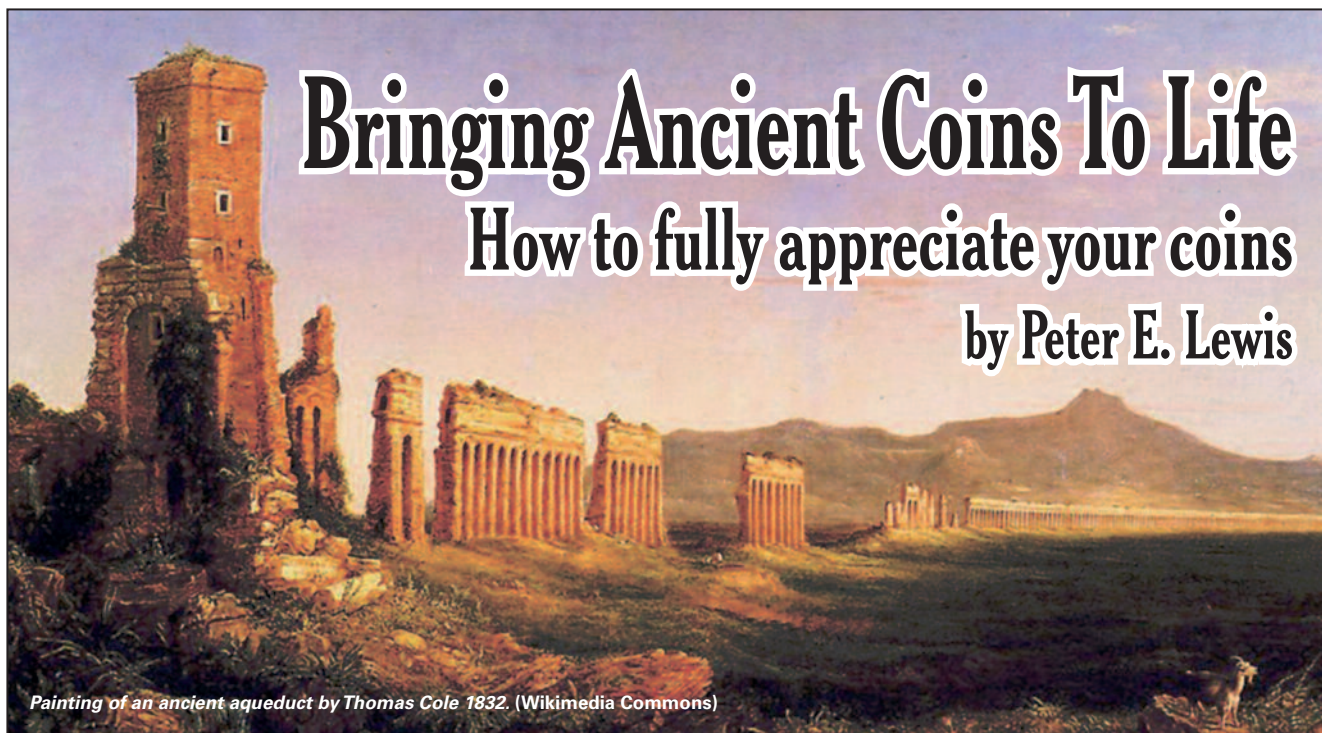


Bringing Ancient Coins To Life

How to fully appreciate your coins

by Peter E. Lewis



Painting of an ancient aqueduct by Thomas Cole 1832. (Wikimedia Commons)

IMAGINATION is needed to fully appreciate the ancient coins in your collection because you are entering a wonderful mythological world where goddesses have wings and gods ride on eagles. If you are so immersed in modern secular culture that you have difficulty exercising your imagination

in this way, do not worry, because there is a method by which you can facilitate your imagination to thoroughly appreciate your ancient coins. It is worth trying because it will enrich your understanding of the world past and present.

You will, of course, need some knowledge of Greco-Roman religion and the symbolism associated with it. For example, you would need to know that the chief of the gods was Jupiter (Zeus to the Greeks) and that he was originally a sky god who could hurl down thunderbolts and whose symbol was an eagle. You do not have to be a walking encyclopedia because as you proceed you can check in the literature if you come across something that you are ignorant about. But for the method of

imagination-facilitation that is recommended you will need the following equipment:

You will need an ancient coin and it should be in VF grade or better. The coin in Figure 1 is EF. It was bought recently on eBay for 8 Australian dollars. Alternatively you could just download an image from the Internet, but there



Figure 1 – Reverse of a small bronze coin of Constantine the Great (306 – 337 AD). Sear (4th edition) 3883. The letters in the centre of the coin, VOT PR, stand for VOTA POPULI ROMANI, which is Latin for ‘Vows of the Roman People’. They were promises made to the gods for the welfare of the emperor.



