

RNA



News

The official journal of the Rochester Numismatic Association

The RNA On Display

PLUS: Gerry Muhl on Mercury coins • Grant Hobika on micro-numismatics • It's time for the banquet!



May 2006

Dear Richard:

I would like to thank you for the interest you took in evaluating and purchasing my \$5 Indian collection.

Over the years I have dealt with a number of dealers involved in direct purchase and auctioning of my coins, but never have I dealt with anyone who showed the interest that you have.

Not only did I get a very good price for my coins, but you were very helpful in the arrangement for extra insurance.

I have seen your ads in "Coin World" showing letters from past customers.

I have to admit that I was a bit unsure of how accurate the letters were. But after dealing with you, I have no doubt that I will contact you for any future sales.

Sincerely,

HN, NC



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I GET A VERY
GOOD PRICE
FOR MY COINS,
BUT YOU WERE
VERY HELPFUL.”



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RNA News

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clubs

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Visit the RNA Web site:
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FROM THE PRESIDENT

April was the *coolest* month

A famous poem starts out, "April is
the cruelest month..."

The poet obviously didn't live in
Rochester.

April has been a busy month, not
cruel. The above few words in
quotation marks are about all I can
remember from T.S. Eliot's great
work *The Wasteland*. For
Rochesterians, spring was in the air.
For the RNA and RJNA, National
Coin Week got off to a great start
with lots of fine posters made by 11
of our eager, young numismatists,

and we put
together a fine
display of our
presidential
medals in the
Rochester
Museum and
Science Center. I
hope you had a
chance to see it.

Special thanks
to Gerry and
Scott, and to all who helped with the
project.

We shared Benjamin Franklin-
related materials and welcomed
guests to our April meetings.

Unfortunately, this column is being
submitted before our meeting on the
April 20 and the RJNA meeting on
April 21, so I can't give you
participation statistics for those
meetings. But if we think April was
busy, here comes May. We'll need to
take a breath and try to stay our
course.

Please mark your calendars so as to
not miss out on any of our
upcoming activities:

Business meeting on May 4 with a
talk by Donovan Schilling entitled
"A Numismatic Salute to Lewis and
Clark."

The Meinhart Speaking Contest is
May 18. It's a school night for our
speakers, **so please note our
meeting start time is at 7:30PM.**
Save room for the pizza. This is
always a special night.

The following night, May 19, is the
regular RJNA meeting night.

Finally, our annual banquet is
Friday, May 26 at the Green Lantern
Inn in Fairport. We will be honoring
our past president Edie Coe. Please
make your reservations early and pay
for your tickets no later than May 18
in order to save \$4 on each ticket.

Tickets are **\$26 in advance and
\$30 at the door.** Dinner includes the
always-popular Green Lantern prime
rib.

You can send a check to PO Box
10056, Rochester
NY 14618, or pay
Joe Lanzafame at
an upcoming
meeting.

Call Joe at 288-
1932 for more
information.

Buying tickets
ahead of time will
facilitate planning
for the numbers

of guests, meals to prepare, tables to
set up, *et cetera*, not to mention
reducing any anxiety about
attendance.

As always, Bill Coe is selling
drawing tickets for a free meal and
for the unique pewter Edie Coe
medal. Contact him at 865-7992, e-
mail him at billcoej@juno.com, or see
him at the next meeting.

Charles Ricard, RNA member #1,
will be on hand for the unveiling of
our new writers' medal, to be named
the Charles Ricard Writer's Medal in
his honor. Of course, tradition will
continue and Edie Coe's presidential
medal will be unveiled at the
banquet. As always, we will also
learn the identity of our Numismatist
of the Year. The night promises to
be memorable.

I am looking forward to May
flowers, as well as all of our
upcoming activities. I hope to see
you at a meeting in May.

*Sincerely,
Tom*

**Mark May 26 on your
calendar, and make
your reservations
early for a great
banquet night!**

Portraits of Mercury, past and present

By Gerard Muhl

At a recent international coin show in New York City, I stopped at a dealer who had a large jewelry box filled with what appeared to be copper coins of ancient Rome. His asking price was 20 dollars each. I invested in three unattributed dark pieces with good portraits of emperors and clear lettering in the style of the eastern Roman provinces.

When I returned home, I pulled out my Roman coin books and almost immediately found the first two coins in David Sear's book *Roman Coins*. They were common varieties of colonial issues of the emperor Gordian III. The third coin was a puzzle.

