

Functional Shifts in Social Contexts: Coins and Coin Jewellery

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Abstract:

This essay focused on the aesthetic value and spiritual value of coins in addition to their monetary value. Following introducing the history of coins and the origin of coin jewelry, the irreplaceability of coins as jewelry materials is investigated by analyzing their appearance and production patterns. Then by tracing the evolution of coin jewelry and analyzing the functional transformation of coins over time, the spiritual significance of coins as amulets was further examined.

Keywords:

Coins, Coin Jewelry, Amulet

1. Introduction

Coins have a lengthy and distinguished history. Because coins have historically been used as a medium of exchange, their monetary value is more familiar to the general public. As time progressed, however, people realized that economic functions are only the top of the iceberg when it comes to coins' true value. As shown in Figure1, the Metropolitan Museum's coin pendant consists of two coins suspended from a gold chain. Emperor Alexander Severus (r. 222-235) is depicted on both coins. The era of this coin, the authorities at that period, and even the political and religious concepts admired at that time were reflected through the patterns on its surface. In today's culture, this kind of coins are increasingly valued as collectibles and works of art, as opposed to solely as a means of exchange. The popularity of coin jewelry in recent years, has broadened people's observation methodologies and study perspectives on coins, creating an opportunity to investigate the artistic value of coins. When worn as jewelry, coins obtain the capacity to communicate. People began to use the graphics on the coins as apparel embellishments and to express themselves by writing or engraving on a surface less than 2 cm wide. Coins continue to transcend their original economic value in modern interactions: we use coins as an auxiliary divination tool to help us choose between alternative points of view; in China, elders wrap coins in dumplings to communicate surprises; and we throw coins into wishing pools to pray for good fortune. Coins were placed in a broader context and reexamined from a new perspective in terms of other repurposed functions based on their varying characteristics and time periods.



Figure 1. Gold necklace with coin pendants, 3rd century A.D., the Metropolitan Museum, 17.190.1655.

Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/249215>

2. Historical Research Value of Coins

Ancient coins were initially made of metal for trade purposes and eventually disseminated globally as a form of payment. Throughout history, ancient coins originated primarily in ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and the Byzantine period. Due to the distinct regional cultures, the monetary systems of the three regions exhibit distinct characteristics. Deities dominate the designs on ancient Greek gold coins (e.g., Figure 2). As depicted in the image, the front depicts Athena Attica in archaic form, while the back depicts the standing owl, Athena's guardian bird. The owl's penetrating eyes convey a message to Athena and are regarded as a symbol of intelligence. Because sculptures from this era are frequently associated with gods, not only for human use and appreciation, but also as gifts to gods, these coins are frequently employed in temples and on occasions of sacrifice. And ancient Roman coins feature sculptures of monarchs (such as Figure 3), the head of Constantine I is engraved on the coin to promote his authority and riches. Typical Byzantine gold coins feature emperor portraits and religious symbols (such as Figure 4). The images and language on the coin demonstrate that, despite the passage of time, it is still possible to deduce the ancient people's beliefs and political context. History is the source of coins, and in some respects, coins also validate history. People appear to always receive immediate feedback on history from coins.



Figure 2. Owl Silver Coin of Athens City, Ancient Greece, 510-505 BC.

Available at: <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/26018/lot/405/>



Figure 3. Gold bracteate pendant; sheet disc with impression of obverse of centenionalis of Constantine I (306-337), 5thC-7thC, The British museum, AF.511.

Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_AF-511



Figure 4. Justinian I gold coin.

Available at: <https://www.numisbids.com/n.php?p=lot&sid=1081&lot=776>

The coin is a historical representation of an era. The coin's circulation allows it to travel freely between regions and social classes around the world, and its inheritance has the potential to transcend historical time. The coin contains images, text, materials, and historical information. Whether separated or combined, its various components interact with one another, and each possesses exceptional research value. The book by Thomsen(1836) characterizes coins as possessing highly descriptive and professional features [1]. Simply put, they have the ability to trace back the history. He believes that, in general, the information on coins is fixed, allowing them to present history with greater clarity and precision than other artifacts. Consequently, coins may be regarded as an essential component of historical research. Simultaneously, Kemmers (2011) emphasized in his work that coins serve as a significant medium of exchange, so historical records usually accompany it [2]. Moreover, its consumption frequently involves all social classes. As such, it is a rare and valuable historical reference specimen. To conduct research and investigation, scholars have begun to position coins within the theoretical framework of material culture [2]. Through research, the historical significance of the coins was elevated. Due to the unique capabilities of coins - they can incorporate images, text, and historical events, and present a variety of artistic styles in a variety of historical periods and geographic settings - the relationship between its material and time can be used as a crucial reference point for historical research and its unique significance beyond economic value can be demonstrated.

