

LIBERTY *and* THE AMERICAN EAGLE

FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF BOSTON



“LIBERTY” AND “THE AMERICAN EAGLE”

On an everyday basis, money is important primarily as a medium of exchange, but our coins and paper currency are also relics rich in historical meaning. Monetary artifacts dating from the early days of our nation to the present are collected in four panels displayed at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. “Liberty” and “The American Eagle,” the two chief emblems on our early coinage, are the subject of one pair of

panels. The other pair, “History at Your Fingertips” and “Spirit of the Nation,” focuses on the themes depicted on our paper currency.



Liberty

THE FIRST COINAGE EMBLEMS

From the start of our national coinage until well into the 20th century, almost all U.S. coins bore the same two emblems: the goddess Liberty on the front and the American eagle on the reverse. The first Congress selected these symbols with the passage of the Coinage Act of 1792, the “Act Establishing a Mint and Regulating the Coins of the United States.”

The question of who should appear on the front of the coins had sparked a heated debate. The Senate favored honoring the president, but both Washington himself and the House of Representatives strongly opposed featuring the president’s profile as too suggestive of the use of the monarch’s image on British coins. (In a similar view, when this same Congress debated how the new chief executive should be ad-

dressed, they decided that his title should be the same as that of any other citizen — the simple Mister.) Thus, instead of the president, or any real person for that matter, the Coinage Act of 1792 decreed that “upon one side of the coins there shall be an impression emblematic of Liberty,” a mythical female figure who had appeared as a symbol of America in colonial cartoons and prints.

The proposal of the eagle for the reverse provoked less debate. Ten years earlier, a forerunner of the first Congress, the Continental Congress, had already adopted the eagle as an official symbol by approving a design for the Great Seal of the United States which included the bird as its central feature. Follow-



The American Eagle

ing its selection for the Seal, the eagle quickly became a popular patriotic symbol: In 1789, for example, when the newly-elected George Washington made his triumphal tour of the states, citizens traced the outlines of eagles on whitewashed windows and placed lit candles behind them. Even so, according to



1796

Quarter Dollar

legend, one southern representative did oppose the eagle's use on the coinage, arguing that the "king of birds" was too regal an image for the coins of a democracy. One of his colleagues is said to have retorted, "...perhaps a goose might suit the gentleman better, as it is a rather

humble and republican bird, and would also be serviceable in other respects, as the goslings would answer to place upon the smaller coins."

Today, the eagle still appears on the reverse of the quarter, the half dollar, and the one dollar coins.

The goddess Liberty, in contrast, has been replaced on all of our coins by the portraits of famous Americans. The American people's dislike of seeing their leaders' faces on their coins persisted until 1909, when the public enthusiastically received the new Lincoln penny issued by the Mint to commemorate the centennial of Lincoln's birth. The occasion aroused sufficient popular sentiment to overcome the long-prevailing prejudice against depicting real figures on the coinage, but even today, the honor is reserved for deceased Americans. Although the Coinage Act of 1792 is still the

law, it requires only "an impression emblematic of Liberty" rather than the goddess herself, and it is said that the figures now portrayed on our coins, such as Washington and Jefferson, are themselves symbols of liberty.

LIBERTY

The oldest of our patriotic symbols, the goddess Liberty, first appeared as an Indian queen symbolizing the New World in European engravings of the 1600s. At that time, the North American settlers themselves used the image of an Indian brave on devices such as colonial seals, but by the 18th century they also adopted the Indian queen, whom they titled Liberty, as a symbol of their emerging nation.

The late 1700s and early 1800s witnessed a neoclassical revival in American culture, and Americans of the time were fond of praising



1834 Quarter Dollar

their new nation as a re-creation of the democracy of ancient Athens or the republic of Augustan Rome. Accordingly, Liberty's image changed from Indian queen to classical goddess. The goddess' most well-known representation today — the statue that holds a torch aloft in N.Y. harbor — reflects her early classical heritage.

Pictured are several coins — an 1834 quarter, an 1852 penny and an 1871 silver dollar — all of which show Liberty in her classical guise.



1852 Cent

The classical Liberty often wears a liberty cap, as she does on the 1834 quarter. The cap is a symbol of

freedom. Also used during the French Revolution, this symbol originated in the ancient Roman custom of giving a freed slave a cap to wear as a badge of his new status. On some coins, such as the 1871 silver dollar, instead of wearing the cap, Liberty carries it on a pole. The pole represents the wand with which a Roman praetor touched a slave on the cheek during the ceremony that accompanied his release from bondage.