Figure 2 – Figure 1 in colour.



Figure 3 – Detail of Figure 2.



Figure 4 – Reverse of a small bronze coin of Licinius I (308 – 324 AD). Sear (4th edition) 3803. The surrounding inscription is IOVI CONSERVATORI AVG, which is Latin for ‘To Jupiter, the protector of the emperor’.



Figure 5 – Figure 4 in colour.



Figure 6 – A schautaler minted at Hamburg in 1643. It shows an Annunciation scene. The Latin legend, AVE MARIA GRATI PLEN DOMIN TECUM BENED TUINT MULIERES, means, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.” It is Luke 1:28.

is nothing like owning your own little chunk of the ancient world and finding out everything it has to tell you about that exciting time when it was passed from hand to hand buying and selling things.

A digital camera with the Macro facility to enable you to obtain a close-up digital image which you can transfer to a computer and print out on paper. Obviously this will only be needed if you want to photograph your own coin. Usually if you buy a coin on the Internet there will be an image of it that you can download to your computer. In fact, using a downloaded image of your coin is the simplest way to proceed.

Coloured pencils, crayons or a water-colour paint set. Watercolours give the best results and have been used in the illustrations in this article, but you will need special paper that can absorb the watercolour wash. The paper that is generally used for watercolours is too thick to pass through the average printer, so you will need paper thick enough to take a light watercolour wash but flexible enough to pass through the printer.



Figure 8 – A schautaler minted at Hamburg in 1651. It shows a Nativity scene. The legend is in German. (Dr Busso Peus Nachf. Auction 411, Lot 1376)

Ideally, if you are doing your own photography you will need Photoshop or a similar facility on your computer so that can remove the background from the coin image, etc. Often the coin

images that you can download from the Internet already have been processed in this way.

Now you are ready to start on the imagination-facilitation exercise. Select



Figure 7 – Figure 6 in colour.



Figure 9 – Figure 8 in colour.



Figure 10 – A double taufaler minted at Zellerfeld in 1685. It is 64 mms in diameter. The legend is Matthew 28: 19 in German.

a coin, preferably with an interesting reverse, and obtain a digital image of it. On your computer take all the colour out of it and increase the brightness a little so that it is a pale grey. Print out this image large enough to be easily coloured-in. About 10 centimetres is a good size.

Before applying the colours you may need to outline the figures and some of the features with a soft pencil. Look carefully at the various elements before you decide on the colours, and as you proceed you will find that the picture is coming to life. Human beings live in a world of colour, and colouring the image of a coin that was previously dirty brown

enables you to see things differently.

Many collectors of ancient coins would say that the coin in Figure 1 was “just a nasty little AE3”. It is certainly small (only 17 mms diameter) and a very common type, but when perceived with imagination (Figure 2) it is a masterpiece. The person who engraved the die was not only a master craftsman but a true artist. How elegantly the ladies are attired and how solid the altar looks! Although they have wings the ladies are not angels. Angels do not have breasts and do not appear on coins until the 6th century AD. They are Victories, divine beings who personify victory. The Victory on the left has been enlarged even further in Figure 3, and isn't she beautiful? Isn't the garland on the altar



Figure 11 – Figure 10 in colour.




Figure 12 – Detail of Figure 11.

pretty? You can put flowers in the garland if you like, because they will be there in your imagination. They are just waiting for you to colour them in.

Similarly the coin in Figure 4 is very small and dark brown, but when seen by the imagination-facilitation method (Figure 5) it becomes full of life and activity. A youthful Jupiter smiles as he rides on a great eagle and is about to throw a red-hot thunderbolt to the ground. Its strange jagged shape suggests its powerful electric nature. With his other hand he holds a golden sceptre,

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Galerius as Caesar

silver argenteus (c296AD)

18mm, 3.0gms. Rome mint.

Obv: MAXIMIANVS CAES, Laureate head facing right.

Rev: VIRTVS MILITVM (Γ in ex.),

Four princes sacrificing over tripod before gate in six-turreted inclosure

Ref: Sear 14264, RIC 42b, RSC 219b

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When Diocletian split the empire in four he appointed Galerius as his deputy (Caesar) and made him his son-in-law. The tetrarchy fell apart after Diocletian retired in 305 but Galerius continued Diocletian's persecution of the Christians before dying in 311.