3. Decorative Aesthetics of Coins - Coin Jewelry

Aesthetically, the graphics and writing on the surface of coins have also evolved. Collectors are widely attracted by their distinctive creative artistic style and craftsmanship, and their memorial accounts of historical events. The value of coins as material culture and works of art is discovered by people day by day. Nowadays, besides being a medium of exchange in the market, they are primarily utilised as ornaments. The reuse of coins as decorative objects can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome. People in the Roman period were keen to decorate themselves with antiquities, and different jewellery pieces inlaid with coins (e.g. Figure 5) were unearthed in tombs in various places. The second-century jurist Sextus Pomponius's explanation of usufructuary rights in "Digest" documents this phenomenon: gold coins and coins are used as jewellery after being manufactured, and their usufructuary rights ensure that they can be passed down as inheritance (Digest 7.1.28.). This rule is a rare piece of written account and evidence that Roman coins were used as jewellery. Coins, in general, will leave physical marks when they are used for the second time as ornaments, and perforations are often the most common. Take The British Museum as an example. Among the many coin collections, approximately 129 coins in the

numerous coin collections exhibit rough perforations and wear marks (e.g. Figure 6). As can be seen, perforated coins are still a minority, because that modifying the original form of coins is not widely accepted in both history and contemporary society [3]. At the same time, specific archaeological evidence is missing from the perforated coins recovered in various locations. The purpose of the holes on different coins is obscure to people. They can only speculate that they are being utilised as decorations based on their wear patterns. But it is undeniable that these perforated coins provide more opportunities for transforming coin functions in today's society. In fact, this uncertainty later led people to think about the reasons for the rise of coin ornaments. Because gems are the primary material used to create jewellery generally, people began to investigate the irreplaceable features of a particular type of jewellery possessed by coins, to the point where many jewellers prefer to use coins as raw materials. The low cost of coins is a primary reason they have displaced gems. The key to determining the value of coins is to look at their own history. Unlike other popular decorations, time gives coins a heavy historical foundation, which adds a solid cultural flavour to the objects they decorate, rather than just as gorgeous patterns embellished on the decorations. As can be seen, while being in a lesser-known realm of art, it is still unique. Although antique coin jewellery is quite rare, its history dates back to Europe in the sixth century. During the Serbian period, jewellery employing old Roman and Greek coins as decorative artefacts peaked. Around 1592, the German jewellery Hans Kellner constructed a wide-mouth cup decorated with coins (e.g. Figure 7), which was considered a representative work of art at the time. And it was Bulgari who indeed pioneered the coin's entry into the fashion world. Bulgari, the famed Italian jewellery, began using ancient coins as ornaments in their jewellery in 1950 [4], and it quickly became a signature characteristic of the company. Bulgari views coins as the foundation of a piece of jewellery, complemented by various embellishments such as metal diamonds. Bulgari's creative director, Lucia Silvestri, believes that integrating coins that represent masculinity inside women's jewellery can create amazing contrast and that coins can serve as a design framework for her [5]. In this instance, the aesthetic value of the coin is discovered, and it is regarded as a kind of "material" rather than currency, thereby promoting the evolution of coin functions.



Figure 5. Gold pendant in the form of an engrafted hexagon, Late Roman, The British museum, 1984,0501.1.

Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1984-0501-1



Figure 6. Silver coin pendant, Arab dirham pierced for suspension, 9thC(late)-10thC, The British museum, 1852,0329.162.

Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1852-0329-162



Figure 7. Ancient Roman Coin Wide Mouth Cup, Hans Kellne, 1592.