The obverse of this elusive coin had what appeared to be a bust of Severus Alexander (AD 221-235), but the coin was not listed in the new edition of the Sear book. What to do now?

I had a clear photograph of the coin sent to a Chicago coin dealer for attribution. Surprisingly, it came back as a billon tetradrachm of the Emperor Maximinus I (AD 235-238), issued in Thrace (Greece) by the City of Anchealus. I was told it could be found in a rather obscure book called *Ancient Coins of Northern Greece*.

The coin bears the portrait of Severus Alexander because the mint in Anchealus had no good likeness of Maximinus. Maximinus was a giant of a man; some say over eight feet tall. His thumb was so large that it was said he wore his wife's bracelet on it.

Neurologist Harold Klawans believed the emperor suffered from a condition known as acromegaly. Caused by a pituitary tumor that eventually affected the hypothalamus in the brain, this disease causes enlargement of the skeleton and distortion of the facial bones. According to Klawans, "the skull becomes enlarged and thickened, and all its bony ridges are exaggerated...most striking of all, the lower jaw becomes massively enlarged."

The portrait on typical coins of Maximinus shows the effect of acromegaly, but my coin had none of these characteristics, just the normal features of Severus Alexander.

It is interesting to note that Maximinus was the first emperor not born in Rome and in fact the first never to even visit Rome. Roman minters in the western empire often used as models marble busts, cut using portraits painted as the emperor sat for this process. Since Maximinus only reigned for three years, and most of those were as a general in the field, few likenesses of him were made, and chances are that none reached Thrace in Greece before he was killed. Thus the coins used whatever portrait they had.

The reverse of the coin shows Mercury (Hermes) in repose. The name of the issuing city encircles his image. This design is from a statue originally carved or cast by Alexander the Great's court artist Lysippos of Sikyon. Lysippos worked for 46 years beginning in 360 BC, and according to Pliny the Elder, he produced 1,500 works in stone and bronze.

Most of his works are lost or destroyed, but the seated Mercury was preserved by the 79 AD eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the Villa Suburbana in the city of Herculaneum near Pompeii, Italy. Buried under ash and mud that hardened into a cement-like composition, this statue was uncovered by the excavation of Karl Weber between 1750 and 1758.

The recovery of the Mercury caused quite a stir even though it is now believed to be a Roman copy of the Lysippos original. Numerus papyri scrolls were also found in the 30,000-square foot house. So grand was this "Villa of the Papyri" that it is speculated to have been owned by Julius Caesar's father-in-law.

After its rediscovery, plaster and alabaster copies of the Mercury were ordered and sent throughout the world. Artists studying in Italy returned home with sculptural and painted copies of the work. Interest in this Greco-Roman god was rekindled.



The mystery Roman coin that began Gerry's Mercury quest



According to the ancient Roman historian Livy, the early temple of Mercury in Rome was dedicated in 495 BC. Mercury was patron of athletes, having been said to have invented running races. At all racing events would be a prominent statue of the god of speed. In this guise he was also seen as the messenger of the gods. What better symbol to use today for a speedy auto or an overnight flower delivery service?

Mercury was also a god of merchants, often shown in association with a bag of coins. Sometimes the image of the god is substituted by merely a money bag on ancient coins. Where there are coins, there are thieves. Mercury was also patron god of thieves.

Mercury is noted as the patron of alchemy and magic and is associated with the healing arts. He is often pictured holding the caduceus, or wand of magic. A number of modern medical societies have used the caduceus as their symbol.

Mercury appears on a number of modern coins and paper currency. Immediately following World War I, the French Chamber of Commerce issued aluminum-bronze coins showing Mercury in repose. Their design was directly influenced by the statues buried by Mt. Vesuvius nearly two millennia earlier. In 1942, the French again used the Mercury design on their 1000-franc note.

Czechoslovakia in 1933 issued a 20-korun silver coin with the standing figure of Mercury with two working

men. The symbolism was meant to commemorate the growth of commerce and industry and, hopefully, an end to the depression in Europe.

Between 1948 and 1955, Belgium's regular-issue 20- and 50-franc coins portrayed the bust and the caduceus of Mercury. Commerce was the theme for this war-torn nation struggling to rebuild.

Mercury appears on several issues of paper currency, such as the 1914 U.S. \$100 bill and many commemorative medals, but remains relatively rare as a topic for the art of the coiner. In Rochester, however, the god of commerce will be remembered as the informal symbol of the city. The three-times-life-size statue of Mercury commissioned by William Smith Kimball in the late 1800s still soars over the downtown skyline.

