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*Proceedings of the ICOMON meetings held in: Stavanger, Norway, 1995, Vienna, Austria, 1996 / Memoria de las reuniones de ICOMON celebradas en: Stavanger, Noruega, 1995, Viena, Austria, 1996*

[Madrid] : Museo Casa de la Moneda, [1997]  
269 p. – ISBN 84-88298-03-X., pp. 42-44

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## **BANKNOTES IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF FINLAND**

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The Coin Cabinet of the Finnish National Museum was originally founded as the numismatic collection of the University of Helsinki. The first acquisitions of paper money dates from the mid-19th century. Today we have some 5,000 banknotes, most of them of Finnish, Swedish and Russian origin. This figure does not include the various parcels of Russian inflation notes from the revolutionary period. They came to the museum in rolls and are kept as such.

In general the keepers of a collection in the 19th century were not interested in paper money, and the banknotes which happened to be acquired were in most cases obsolete or exotic. The former included various notes which had been used in Finland during the 18th century, as well as the earlier (pre-1840) notes issued by the Bank of Finland which were invalidated in 1850. When in 1860 Finland got a monetary system of its own, the rouble notes issued before were also regarded as a historical document worth collecting. Among the exotic material belong the parchment notes which had been brought home by Finns visiting Russian Alaska.

Many of the notes were acquired from the Bank of Finland which had been founded in 1811. These were normally specimens of series which were no longer issued, but in 1860 the Bank gave the Finnish mark no. 1 - it was a banknote, not a coin - to the national numismatic collection. This note has a special interest also from the point of view of conservation, for it was apparently kept in a showcase where it remained exposed to sunlight for several decades. As a result it has almost completely lost its bright red and blue colours.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, we are nowadays very careful about exposing banknotes to light.

Originally the museum seems to have used ordinary envelopes to store the banknotes. When the collection was reorganized in the early 1960s, the envelopes were replaced with folded sheets of acid-free paper. The sheets were, however, unpractical to handle and to store; the notes were easily misplaced and they were subject to more damage than necessary.

Until the 1980s, there were no other substantial public collections of paper money in Finland. In 1985, however, the Bank of Finland purchased a large private collection which, combined with the Bank's archive holdings, made the Bank's collection the most prominent in the country. It is now exhibited in rooms of its own in the main office of the Bank, and can be seen by appointment only. Because the history of paper money in Finland is so well presented by this exhibition, the recently opened numismatic collection in the National Museum is mainly concentrated on coins and medals.

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<sup>1</sup> It now seems, however, that the note was originally printed without the blue background colour (TT 2009).

When acquired by the Bank, the above-mentioned private collection was stored in albums of a type known as 'Visir'. Various plastic sheets had been used by collectors since the 1960s and even before, but they were not trusted by everybody because certain materials had been found to damage not only coins but also banknotes. The Bank naturally wanted to make sure that its method of storing the notes was safe also in the long run, and for this reason samples of six different brands of stock sheets were sent to be analyzed at the Technical Research Centre of the State. The results were reassuring: there were differences between the brands but in the case of at least two of them (named 'Hagner' and 'Mylar') the materials were considered safe enough. Following the example of the Bank, the National Museum has also started to use board and polyester sheets for storing its banknote collection.

The advantages of the sheets are obvious: the notes can be kept in albums and they can be seen and handled without touching them. The polyester film keeps them in place, and the cardboard acts as a protective background. Even if the sheets may not be ideal for all types of notes, they are undoubtedly practical for storing most of the material, including old and fragile notes.

Older types of albums used by collectors can sometimes be problematic. Special albums have been made for this purpose at least since the beginning of this century. The National Museum of Finland has two collections of German emergency notes which are kept in albums apparently dating from the 1920s. One of them consists of two albums, which have the notes stuck in 'pockets' and the word Notgeld stamped on their covers, showing that they have originally been designed for a collection of this material. As the notes do not seem to have suffered any damage, there is no reason for not keeping them in these albums.

Another type of album (possibly made in Finland) has not stood the test of time: it has the notes between transparent sheets of cellophane which have become strongly warped, destroying the binding and damaging the notes.

However, the damage is not always caused by wrong materials. The sad story of the Weckstrom Collection, the most important early collection of paper money in Finland can illustrate this. Bought by the museum in 1906, it contained some 400 notes, including many rarities and even unique pieces, which had been collected by Mathias Weckstrom, a civil servant, and by his son, Court Counsellor Alexander Weckstrom. The notes were mounted with glue in a large leather-bound album. As most of them were one-sided (and the glue was usually only applied to one margin), this was in fact a very practical way of keeping them. However, some time in the 1950s or '60s it was decided that the notes should be removed from the album by steaming. Unfortunately the Weckstroms had used various kinds of glue, and steam did not react to all of them, with the result that many of the notes were damaged. Even more serious than the album itself, and with it, a valuable piece of cultural history, was destroyed as well.

Recently we have acquired another handsome leather-bound album, this time containing Russian notes from the Civil War period. In this album, too, the notes have been fixed with glue, but openings have been cut in the

pages so that the reverses can be seen. The album may well have cost more than its contents - perhaps the original owner had collected the notes mainly for reasons of remembrance. In other words, this collection is also of more than purely numismatic interest.

The above proves that banknotes can be stored in several different ways depending on such factors as the size of the collection and its purpose. The main requirement is to protect the notes from damage caused by light and harmful chemical compounds. If the notes are kept in old albums, it should be decided, case by case, whether to break up the collection in question is justified for numismatic or other reasons, or whether the historical value of the album requires that the notes are left as they are.