Figure 13 – A schautaler minted at Lübeck in 1619. It shows the Crucifixion. The legend is in German. (Dr Busso Peus Nachf. Auction 411, Lot 1384)



Figure 14 – Figure 13 in colour.

the symbol of his regal status. The next time you see lightning think of Jupiter way above the storm (the dark blue in the lower half of Figure 5) getting ready to throw down his next thunderbolt. It's much more fun than just knowing the scientific explanation.

If you are a religious person with a fairly strong imagination you will find it very inspiring to apply the imagination-facilitation method to more modern coins that have religious images on them. Some German coins from the 17th centuries are particularly suitable. A silver schautaler (show coin) minted at Hamburg in 1643 has a wonderful Annunciation scene on the obverse (Figure 6). The elongated figure of the

archangel is like the 'unnatural' figures in El Greco paintings and indicates his other-worldly nature. The addition of colour enhances the spiritual dimension of the whole scene (Figure 7).

If you create art yourself, or at least try to create art, you are much more able to appreciate the works of great artists. The subtle variations in the colours in paintings by Giotto, for example, bring out the spiritual element in his work. In religious art even the colours themselves are symbolic. Blue, the colour of the sky, symbolizes Heaven and Love. Red, the colour of fire, symbolizes the coming of the Holy Spirit. Green, the colour of vegetation, symbolizes life. Yellow, the colour of the sun, symbolizes divinity. In Figure 7, for example, the archangel is painted mostly in red colours to symbolize the coming of the Holy Spirit. Actually, everything is symbolic for anyone who has a religious sense, as George Ferguson says, "The early Christian saw God in everything. In God he 'lived and moved and had his being.' It followed naturally that, in his eyes, everything was symbolical of God." (*Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, Oxford University Press, 1954, page 8) The Christians attached spiritual meaning to everything they observed.

On a schautaler minted at Hamburg in 1651 there is a Nativity scene (Figure 8). It is a wonderful work of art, but if colour is added (Figure 9) it becomes even more impressive. What adds to the charm of these medallions is that the die engravers often depart from the standard depiction of the scene. In Figure 9, for example, instead of the three wise men bringing gifts, there is a fellow jumping around waving his hat in the air. The engraver knows that this fellow should not be there and shows only part of him, but he is expressing the joy that the people of Hamburg felt.

If you really want to be blown away you could tackle a large German tauftaler (baptism coin). A double tauftaler minted at Zellerfeld in 1685 is shown in Figure 10. The Holy Spirit is coming

down from heaven like a dove as John the Baptist baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River. John is pouring water over Jesus' head from a bowl. On the other bank of the river there is a seraph. Seraphim have six wings, two of which cover their feet (Isaiah 6: 2). In the Bible there is no record of seraphim being present at Jesus' baptism. Previously the prophet Isaiah had seen them flying above God's throne in his Temple and shouting, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." (Isaiah 6: 3) The artist has shown one present when God's spirit descended on Jesus. In his imagination God's glory was particularly apparent on this occasion and the scene would have been full of colour (Figure 11). To a large extent he has been successful in conveying the sense of joyous rapture that Jesus was experiencing, but when colour is added (Figure 12) what was in the artist's mind is seen more powerfully.

A schautaler minted at Lübeck in 1619 shows the Crucifixion (Figure 13). There is a lot going on in this scene, and the artist's knowledge of the Bible is surprising, as is often the case. At the foot of the Cross the Roman soldiers are casting lots for Jesus' clothes (Matthew 27:35). The expressions on their faces reveal their greed and cruelty despite all the suffering around them. On the far left, John is holding Mary's hand (John 19: 25-27). On the ground at the foot of the Cross there is Adam's skull with some of his bones. The place was called 'Golgotha', which means a skull, not because it was skull-shaped, but because it was believed that Adam was buried there. Under the horse on the left there are sheep scattering. They are tiny and could easily not be noticed, but they symbolize what Jesus said on the Cross, "You will all fall away, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'" (Mark 14: 27) If colour is added to the scene (Figure 14) the wonderful design and craftsmanship can be more easily appreciated.

If teenagers are looking for something to do during the Christmas holidays they could try applying this imagination-facilitation method to their coins. They might be pleasantly surprised. What a young person imagines may be of more value than what he or she knows, as Albert Einstein wrote in an essay, *On Science*, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." On a more spiritual note the poet, John Keats, wrote in a letter, "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination – what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not." (*Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 1817*)

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