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Why do coins and medals matter? They are unique sources of historical information for those who can discover their messages. Coins and medals give us important information about political history, about rulers and their territories. The designs express the opinions and ideals of their time. Coins tell us about the religion, the arts and the economy of vanished cultures. They can be considered as the commissioner's visiting-card. Even though the intrinsic value of money has been abandoned for some time, the emotional value attached to the designs seems only to have increased. The political battle around the name and the design of a single European currency unit is an interesting illustration of the immense symbolic power of national emblems and images used on coins. While in time most paintings, books and buildings may perish, some contemporary coins and medals will be around for many centuries or even millennia to come. Their material, metal, is a sound guarantee to withstand the ages.

Despite the solid material of coins, problems can still arise.

Many curators consider coins and medals first and foremost as sources of information and only secondly as objects which sometimes need special care. Due to the lack of accessible information about the conservation of coins and medals it may seem as if there are no problems and no solutions available. One could state that all collections containing base metal coins or medals face conservation problems. Tin medals may slowly crumble away, iron coins may be covered with rust and lead tokens may be covered with white fungus.

The problem for present day curators, who take the preservation of their collection seriously, is that they have to take decisions with sometimes unforeseen consequences. Although our knowledge of the reaction of metal in certain circumstances has increased considerably during the last two decades, there are still many blank spots on the map. From the past we have learned that some solutions to conservation problems have led to rather undesirable results in the present. So all a curator can do is to find out as much as possible about the conservation of coins and medals and to take a well-calculated risk.

In 1993 the Leiden National Museum of Coins and Medals organized a seminar on this subject.

There were lectures by conservators (W. A. Oddy, O. Enderly, N. H. Tennent) and curators (J. Steen Jensen and M. Scharloo) which explored the state of the arts and the present day dilemmas in decision making.

The National Museum of Coins and Medals in Leiden is an example of a large public collection which until recently had neither policy nor facilities for the conservation of its large collection (about 200,000 objects).

Until a few years ago the conservation activities which took place in our museum were aimed only at the cleaning of coin hoards which were brought in for study. Of course it was known that the relative humidity in the vaults was high. It was also known that the base metal medals had deteriorated considerably when compared to pictures from around 1900. Many older silver coins were tarnished black and 19th and 20th century silver coins, made with polished dies had somehow turned into a dull grey. All this was more or less accepted as a normal and inevitable fact.

After a devastating report by the Auditor's Office on the state of the national museum collections, the Dutch Ministry of Culture launched the so-called Doltascheme for the preservation of the national cultural heritage in 1990. The first phase of this project was the make up of a survey of the problems relating both to the registration and the conservation of all the objects.

For our museum, with a collection of more than 200,000 objects, the problems of registration turned out to be relatively small. Since the end of 1994 the inventory is up to date and all objects have been stored according to their place in the systematically arranged collection. The conservation problems turned out to be far more serious. With the help of specialists from The Netherlands and abroad a preliminary survey was made. It turned out that the relative humidity in the vaults needed to be brought down considerably, that all the cardboard boxes were unfit for permanent storage and that many objects needed conservation treatment in the next few years! The proposed measures require a lot of money as well as considerable energy from the staff. However we are convinced that all the efforts will be worthwhile as the necessary funds are now available.

First of all a climate control system was installed, which decreased the relative humidity in the vaults from over 70% to 42%. An air filtering system to reduce the amount of sulphur in the air is scheduled to be installed.

The 100-year-old cardboard boxes are slowly pulverising and now old boxes alike turned out to be made of acid paper. Since this year the ambitious project to replace the cardboard boxes has started. All the handwritten information on the old boxes is to be put straight into a database by extra personnel. No efforts are made to insert extra information about the object in this phase since it would almost certainly cause considerable delays in the process. This operation has to be overseen by the responsible curators. By the year 2000 there will be a rudimentary computerized catalogue of the collection available as a very welcome side effect of the whole operation. In order to design the ideal box, the services of an industrial designer were called upon. Last but not least a conservation programme has been set up to clean all dirty and corroded coins and medals and to register their treatment for future conservators. It has been decided to treat only objects which show traces of deterioration however slight they might be. The collection of 42,000 medals has been worked through and the results are quite striking. In the course of two years about 8,000 medals underwent conservation treatment. Gradually the methods of cleaning were further improved and

new discoveries were made about the production of the medals. The next collection to be treated will be the 60,000 Greek and Roman coins.

CONCLUSION

The museums of today have the responsibility to preserve in the best possible way objects of the past for future generations. To enable the public and the scholars of the future to enjoy and use coins and medals in the same way as today, it is necessary to prevent their deterioration and to consider the available methods of conservation seriously. The next step is the formulation and application of a feasible conservation policy.