When commissioned, Mercury advertised the success of the Peerless Tobacco Company. Now it is a symbol of an economy optimistically looking to a bright future.

In 2005, the RNA struck a new award medal featuring Mercury, named for the club's Member #1, Charles Ricard. Beginning at the annual banquet this month, it is to be awarded to members willing to share their numismatic knowledge by writing an article

for the RNA News or other numismatic publications. Be one of the first to receive the Ricard Award – send in an article for publication this summer!



(top) 1921 French Chamber of Commerce aluminum-bronze Mercury coin – compare its design to the Roman coin, opposite (bottom) 1933 Czech 20 korun Mercury coin



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MICHAEL OMELUCH, Professional Numismatist

RNA medals on display at RMSC



The RNA celebrated National Coin Week with an exhibit of its presidential medals in the lobby of the Rochester Museum and Science Center.

Designed and built by assistant curator **Gerry Muhl** (*left*), the exhibit includes examples of each of the club's 92 presidential medals, issued annually since the club was founded in 1912, as well as several medals and a die designed by Alphonse Kolb for the RMSC.

The exhibit went on display Wednesday, April 12, and will remain up until at least May 1, in a prominent spot next to the stairs that lead to the new Riedman exhibit hall on the museum's third floor.

No sooner did Gerry get the exhibit in place then museum visitors began asking about the medals and the club – and that prompted the club to sponsor an educational table next to the exhibit on Saturday, April 15.

RNA members **Tom Kraus**, **Jason Childers**, **Scott Fybush**, **Bill Coe**, **Edie Coe** (*below, right*) and **Chip Scoppa**, as well as RJNA co-president **Ted Kraus** (*below, left, with Tom Kraus*), took shifts behind the table, answering visitors' questions about coins, medals and the club itself, as well as handing out free coins donated by **Gerry Muhl**, magazines donated by **Ursula Loose** of **McLeod Stamp and Coin**, and copies of *RNA News*.

Among the visitors to the table were several teachers, who expressed interest in using some of the Roman coins being distributed to help them with their classroom lessons.

The club may sponsor another educational table before the exhibit comes down – contact Gerry at 336-9459 if you're interested in volunteering or donating material.

And be sure to stop by the RMSC before May 1 to check out the exhibit and show your pride in the club's long history in the Rochester community!



The World of Micronumismatics

By Dr. Grant Hobika

There are many ways to collect coins, but as the centuries have passed there has been a clear trend: greater specialization in defining what constitutes a “set” and much closer scrutiny of the individual coins themselves.

In the 1800s, it was common to assemble a collection of just one representative of each major design type for each denomination. Later, collecting complete sets of a denomination by date alone became popular. It was much later before collectors began to even pay attention to mintmarks.

Grading was also tremendously simpler in days gone by, with none of the hair-splitting calls made by today’s professional certification and encapsulation services. They routinely assign grades where a single tiny point difference would result in many thousands of dollars more or less in the coin’s market value. They also send many coins back to the unfortunate owner in “body bags” for a variety of reasons – such as having been allegedly cleaned or artificially toned.

In this way, much wealth is created and destroyed. There are many pitfalls to avoid and a fabulous amount of hidden value to be found by examining coins more closely – under the microscope, so to speak. View your coins under 7- to 15-power magnification and discover an entirely new world of interesting varieties and potential profit. You will also become able to share in the fascinating secrets of the artists, engravers and diesinkers, who made the dies that struck the coins you hold.

Here are some tidbits of what exists in the world of “micronumismatics”:

Overdates: Some of the most valuable coins in many series were made when the die was changed at the beginning of a new year on a serviceable die left over from the previous year. All of us have the chance to find and buy for 50 cents a 1942/1 overdated dime that would easily sell for \$500. Not surprisingly, this is called “cherrypicking.”

Overmintmarks: Dies intended for one branch mint were sometimes sent to another branch mint and the wrong mintmarks fixed by overpunching with the correct one. The last Carson City dollar is considered by many to be not the 1893-CC, but rather the 1900-O over CC issues, struck in New Orleans seven years after the closing of the Carson City facility, using seven different reverse dies with the CC mintmark left over from the final year of that mint’s production.

Repunched mintmarks: Multiple attempts to get the mintmark right are obvious on a tremendous number and variety of coins minted before the 1980s.