Liberty retained her Greco-Roman appearance through the mid-1800s, by which time people had tired of classical goddesses on their coins and were receptive to a more "American" representation of Liberty. Thus, on several coins, such as the \$3 gold piece minted in 1860, Liberty again donned a feathered headdress, returning to her former image of Indian maiden. Perhaps the most famous image of Liberty as Indian maiden is

found on the extremely popular Indianhead penny, minted from 1859 to 1909.

A 1907 Indianhead penny is pictured on this page. Ironically, the only Indian attribute of the profile is the headdress; the features themselves are clearly not American Indian. Thus, a legend grew up that the face on the penny is not that of an Indian at all but rather that of a white girl from Philadelphia, Sarah Longacre, the daughter of the chief engraver of the Mint. According to tradition, one morning in 1835 while a competition was under way for the design of the new copper penny, an Indian chief visited the Philadelphia Mint where 12-



1871 Silver Dollar



1860 \$3 Gold piece

year-old Sarah was visiting her father. The chief playfully put his ceremonial war bonnet on Sarah's head, prompting Longacre to take up his sketching pad. He entered his sketch in the contest, and, as the no doubt apocryphal story goes, it won by one vote.

Not every artistic interpretation of Liberty was as successful with the public as the Indianhead penny; the 1917 Standing Liberty quarter, for example, caused quite a flap. Designed in 1916, just prior to the United States' entry into World War I, the coin symbolized national sentiment toward the approaching conflict. A standing Liberty extends the olive branch

of peace, which she carries upraised in her left hand, ready to protect herself if necessary. Although many

consider the coin quite beautiful, the public reacted with horror when it was issued in 1917 because the goddess' right breast was bare. The government received a storm of complaints, and although it never officially acknowledged the problem, the coin's design was modified before the end of the year to conform to the moral standards of the time. A version of the quarter minted in 1927 is shown.

Liberty holds the distinction of appearing on the coin generally considered to be the pinnacle of U.S. coin minting: the gold \$20 "double eagle" of 1907. (Even though only one eagle appears on the coin's reverse, it is called the double eagle because of its denomination; at the time, the \$10 gold piece was called an eagle.) President Theodore Roosevelt was the guiding force behind the minting of the 1907 double eagle.

In 1904, he complained in a letter to the Secretary of the Treasury, Leslie Shaw, that American coins were "artistically of atrocious hideousness."

To remedy the situation, he commissioned the sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, to design a gold coin that would rival the majestic coins of ancient Greece. Upon receiving Gauden's model for the double eagle, Roosevelt wrote to the sculptor that the coin was "*simply splendid*" and that "*I suppose that I shall be impeached for it in Congress, but I shall regard that as very cheap payment.*"

Indeed, a furor did arise after the first coins had been struck. Mint officials objected that the coin was too costly to manufacture because of its unusually high relief,



1907 Cent



1927 Quarter Dollar

which also led bankers to complain that the coins would not stack properly. Congress took offense because the design did not include the motto "*In God We Trust*," which first appeared on our coinage during the troubled times of the Civil War, when Treasury officials felt that some reference to the Deity was appropriate. Roosevelt objected strongly to the motto's appearance on our coinage, arguing that the use of the Lord's name on so commercial an object as a coin was actually sacrilegious. He withdrew his objections, however, in 1908 when Congress passed a bill requiring that the motto be inscribed on all

coins on which it had previously appeared. Later versions of the double eagle thus do bear the motto.



1907 \$20 Gold Piece

THE EAGLE

When the Continental Congress adopted the eagle as an emblem for the Great Seal in 1782, they chose a time-honored symbol of independence, courage, and might. Roman soldiers, for example, carried eagle-topped standards into battle, as did Napoleon's troops centuries later. The ancient Greeks saw the eagle as Zeus' messenger and the bearer of his thunderbolt. Long before Europeans landed in America, certain Indian tribes considered the eagle sacred and believed that it possessed divine powers.

