Peace Dollar and "oF" on the Lincoln Memorial cent are interesting ☺

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stylistic choices. Sometimes dates or mintmarks send mixed messages. For example, the 1942/1 dime resulted from an error in die production, while the 1938-D/S nickel adapted a San Francisco die for use at the Denver Mint. Early American cents also feature some notorious flubs, including “AMERI.,” an abbreviation used when the engraver ran out of space, and the mathematically meaningless fraction “ $\frac{1}{000}$.”

However they're expressed, be it in numerals or letters, inscriptions on U.S. coins are extremely informative. They provide insight into every aspect of numismatics, explaining the politics, economics, history, technology and art behind a particular piece. Accordingly, the curious numismatist will gain a wealth of knowledge about the United States, the specific pieces and the hobby by taking the time to read what's written on America's coins.

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