

Can You Spare a (Mercury) Dime?

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Recently, a Mercury dime showed up in my change, practically leaping into my palm like a trout into a canoe. What a mini-miracle! I know it's silly to take delight in such a tiny thing, but coming across this brightly polished disc and grasping the sliver of silver between my fingers made my day.

It is wonderful that such an oddity, which hasn't been minted since 1945, could surface more than six decades later—after being tumbled through the years of common coinage—polished smooth like a river stone. “In circulation” is the phrase used to describe a coin's life, aptly suggesting economic blood flow. But very few Mercury dimes continue to circulate. I hadn't seen one in years. Every now and then I'll come across a wartime steel penny, but Mercury dimes are increasingly rare. Made of 90 percent silver and 10 percent copper, they are now worth about 60 cents, I discovered.

A bright and shiny Mercury dime, with wing-headed Liberty on the obverse and fasces on the reverse.

My new old dime dates to 1945, the last year the Mint made the Mercury. The coin was introduced in 1916, during the golden age of numismatic art in America. The popular coin collector's site Coinresource.com declares that it “may very well be the most beautiful coin ever produced by the United States Mint. It is truly remarkable that a coin this small could have such an intricate and aesthetically pleasing design.” I tend to agree.

“Liberty Leading the People ” by Delacroix (Louvre).

The Mercury's designer was Adolph A. Weinman, a noted sculptor of the day and a student of Augustus St. Gaudens who won the job through a competition. Interestingly, the Mercury dime is more properly known as the Winged Head Liberty dime, for it does not actually show Mercury, the Roman god of commerce, at all. Rather, Weinman's engraving is of Liberty, embodied as a young woman wearing a Phrygian cap with wings. (In France, too, Liberty has long been depicted as a woman, Marianne, who is also the embodiment of the French Republic. She's been shown on the ramparts in paintings and featured on stamps. Models for Marianne in modern times have included celebrities such as Catherine Deneuve in the 1980s.)

The Phrygian cap, fashioned on the dime, was once associated with a group in Asia Minor who valued and fought for freedom. It was worn by freed Roman slaves to signify their new status and figured in iconography of the American and French revolutions. The wings, however, appear to be an innovation: they are said to symbolize freedom of thought. But wings suggest Mercury, the messenger, a symbol used by medical associations (he was a kind of classical EMS guy.) Mercury, or Hermes, had winged shoes and was often depicted wearing a wide brimmed soft hat called a petasus with wings added, presumably to match those on his footwear.

The model for Liberty is thought to have been Elsie Kachel Stevens, the wife of poet Wallace Stevens. The couple were Weinman's tenants in a New York brownstone. Mrs. Steven modeled for a bust that the sculptor later used for the dime, as well as for the face of the Walking Liberty half-dollar. (How amazing it must have been to walk around with a pocketful of change bearing your wife's image!)

In *The Mechanic Muse*, critic Hugh Kenner describes Ezra Pound's interest in the machinery used to stamp coins at the Philadelphia mint, where his father had been employed as an assayer (one who ensures the precious metal content and purity of coins). Pound thought of the die striking the metal as a "point of concentration," like an image or phrase in poetry. Such boldness of image appears on the Mercury's reverse, or "tail": a fasces, symbol of wartime strength as well as fascism, along with olive leaves, juxtaposing war and peace like the arrows and olive branches in the talons of the American eagle on the presidential seal.

In 1946, the Mercury was replaced. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who died the previous year, took his place on the head of the dime that's still in circulation today. The Congressional decision to memorialize the creator of the New Deal in this manner was a testament to his search for a cure for polio (resulting in the charity March of Dimes) and carried an implicit reference to "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"—the song of the Great Depression that he had helped resolve. The dime, as luck would have it, was also the only denomination not "taken" by another president. For FDR, it was right on the money.

A dime was more powerful during the years the Mercury design reigned. To quote Coinresource.com again: "Even in its final years, this was a coin with real buying power. Armed with a Mercury dime, youngsters in the 1940s had their choice of a 52-page comic book, a double-dip ice cream cone, two Hershey bars or two bottles of Coca-Cola."

The Mercury speaks of its power. The head leaps out, charged with energy of line, so the suggestions of the mercurial god are apt. The details are crisp; Weinman even lent himself a logo, in initials overlapped, Durer-style, in a signature. If coin connoisseurs consider the Mercury dime one of the finest of all American coins, its beauty struck me as a reproach to some recent disappointing coin designs, such as many of the state quarter series or the commemorative nickels and pennies.

Coin making has conventions and rhetoric, with message and medium tightly linked. But the new quarters often read as translations of printed images to metal. Take the random three I've pulled from my pocket. The Wisconsin shows a three-quarter frontal view of a cow and a sliced wheel of cheese, among other images. The North Carolina is a clumsy rendition of the famous photograph of the Wright Brothers first flight, which took place on the state's coast, with unconvincing waves or dunes. The Mississippi offers a magnolia—the state flower—recalling the term "steel magnolia," or a flower without softness, color or fragrance.

One of the Jefferson nickels released to commemorate the bicentennial of the

Louisiana Purchase offers a casual “off center” portrait of Jefferson that suggests the die missed the slug—it seems to be a coinage misprint or misstrike.

The new designs for pennies to honor the 200th birthday of Abraham Lincoln were released in September with the imprimatur of none other than Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson! These designs need a bailout, too: take the one showing a young Abe sitting on a badly drawn log in perspective. Is this how far the cent has sunk?

These designs seem to me to break some of the most basic conventions of coinage. Coins do not render much in the way of subtle texture or allow for depth of perspective. Coin design requires fidelity to flatness, the way Clement Greenberg famously argued that easel painting required expression of the “picture plane.”

The 2005 nickel series with President Jefferson in off-center profile.

Looking at the new designs I suspected I knew the problem: they come from people used to working on paper and canvas. Sure enough, a look at the U.S. Mint’s website suggests that most of the designers of the new crop of coin are, I’m afraid to tell you, graphic designers. Several were chosen through the Mint’s Artistic Infusion Program (AIP), an admirable enough effort to widen the pool of people designing coins. The 2005 “off center” nickel, it turns out, was created by AIP artist Joe Fitzgerald, of Silver Spring, Maryland, and sculpted by U.S. Mint sculptor-engraver Don Everhart.

Many of the designs on the quarters would be fine on stamps, but are diminished in metal. There may be a lesson here. In the competitions that once yielded Weinman’s Mercury dime, sculptors brought energy to a staid design language on coins, born of simple engraving. Properly marshaled, the powers of graphic design would help—not harm—coin design. Some of the boldness of the logo and richness of type would be welcome.

If sculptors created the “golden age” of coins, it was not because they made the coins into sculpture, but because they adapted the best of their skills to the conventions and contingencies of coin making. The sculptors had to rein their art in, but they had a tradition of doing so: bas relief, the centuries-old discipline of giving depth to plaques, tombs, memorials and medals.

Working under constraints often inspires the best design. Graphic designers can do the same: make their skills meet the needs of the minting process and enrich it. The dollar will grow mighty again, perhaps creating an opportunity for designers to approach coin making a different way, while embracing a thousands of years long tradition to spark a new golden age.