

# Money Talks

Currency  
and Coinage  
in Global,  
Historical  
Contexts



**HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH**

This installation uses objects from the Hood Museum of Art's collection to explore how different societies and cultures have conceived of and used money.<sup>1</sup>

Numismatics, the study of coins (Greek νόμισμα; Latin *nummus*), is one of the oldest academic disciplines. Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) both collected coins and described himself (in his letters) as being consulted on the identification of coins. The modern study of coinage began in the late eighteenth century, when Joseph Hilarius Eckel published an eight-volume study of Greek and Roman coinage. Numismatics combines the disciplines of archaeology, (art) history, and literary studies as ways to understand the coin as an artifact of the culture that produced it.

Like the archaeologist, the numismatist considers the physical attributes of the coin (weight, size, material, denomination), its production (the sourcing of materials, the creation of dies, the process of manufacture), and the contexts of retrieval (hoards, excavation). As an historian, the numismatist assesses the social, political, religious, and cultural frameworks that influenced coin production, as well as the design and messages communicated by the symbols. Like the literary scholar, the numismatist interprets the words on coins (legends) and their historical significance. The students of *Before Billboards* and *Twitter: Roman Coins as Text* have been studying numismatics and present their research here.

Currency has taken many forms: beads (cowrie, wampum, glass beads, ingots, the Congo's x-shaped handa), coinage made from base or precious metals (bronze, copper, silver, gold), and, most recently, Bitcoin. The worn coinage shows how long and hard coins worked as money, as coins stayed in circulation until they were no longer accepted as currency. While materials correlate with the availability of natural resources, form and design reflect local traditions and values.

Two very different traditions of money developed on the eastern and western edges of the Eurasian landmass. In China, early forms of money included cowrie shells, cast-bronze cowrie, and cast-bronze utensil coins; the casting (rather than stamping) of coins and the absence of figural decoration reflect cultural traditions. In the Mediterranean basin, at the western end of the Eurasian landmass, precious-metal stamped coinage developed in Asia Minor, then Greece, then Italy, and then Rome.

The Roman silver denarius initially showed a static type: the helmeted goddess Roma on the obverse and the heroic gods of the Roman cavalry (Dioscouri) on the reverse. In the late second century, Romans began to experiment with frequently changing types to make personal, political claims. So, Julius Caesar advertised heroic and divine ancestry (his mythic ancestors Venus and Aeneas) as he fought a civil war. The obverse and reverse of the coin became a coherent unit. A coin of Nero, for example, unites them with a complete Latin sentence, running obverse to reverse, quoting from Augustus's autobiography and claiming a success that Nero may not have achieved. During the Roman Empire, coins illustrate the growing public presence of imperial women such as Sabina and Faustina, pairing their portraits (obverse) and the virtues associated with their imperial status as wives (reverse).

Roman coins illustrate the precarity of transfers of power. Galba, the first emperor not connected with the Julio-Claudian dynasty, copied one of his predecessors' coin types to underscore his relationship with the Roman armies. The first Christian emperor, Constantine, reused military symbols of Roman conquest, copying a design first used by Julius Caesar.

Local coinages used traditional Roman iconographic and design conventions to show allegiance to the regime, as in a double-portrait coin in Spain that links the emperor Tiberius (obverse) with his advertised successors (reverse).



A tenth-century gold coin (*solidus*) from Constantinople illustrates the transition from the ancient to the medieval style: frontal portraits of Christ (obverse) and of emperor Constantine VII and his son Romanus II (reverse). Medieval portraits are frontal and schematic. Identity is marked by clothing (Constantine's *loros*) and by the legend written (still) in Latin. Christ *pantokrator* (All-Powerful Christ) is framed in an elaborate nimbus, the spokes of which mimic the shape of a cross; the emperor and his presumptive heir together hold the cross on the reverse, suggesting that their authority derives from Christ.

Selected coins from the modern, global era—from North Africa (Morocco), South America (Chile), and Europe (England)—illustrate different numismatic traditions in the early nineteenth century. The coins also document the global use of coins to communicate social, religious, and political claims and to articulate agendas on base-metal currency for quotidian use.

The Moroccan cast-bronze fals represents Islamic coining tradition, namely the rejection of figural representation and the use of script for decoration. It bears a six-pointed star, associated with the seal of Solomon, and a reverse field filled with inscriptions indicating mint and date. The coin shows the posture of political leadership as it sought to modernize (economically and militarily) and to counter European colonial influences in North Africa.

The 1835 postcolonial currency from Chile advertises independence. On the first copper currency, a five-pointed, raised star invokes the star on the Chilean flag adopted in 1817. Small-denomination copper coinage was a demand of growing economies, and the 1835 copper coin proclaims its benefit for a postcolonial emergent state: *economia es riqueza* ("economy is wealth").

The East India Company, a private company ruling in India from 1757 to 1858, minted coinage that combines national symbols with legends in the English language. By contrast, the English coin of George IV issued in 1826 reveals the imperial posture—and classical imaginary—of English society on a bronze coin of daily use.

Selected American coins illustrate the value of coinage for understanding US history. The Pine Tree shilling minted by early colonists in Massachusetts bears comparison with the current Dartmouth College Lone Pine logo. A 1909 gold coin illustrates



the use of Native Americans as a symbol of the country fifteen years before they were granted US citizenship.

