

New Coins in the Classical Collection

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NEW COINS IN THE CLASSICAL COLLECTION

THE embellishment of coins, although originating without doubt from a purely practical need and ever serving a utilitarian purpose, has been developed at various times to a high degree of artistic excellence. There is great beauty in the classical coins of the earlier periods, when engraved dies were the result of individual impulse and effort, and simple needs permitted the designer to work with a corresponding simplicity appropriate to the limited space at his disposal. More elaborate are the coins of later periods with their more or less complex legends and allusive types and symbols, but they are none the less of high order and many are preëminently artistic.

A group of fourteen Greek and Roman coins recently presented to the Art Institute by W. F. Dunham were shown during the summer months in the recent accessions room. They are now exhibited with the classical objects in Gunsaulus Hall, and the coins described below are shown by themselves in the order mentioned. One bronze, eight silver, and five gold coins comprise this group. They are representative of a large collection owned by the Art Institute which, unfortunately, has never been exhibited because of lack of space.

The earliest of these new coins (Figure 1) is a small silver piece about five-eighths of an inch in diameter.¹ The Boeotian shield, or buckler, appears alone on the obverse, its outer rim outlined in low relief against a smooth undecorated field. The convex face of the shield rises in high relief, and the absence of any sharply defined edges gives a semblance of modeling. On the

¹ Diameter, $\frac{31}{32}$ "; weight, 41 grains

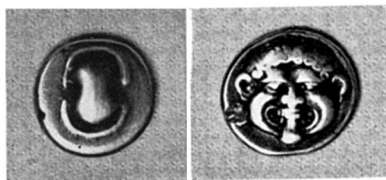


FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3

reverse a deep and clear-cut incuse square bears within its recess an amphora in high relief with two small unknown symbols beside it and one beneath. The polished surfaces of vase and field stand out as high lights against the darker incuse area. The striking of the die a little above the centre of the flan, or blank metal, has produced a pleasing variation in the segmental spaces about the square.

A silver coin of Macedonia (Neapolis, 500–411 B. C.)² is interesting for its whimsical Gorgon head (Figure 2). Unfortunately there is a plugged hole in the field, but the head itself has remained intact. Puffed out cheeks and outstanding ears, the depression in the centre of the forehead, the formal treatment of the curly hair, the long, extended tongue, and a nose long since flattened into a trefoil, are combined in a decorative symmetrical design of considerable charm. On the reverse is an incompletely quartered incuse square.

Both of these coins are of a clear silver and have acquired during years of use a smooth surface sheen of intrinsic beauty.

A Campanian silver stater (286–269 B. C.)³ shows two sides well composed in rather low relief (Figure 3). On the obverse a youthful Janiform head is enclosed in a border of dots. On the reverse Jupiter in a quadriga rides to the right holding in his right hand a thunderbolt and in his left a sceptre. Below are the letters ROMA incised on a rectangular incuse tablet, and the whole is enclosed in a plain border.

² Diameter, $\frac{31}{32}$ "; weight, 58 grains

³ Diameter, $\frac{3}{8}$ "; weight, 95 grains



FIGURE 4

On a Greek silver stater of about 300 B. C.¹ we have Ptolemy I of Egypt (Figure 4). Portrait heads appeared on Greek coins at the close of the fourth century B.C., and since that time portraiture has been an important element in numismatic art. This head, though perhaps lacking in beauty of profile, is strong and dignified and has been skillfully handled. A portion of a dotted border may be seen above the head. On the reverse is the badge of the Ptolemaic rulers (an eagle erect upon a thunderbolt), the name and title of the king, a monogram, and several smaller marks.

Another Ptolemaic coin² is of gold. Jugate heads appear on both sides: on the obverse, Ptolemy II and Arsinoë II; and on the reverse Ptolemy I and Berenice I. In each case a feeling of perspective has been secured by placing the head of the queen against the background in low relief with very little detail and bringing out the portraits of the monarchs in high relief and fine delineation. The obverse is particularly pleasing. At the left is a small shield emblazoned with a thunderbolt. Above the heads the Greek word $\Lambda\Delta\epsilon\lambda\phi\omega\Nu$ —which refers to the marriage of Ptolemy with his sister Arsinoë—is inscribed in carefully placed letters. A border of dots has been worked out with appreciable care. The border on the reverse, however, together with the word $\odot\Delta\omega\Nu$, signifying the deification of Ptolemy and Berenice, has been somewhat carelessly handled. In fact, the whole reverse shows much less finesse than the obverse, although the portraits are well done.

¹ Diameter, $1\frac{1}{8}$ "; weight, 206.4 grains

² Diameter, $1\frac{1}{8}$ "; weight, 206.4 grains

There is also in the collection a well preserved Attic tetradrachm³ of silver on which Antiochus of Syria is represented.

A gold coin of Antoninus Pius (86–161 A. D.)⁴ is one of the handsomest in the collection (Figure 5). The portrait is well placed on the field and evidences the skill of the artist. The features are delicately portrayed but are nevertheless firm and expressive. The broad treatment of the hair and the suggestion of beard accentuate rather than conceal the contour of the head. The neck, which is not so disproportionately long as in many of the imperial Roman portraits, ends in a fold of the mantle. The legend, IMP T AEL HADRI ANTONINUS (Imperator Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus) is inscribed in letters of rare individuality, due perhaps to the slight widening of all lines at their terminals. The reverse bears the legend, AUG PIUS P M TR P COS DES II (Augustus Pius Pontifex Maximus Tribunicia Potestate Consul Designatus II), and the type represents a draped figure standing before an altar, the right hand outstretched. There is the usual border of dots.

The policy of the Art Institute in regard to the development of its collections is exemplified in this group of coins. Artistic merit is the basis of its acquisitions. Rarity and historical significance are factors of but slight import in the selection of specimens suitable for the purposes of an art museum. It is hoped that the present collection may be augmented from time to time by the addition of more coins comparable to these.

D. B.

³ Diameter, $1\frac{1}{8}$ "; weight, 253.3 grains

⁴ Diameter, $\frac{3}{4}$ "; weight, 107 grains



FIGURE 5