Repunched dates: Incorrectly punched in the wrong position – or even upside down and backwards – then later corrected, leaving tell-tale evidence for anyone with a loupe to see. There are also a lot of cases of mysterious misplaced

digits popping out of all sorts of odd locations on coins of the 1800s.

Die damage and repairs: Spectacular breaks as the die metal failed, or clashing of dies with no planchet between them, are responsible for many interesting cherrypicking targets. Another type of popular collector variety is created by efforts to remove evidence of clashing, such as those that resulted in the well-known and valuable “three-legged buffalo” on some 1937-D nickels.

Rare design variations: A tiny percentage of a year’s production may be from a slightly different design variety. That scarcity makes “small motto” two-cent pieces, as just one example, much more valuable than other 1864s.

Counterfeits and alterations: Adding or removing mintmarks is just one way of altering a genuine (but common) coin to resemble an extremely rare and costly issue, so *watch out!* All manner of counterfeits exist for the more valuable collector coins. It pays huge dividends to have some knowledge of how to detect and avoid them.

Surface problems: Everything from impaired luster and planchet flaws that detract from eye appeal to hairlines that lower the grade to repaired holes, filing of rims, artificial toning, evidence of improper cleaning and “doctoring” might result in your treasured new purchase turning out to be a big loss instead. There are many unscrupulous villains out there just waiting to pass off problem coins to the unsuspecting. The coins are unacceptable, and will be rejected by all numismatists with a better-trained eye.

World of VAMs: There are more different *identifiable* varieties of Morgan Dollars minted in Philadelphia alone in the first year, 1878, than the total number of coins comprising the *entire Morgan Dollar series by date and mintmark* produced at all five mints from 1878 to 1921.

Leroy Van Allen and George Mallis were great pioneers in this field, and the acronym VAM comes from the initials of their last names. Each individual marriage of one particular obverse with another specific reverse can be identified because of individual unique variations (like a fingerprint) that each die leaves on every coin it strikes.

Each specific obverse/reverse die marriage is given a VAM number. Collecting Morgan Dollars by VAM number is a popular – and sometimes lucrative – specialty. There are dozens of VAMs in 1878 alone that have never yet been found in uncirculated condition. These can be worth a significant premium, even in low grade, and finding a high-grade specimen is like the big jackpot in a large Bingo hall.

VAMs today represent a true frontier of micronumismatics. Important new discoveries are being made constantly, and new books appear annually to aid the next generation of VAMmers coming aboard daily to “take it to the next level.” If you are interested, **WELCOME!**

Contact Grant Hobika at vamdoctor1878@aol.com

The Calendar **May - June**

- Thursday May 4 – 8 PM – RNA Meeting: Donovan Shilling speaks on “A Numismatic Salute to Lewis and Clark”
- Thursday May 18 – 7:30 PM – RNA Meeting: Meinhart Speaking Contest Come cheer on the juniors as they present their numismatic knowledge! *(Note earlier start time)*
- Friday May 19 – 7:30 PM – Rochester Junior Numismatic Association Know someone 17 or younger who is interested in numismatics? Why not bring them to an RJNA meeting? Or just show up and join in the “Stump the Advisor” fun – and congratulate the winner of the previous night’s Meinhart Speaking Contest!
- Friday May 26 – Edie Coe Presidential Banquet at the Green Lantern Inn, Fairport. See details, page 5
- Thursday June 1 – 8 PM – RNA Annual Meeting: Alec Ollies speaks on “Birmingham with an H”
- Thursday June 15 – 8 PM – RNA Meeting: Year-End Auction
- July 20-23 – Canadian Numismatic Association, Niagara Falls, Ontario Anyone up for an RNA group trip?
- August 16-19 – ANA World’s Fair of Money, Denver Check out that mile-high bourse floor!

Regular RNA meetings are held on the first and third Thursdays of every month, except July and August, at the Eisenhart Auditorium of the Rochester Museum & Science Center, 657 East Avenue. Enter through the Eisenhart or Gannett School doors and follow the signs downstairs to our lower-level meeting room. All are welcome! Call Dave Gottfried at 738-0908 if you need a ride or directions.

RJNA meetings are held in either the ballroom of the Eisenhart Auditorium building or an upstairs classroom at the Gannett School; follow the signs posted on the building’s doors or call Steve Lanzafame at 288-1932 for more information.

The Calendar welcomes meeting notices from other area clubs. Send them to rnanews@fybush.com or PO Box 10056, Rochester NY 14610.

Sign up for the Annual Banquet, May 26! (page 3)

RNA News
Rochester Numismatic Association
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