The Great Seal is our national coat of arms — an insignia used to authenticate documents such as treaties and presidential proclamations. The face of the Seal is pictured here. The eagle appears in the "displayed" position — that is, with wings and claws out-

stretched. The number 13, signifying the 13 original colonies, is repeated throughout the design: the constellation above the eagle's head contains 13 stars; the shield on its breast bears 13 stripes; its right claw holds a bundle of 13 arrows, its left claw, an olive branch with 13 leaves; and even the Latin motto ("*E Pluribus Unum*" or "*Out of Many, One*"), which is written on a ribbon held in the eagle's beak, contains 13 letters. Although the arrows that the bird grasps in one talon are a symbol of military might, the eagle's head faces the olive branch that it also carries, indicating a desire for peace.



Great Seal
of the
United States



1858 Half Dollar

The stiff, out-stretched eagle of the Seal appears on many of our coins — for example, the 1858 half dollar, 1916D quarter, and 1964 Kennedy half

dollar. Eagles patterned after the bird depicted on the Seal are called "heraldic" eagles; because they carry shields on their breasts like placards, one writer refers to them as "sandwich board" eagles.

A tiny heraldic eagle appears to the right of the Liberty Bell on the reverse of the Franklin half dollar. Some people believe that the bird's diminutive size reflects the fact that Benjamin Franklin disliked eagles. He wrote, for example, in a letter to his daughter, Sarah Bosche:

For my part I wish that the bald eagle had not been chosen as the

representative of our country; he is a bird of bad moral character...like those among men who live by sharping and robbing, he is generally poor, and often very lousy...the turkey is a much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of America.



1964
Kennedy Half Dollar

Actually, however, the tiny heraldic eagle is there to comply with the Coinage Act of 1873, which requires that the "figure of an eagle or a representation thereof" appear on the reverse of the half dollar coin. The original design for the reverse included only the

Liberty Bell, and Mint officials tried to persuade the director of the Mint, Nellie Ross, that since the Liberty Bell and the American eagle represent the same ideals, the Bell by itself would suffice as a "representation" of an eagle. To make certain, however, that the coin's design would meet the letter of the law, Nellie Ross directed that an eagle be added but made very tiny so as not to compete with the main feature of the Bell.

Several U.S. coins have featured eagles drawn from nature rather than heraldry. Two beautiful examples of "naturalistic" eagles are the birds depicted on the 1907 double eagle and the 1921 Peace dollar. The most recently designed coinage eagle, the bird on the reverse of the



1963D Franklin
Half Dollar



1857
"Flying Eagle" Cent

Eisenhower and Susan B. Anthony dollars, is a naturalistic eagle. The bird is pictured landing on the moon, symbolizing the 1969 moon landing of the Apollo 11 spacecraft, which was named "The Eagle." The earth can be seen in the background, and the eagle carries only an olive branch and not the customary arrows.

One of the earliest naturalistic eagles appeared on the 1857 "Flying Eagle" cent. This coin was extremely short-lived — it was minted for only three years — and it is the only coin ever to feature the eagle on the front. According to legend, the model for the 1857 cent was an eagle known as Peter who resided in the Philadelphia Mint during the early 1800s. He

served as the Mint workers' mascot and posed for coin designs. (He is also reputed to have been the model for the silver dollars minted from 1836 to 1839.) One day, Peter became so engrossed in watching the Mint operations that he failed to notice



1921 Silver
"Peace" Dollar

the flywheel on which he was perched start up, and he was flung to his death. Devoted Mint employees had Peter stuffed, and he is still on display at the Mint to this day.

Coins are a form of official, historical art that reaches a mass audience. The founding fathers appreciated this fact and sought a coinage design that would express their new nation's democratic ideals. The emblems they chose — a female goddess and a fierce bird — became symbols of our nationhood which have endured to the present.



1979
Susan B. Anthony Dollar

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Davis, Norman. The Complete Book of Coin Collecting. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1976.

Horwitz, Elinor. The Bird, the Banner, and Uncle Sam. New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1976.

Isaacson, Phillip. The American Eagle. Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975.

Lindheim, Leon. Facts and Fictions About Coins. New York: World Publishing Company, 1967.

Nussbaum, Arthur. A History of the Dollar. New York: Columbia University Press, 1957.

Taxay, Don. The U.S. Mint and Coinage. New York: Arco Publishing Company Inc., 1966.

Vermeule, Cornelius. Numismatic Art in America. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

Rev. 1/00