If you look carefully, the coins will tell you important stories.

Roberta Stewart  
Professor of Classical Studies

1. The Hood Museum adheres to the 1970 UNESCO convention on museum collecting practices (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>) and has committed not to exhibit items acquired after 1970 that are without provenance.

This installation was organized by the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, and generously supported by the Harrington Gallery Fund.

### Class List

James Bohn, Class of 2024  
Peyton M. Bullock, Class of 2022  
Margaret Ferris, Class of 2022  
Jake Headrick, Class of 2024  
Christopher Huang, Class of 2022  
Paul Hudson, Class of 2023  
Andrew J. Palermo, Class of 2022  
Bridget A. Parker, Class of 2023  
Cameron Primeau, Class of 2023  
Kylie J. Romeros, Class of 2022  
Sameer J. Sadarangani, Class of 2024  
Max Vicinelli, Class of 2022

## Checklist

Stater, Aegina, about 550–480 BCE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29673

Denarius, C. Lucretius Trio, Rome, 136 BCE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29259

Denarius, Julius Caesar, mint moving with Caesar, 48–47 BCE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29267

Denarius, Marcus Antonius, mint moving with Antony, 32–31 BCE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29266

Denarius, Augustus, Lugdunum (modern-day Lyon, France), 2 BCE–4 CE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29270

Denarius, Augustus, Lugdunum (modern-day Lyon, France), 2 BCE–4 CE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29273

Knife coin, Emperor Wang Mang, Xin dynasty (9–23 CE), bronze. Gift of A. Beatrice Buse; 163.45.15141

As, Tiberius, Carthago Nova (modern-day Spain), 14–37 CE, bronze. Purchased through the James and Barbara Block Acquisitions Endowment; 2021.42

As, Gaius/Caligula, Rome, 37–38 CE, bronze. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29278

As, Gaius/Caligula, Rome, 37–41 CE, bronze. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29275

Coin, Nero, Antioch, 54–68 CE, bronze. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29283

Sestertius, Nero, Rome, 62–68 CE, orichalcum, Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29288

Aureus, Nero, Rome, about 65–66 CE, gold. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29287

Sestertius, Galba, Rome, 68–69 CE, bronze. Purchased through the John M. McDonald 1940 Fund; 2019.27

Aureus, Titus, Rome, 79 CE, gold. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29292

Denarius, Titus, Rome, 79 CE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29710

Denarius, Vibia Sabina, Rome, 133–35 CE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29320

Denarius, Faustina I, Rome, 141 CE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29342

Denarius, Antoninus Pius, Rome, 158–59 CE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29333

Denarius, Julia Domna, Rome, 196–211 CE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29392

Denarius, Septimius Severus, Rome, 197–98 CE, silver. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29380

Nummus, Constantine I, Rome, 320–21 CE, bronze. Gift of W. Clark Harrington, Class of 1928; 165.24.29971

Solidus, Constantine VII, Constantinople, 945–59 CE, gold. Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886, in memory of his father, Henry Fairbanks, Class of 1853; 27.1.29226

Robert Sanderson, American, 1608–1693; John Hull, American, 1624–1683, Pine Tree shilling, Massachusetts, 1675–82, silver. Gift of Louise C. Harrington in honor of Frank L. Harrington, Class of 1924; M.991.3.7

Ingot, handa, Democratic Republic of Congo, 18th–19th century, copper. Gift of Morton D. May, Class of 1936 MIS.968.23

Tlingit, Northwest Coast of North America, dark blue Russian trade beads, 19th century or earlier, glass. Gift of Frank C. and Clara G. Churchill; 46.22.17417

Fals, Sultan Moulay Abderrahman, Morocco, 1824, bronze. Gift of Christian W. Fueloep-Miller, Class of 1967; 165.25.31499

Half penny, George IV, London, 1826, bronze. Gift of W. Clark Harrington, Class of 1928; 164.8.31346.

Half centavo, Chile, Santiago, 1835, copper. Gift of Clark Blyth; 174.32.32001

One-quarter anna, East India Company, India, 1835, bronze. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth; 999.35.33266

Fals, Sultan Moulay Abderrahman, Morocco, 1851, bronze. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth; 999.35.33463

Campbell Brothers Wampum Factory, Park Ridge, New Jersey, American, 1860–89, wampum (string of purple beads), late 19th century, carved clam shell. Acquired by exchange from the Museum of the American Indian, New York, New York; 55.32.13312

Five-dollar coin, United States, Denver, 1909, gold. Gift of Charles Seaman Marx, Class of 1931; 181.24.33077

Unidentified maker (New Caledonia), string of cowries, 1943, cowrie, red seed, and string. Gift of Mrs. Chester Beede; 170.31.24687

25-cent token, US military, Vung Tau, Vietnam, 1966, brass. Gift of Richard Gray, 171.40.31954

Unknown maker, token representing Bitcoin digital currency, 2021, gold-plated metal. Lent by Roberta Stewart; TL.1891.1

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Cover: Sestertius, Galba, Rome, 68–69 CE, bronze

Inside left: Knife coin, Emperor Wang Mang, Xin dynasty (9–23 CE), bronze

Inside right: Five-dollar coin, United States, Denver, 1909, gold