Available at: <https://www.puxinjingshe.com/shuijing/48366>

Although the coin's primary function seems to be invalid when it is transformed into an ornament after being pierced by a hole, the advent of coin jewellery enables the social function and symbolic meaning of coins to be inspired and sustained, and presents coins with varying value meanings at different stages of history. Coins' wearable nature preserves some of the coins' original circulation characteristics and endows them with a uniquely symbolic value. According to Henig (1981), the Romans regarded jewellery as items in female boudoirs [6]. Meir (2002) confirms this idea, stating that coins were used initially to embellish headgear and apparel as dowry in the 18th and 19th centuries and were considered part of women's possessions. Simultaneously, she referred to the existence of this currency as a "mobile bank" [7]. This phenomenon actually preserves the currency's original value as a safeguard and symbol of women's rights after marriage. Additionally, men's currency pendants (e.g. Figure 8) were discovered in certain tombs. According to some conjectures, the coin pendant is used as a reward medal to honor a man [8] as a symbol of status or a particular privilege. Two gold coin jewellerys in the Metropolitan Museum demonstrate the authenticity of this argument. The first piece is a breastplate inlaid with coins and medals (e.g. Figure 9). It was cited in early sources as a tribute to army heroes and for coronation celebrations. The second piece is a gold belt embellished with coins and medals (e.g. Figure 10). The museum records that it may be worn as a symbol of officials and some people also speculate that it probably was a gift from Emperor Maurice Tiberius (reigned 582-602) to nobles and high-ranking officials. Therefore, while coin jewellery comes from women, there is no clear gender differentiation for the wearer, and it has also been established as a significant status symbol. As can be observed, even though coin jewellery is no longer a legal tender, it retains the value and liquidity associated with the original payment method.



Figure 8. Pendant in gold set with a Roman silver didrachm of Neapolis showing the head of Parthenope, 1860, The British museum, 1978,1002.424.

Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1978-1002-424



Figure 9. Pectoral with Coins and Pseudo-Medallion, ca. 539–50, the Metropolitan Museum, 17.190.1664.

Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464070>



Figure 10. Girdle with Coins and Medallions, ca. 583, the Metropolitan Museum, 17.190.147; 1991.136.

Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464030>

4. Spiritual Purposes of Coins - Amulets

In addition, the evolution of the primary functions of coins and the emergence of coin jewellery have enabled people to gradually move away from the situation in which objects are understood solely in terms of their original purpose [9]. Coins are now widely used for spiritual purposes [3]. “Amulets” are the most common means for monetary jewellery to be used for spiritual objectives. In the book, these coin-based amulets are referred to as *peripta* or *periammata*, which means “linked objects” [10]. The widespread use of coin jewellery as a talisman can be mainly attributed to three reasons, namely the portrait motif on the surface of the coin, the materiality of the coin itself and the biographical history it carries. Porto (2020) believes that portraits on coins can effectively portray a certain powerful image [10]. This statement is also recognized in other articles. For example, coins have the function of “image” symbols in addition to their decorative functions [7]. Indeed, the coin’s portrait design exemplifies this role. As discussed previously, the portrait patterns etched on coins vary according to historical time and can be grouped into two broad categories: monarch and gods. In the second century BC, several nobles in ancient Rome inscribed their pictures or those of their ancestors on coins. The purpose of these coins was not to commemorate the deceased, but to promote and reinforce individual aesthetics and pursuits and strengthen them. Coins were a vehicle for the royal family to express their political views during the Roman Empire [11]. The emperor presented his subjects with coins and jewellery depicting members of the royal family as prizes or presents. Images on the coins conveyed the ruler’s authority and official will to the various areas [12]. The monarch used the currency to reinforce the connection between diverse locations and the royal family. It also enhanced the emperor’s personal majestic image, endowing the traditional portrait coin with a specific value beyond its function of Commemorating the ancestor. Subjects regarded this type of portrait coin jewellery as protected by a special right and believed that obtaining a prize was a mark of distinction, which is why they frequently wore it on their bodies as amulets. Furthermore, currency jewellery featuring deities as portrait

patterns is considered to bridging the divide between humans and the world of gods [10]. In general, coin minting is a royal privilege [13], which means that the royal family controls the picture on the coin, demonstrating that the image on the coin is meaningful. Numerous rulers enjoy deifying themselves to increase their authority [12]. Religious means are critical in sustaining colonial rule. As a result, coins frequently feature a variety of sacred designs. Consider the Justinian II coin (e.g. Figure 11). Christ made his first appearance on the Justinian II coin when he was shown as the “ruler of everything.” One side of the coin features the ruler’s picture, while the reverse depicts Jesus holding the sacred utensils. From this perspective, as Weetch (2018) said, the image on the coin provides space for propagating the political and cultural information of the ruler. As part of religious practice, religious images make the coin endowed with symbolic properties and some mental power [13]. Later, the use of such portrait coins in decorations demonstrated that by infusing sacred beliefs and secular power into the coins [14], coin jewellery once again broke new ground in the coin’s original currency function.



