

# *Art History*

## **Ancient Coinage: What Ancient Coins Reveal for Modern Art Historians**

Emily Claire Worthey

Modern coins are not given much attention. Today, coins are a nuisance that often get lost in the crevices of cars, couches, and handbags. The modern conception of coins, however, is very different from what they were originally—works of art. In their time, the coins of Greece and Rome served as vehicles for the creativity of artists. The Greeks honored the gods on their coins, depicting their image on the face and an attribute on the back. The Romans praised their emperors, placing their faces on the front and their achievements on the back. Because these two societies put so much effort into the art on their coins, we now have valuable information about the past. In honoring the gods, the Greeks cast pictures of works that no longer exist, giving us visual images of structures that, prior to the discovery of the coins, we had only verbal descriptions. The Roman emperors were so readily willing to boast of their cultural accomplishments that art historians are now able to put a face with achievements that were only written about in historic documents. Without the ancient coinage, art historians would have significantly less information on ancient Greece and Roman art than they have today.

Perhaps the most popular design on a Greek coin was the Athenian owl. On the front face of the coin is Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. On the obverse is an owl, the symbol of Athena, representing her wisdom. Art Historians know that Athena was the patron goddess of Athens from historical documents and other works of art, but the coins show just how much the Greeks revered their patron goddess. David Schaps, Associate Professor of Classical Studies at the University of Israel notes in his book *The Invention of Coinage and the Monetization of Ancient Greece* that “the famous owl coins...came to be the dominant coinage in the entire Mediterranean” (105). The prolific nature of the coins reveal how religion and the gods seeped in to every corner of Greek life. The Parthenon paid homage and thanks to Athena, but building a temple to a god is to be expected. The fact that her face and owl were on such a menial object as a coin expresses a deeper reverence. The coins bearing a sketch of an image of Phidias’ statue of Zeus at Olympia is another example of how ancient Greek coins aid art historians. The coins are of vital importance since this statue, which is among one of the Seven Wonders of the World, no longer exists. Michael Grant points out in his book *Roman History from Coins* that “these sketchy coin-types are of great value since they vitally supplement the descriptions of the masterpieces by writers such as Pausanias,” (63). We have

written evidence that the statue existed, but without the coins as visual proof, we would never be certain of exactly what it looked like.

Because of the vast nature of the Roman empire, its coinage spreads further than that of the Greek's so we can gain more knowledge from them. The first Roman coins portrayed well-known Roman ancestors, such as Brutus or Hercules (Grant 12). Soon, however, it became evident that coins were the perfect way to spread information. Michael Grant notes that "coins were more portable than busts, and more widely distributed," (13). Enter Julius Caesar, who became the first man to put his face on a coin during his lifetime. Julius Caesar set a precedent that all emperors after him would follow: on the face of the coin was the ruler's visage, while the back showed one of his accomplishments (14). Because the emperors wished to make their accomplishments known to the masses, we now are able to use the coins to reconstruct ancient buildings that now exist only in ruins. The emperor Antonius Pius, for example, restored the Temple of Augustus and Livia, which no longer exists. He not only portrayed what the temple looked like, but also gave the dates of its restoration. Therefore, we have proof of the existence of the temple and evidence of where to place it in time (Grant 63-64).

The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus is also an example of how Roman coins reveal information for art historians. The restored temple survives only in bits and pieces. There are coins, however, that depict the temple as it originally stood. The coins show unexplained rectangles in the pediment. Unexplained, that is, until art historians noted similar rectangles on another coin. That coin portrayed the Temple of Artemis at Magnesia, which is known to have had openings in the pediment that could be opened or closed with wooden shutters. Therefore, art historians are able to deduce that the vanished Temple of Artemis at Ephesus had shuttered openings in its pediment as well (Grant 65). If the two coins that provided the connection did not exist, then the rectangles in the pediment of the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus would remain a conundrum today.

Finally, the actual portraits of the emperors on the face of the coins provide possibly the most significant aid to art historians, since Rome is known for the masterful portraiture created during its time. One example is a third century coin depicting a three-quarter view of a man. It is speculated that the coin was in fact modeled after a painting, not a sculpture (Grant 65). This is important because we have very few surviving paintings from the Roman era. If the images on coins are reproductions of paintings from the time period, they would be revealing works of art that art historians had no way of knowing that they existed, since the works perished many years ago.

These coins also show the development of portraiture as time progressed into the Byzantine era. Grant points out that some minters experimented with portraying emperors straight on, a precursor to the "full Byzantine 'frontality'" (65). The progression of styles through artistic eras is an important theme for historians, and having coins as another medium to portray change is extremely useful to them.

If it had not been for the Greek's wish to portray their gods and the Roman emperor's aggrandizement, historians and art historians wouldn't be able to use the coins as a means of solidifying ancient written documentation. From temples with too few pieces to recreate an entire image, to buildings and paintings that have completely vanished, ancient coins provide important evidence that otherwise would not exist. Art historians should embrace these coins and utilize every detail they can extract from them.



#### Works Cited

- Grant, Michael. Roman History from Coins. Cambridge at the University Press, New York: 1958.  
Schaps, David M. The Invention of Coinage and the Monetization of Ancient Greece. The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor: 2007