**The Stamp of History**

*James Fenton is impressed by the precision of ancient coin makers*

I met a woman recently who was a medalist by profession: she designed and executed rather large, coin-like objects in many unusual forms and with a range of different finishes — modern variations on ancient techniques. There are two main ways of making a medal — by casting and by striking. When you cast a medal, even using the most sophisticated methods such as silica moulds, the cast that you initially achieve has a rough surface that has to be chased (worked with tools) and polished before it looks good. But when a medal is struck, as a coin is traditionally struck, the object you gel looks good straight away. A struck coin is the result of a piece of hot metal being placed be­tween two dies and hit with great force, so that the metal is forced against the contours of the die, whose shape it takes with utter precision. The more I look at early Greek coins, the more impressed I am by the observation that (with the best of them) we can see an ancient art exactly as the ancients saw it.

Ancient statuary one would expect to show the effects of the weather. Marble gets worn by wind and rain, by frost too in a northern climate. And the marble statues of the ancient world have suffered all kinds of interventions. Once perhaps they were coloured. Now they are clean. Or once their surface had deteriorated and gone sugary, but now they have had their epidermis removed.

Among the freshest of survivors from millennia ago are hard-stone seals, as for instance the cylindrical seals from Mesopotamia which, when rolled over a piece of clay, still produce an astonishingly sharp im­age. Classical gems, which retained this freshness, producing a perfect image in wax, were objects of wonder in the Renaissance, and still aston­ish us when we bother to ask of them, for instance, how such a device could have been cut with such precision on such a small scale. What kind of lens, if any, could the gem-cutter have used? What kind of tool?

Always, when we look at photographs of such gems and seals and coins, we have to remind ourselves of the scale of the original, for they are routinely reproduced in generous magnifications, and yet they do not lose the decisiveness of their contours. They seem to expect to be enlarged.

The die-cutter’s art must have descended from that of the gem-cutter. They thought in the same way, in terms of negative space. They had the same gift for reduction. One worked in the hardest of stones, the other in metal. One — the seal-cutter — worked typically for the individual. The die-cutter worked typically for the slate. Uniqueness, in both cases, would have been at a premium, and no doubt the art was usually a rare one.

I used vaguely to imagine that the irregularity of ancient coins, on which images are often only partially present, was a result of wear and tear that the coins had been clipped or had suffered in the course of commerce. But irregular coins are typically complete. It is the position­ing of the die at the moment of striking that has led to the partial image.

Beyond the limits of the die, around the edge of the coin, the metal has been pushed out by the force of the blow, exactly like a cushion of sealing wax. You can feel each blow as you examine or handle each coin. The total shape is dynamic in the way a cast coin never is.

The earlier coins were produced before it had been fully under­stood that a coin could have two sides. The obverse bears the image. On the reverse it shows the impression of a square punch, the aim of the maker being to force the metal right into the die, to achieve that precise, intended image. Then this punch is elaborated: reverse, heads with tails complement obverse.

And leaving aside these heads, this array of portraiture, there are all these tails to consider. Leaving aside all these humans, there are all these animals: bulls, tortoises, lions, hares, tu­nas, dolphins, cuttlefish, strutting cockerels, eagles, the famous owls, crabs and the all- important horses.

Remember, when you look all these Greek coins, that “the poor man’s purse was generally his mouth”. There is a character in Aristophanes who, during hard times for the Athenian state, has just sold some grapes for a mouthful of bronze, and has gone to the market­place to buy some meal, when the town-crier comes by, shouting, "Bronze is no longer legal tender; Athens is a silver-using state once more."

So it was not an odd practice (if we ever thought it was) to place a coin in a dead person’s mouth, to ease the passage into the after-world. The mouth would be the obvious place for keeping money safe. But how the dead managed to pay for their passage before around 700 BC, which is when the first coins are supposed to have been minted — that’s just one of those questions which will have to wait.

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