Figure 11. SSolidus of Justinian II (685-95), 692–695, THE MET, 10.130.1495.

Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/463390>

Moreover, materiality plays a significant role in why coins are employed as amulets. Coins are an example of material culture. The physical contact between human fingertips and a coin initiates the first conversation between humans and coins. This initial perception of materiality is critical and may even dictate the next step. In this situation, the coin's inherent physical properties, such as its actual touch or perceived hue, constitute its essence [2]. That's the process of how coin jewellery is given a symbolic ideology. According to Weetch (2018), the rise of coins as jewellery materials may be since that coins are relatively easily available precious metals [13]. However, the selection requirements for coins of various materials used as raw materials for amulet jewellery are quite stringent. For instance, the Greeks considered gold coins to be unsettling and easily became a symbol of "excessive wealth" [2]. On the contrary, they believed that silver coins were an excellent material for this purpose, as they exhibited a specific characteristic of the average. By classifying the material characteristics of the coin, people have divided different symbolic meanings for the coins of different traits. Kurke (1999) argues that because bronze is a composite metal, the Greeks refused to use bronze coins as amulets to symbolize "purity" [15]. However, Michael Italikos, a teacher in the Middle Ages, noted that matter's protecting force does not derive wholly from its imagery [16]. This power appears to be injected by jewellery makers or metal workers [17] to protect the holder from harm. Both the physicality of the coin and the way of creating numismatic jewellery impart spiritual meaning to the coin. Spiritual power is instilled in the coin through people's judgement of the material or a specific action, ultimately acting as a 'talisman'.

Finally, the meaning of the coin’s protective amulet is connected to the biographical story it contains. Porto (2020) illustrated this idea using an old coin from the Trajan

period (e.g. Figure 12) [10]. On the opposing side, the image depicts Hygieia, the goddess of health, reclining on a rock and feeding a serpent with a phiale [18], as spring water runs from beneath the rock. This image is actually a symbol of the Tiberias hot springs, renowned worldwide for their remarkable therapeutic properties [10]. Therefore, in this coin, it is not the image itself that allows the coin to assume the role of “amulet”, but the biographical story portrayed by the image that convinces people that the coin can offer healing and protection. It is also confirmed in Weetch’s book (2018). He took a coin pierced by a holy spear as an example. Due to the fact that the coin was shot from the tip of a spear [13], it is thought that the divine power bestowed the curative function on the coin the instant the sacred object made touch with it. The bishop who owns it distributes the water-soaked by it to the populace because he believes that this way has cured numerous individuals in the past. Due to the physical interaction with the sacred instrument, this coin is endowed with spiritual significance and symbolises strength. Van Dyke and Alcock(2003) also refer to the biography of coins as social memory [19]. While it becomes more difficult for people to reconstruct or revisit biographical stories from the past as time passes, the widespread use of coin jewellery protects these historical accounts. These biographical stories are passed down from generation to generation along with coin jewellery, and modern people finally know it. Therefore, not only does the biography play a role in the function of the coin's amulet, but coin jewellery known for its biography can restore history most directly for people. Both are interdependent.



Figure 12. Ancient coins from Trajan’s period. A.D. 108-109. (Meshorer, 1985: 78; Porto, 2020: 499).

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this essay illustrates the history and method of coin's introduction into the domain of decorating, as well as its various characteristics over time. Due to the evolution of coin functions, the role of coins in the social context has been more explored, and people’s knowledge of coins has become more multi-dimensional and complete. As mentioned in the article, coins have a highly stable historical narrative ability as a precious material and cultural product. The feature of the coin collection of pictures, words and materials as a whole determines that it can show and restore the essence of history from different angles. People can reconstruct historical scenes or circulate biographical stories from their surface images. These functions are important for whatever archaeology and historical study are of incalculable importance and relevance, and they assist numerous facets and fields of society. Although social patterns have shifted dramatically since the coin was produced, the pace of research on the coin appears to have remained constant. The rising popularity of coin jewellery has accelerated the process of reexamining coins in a variety of areas. At the same time, this kind of decoration also retains the circulation and exchange value of coins as a currency. It has allowed the preservation of several historical records and the creation of new value meaning. People are on the way of fully exploiting the advantages of coin jewelry in terms of historical inheritance, paving the way for the

future development of a system of numismatic discipline that is more systematic and comprehensive.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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