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NUMISMATIC COLLECTIONS OF REGIONAL MUSEUMS

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A lot of regional museums - archaeological, historical or folkloric - possess coins, pennies, medals, banknotes or other numismatic or related objects as decorations and seals. The management of such objects poses specific problems concerning conservation, study, security and museological valorisation.

The national museums can appeal to national coin collections for these have the necessary knowledge to solve most of the problems. A close collaboration between regional museums and coin collections isn't always possible, not only for administrative reasons but also because most national coin cabinets don't have enough staff at their disposal, necessary for permanent contact with a lot of institutions who are confronted with a wide range of specific problems.

1. INTEGRATION OF NUMISMATIC OBJECTS IN A GENERAL COLLECTION

Mostly, regional museums have to take a principal decision about the role that numismatic objects can or have to play in the whole of their activities. This decision depends a lot on the dimensions and importance of their numismatic collections.

It isn't unusual that an ancient gift or a loan was the origin of such a collection. Coin collections often are too general or lacunal to be used by a traditional regional museum. Sometimes the set is too specialized or too exotic and doesn't have any link with the principal field of interest of the museum. During the 19th century the art medal, mostly historical, was highly prized. Since then, tastes and aesthetical standards have changed a lot, so that ancient collections only have a secondary role.

In both cases a series of initiatives have to be taken. First of all, you have to ask a numismatic specialist to make a scientific evaluation of the collection as an entity. He can point out possible merits of the collection and perhaps even indicate the rare or exceptional pieces that require special attention, not only scientifically, but also for security and insurance. Moreover, he can advise the conservator about the necessity of a detailed inventory that should eventually be published. If necessary, he can tell which specialists have to be called upon. He can also be charged to announce the existence of this collection to the numismatic world.

In order to protect and to valorize the numismatic collection it's necessary to take some measures. It is impossible to point out the specific problems of conservation in detail. It will do to indicate that coins, pennies, medals are more fragile than we generally believe. Moreover you can't lose sight of the fact that coins or medals are easily stolen or substituted, not only because of their small size but also because there is an important market of collectors who don't always ask where the rare coin they bought was coming from.

There are different possibilities of valorization: the organization of temporary numismatic expositions, the insertion of numismatic objects in the permanent exposition. Of course you have to bear their small sizes, in mind, their often important commercial value and the problems of specific conservation. For the rest, a numismatic object doesn't differ from other objects. On the other hand, it brings no more value to the museum. This approach is not always the best but it is almost the only possible one.

2. CREATION OF A CABINET OF REGIONAL MEDALS

There is however another possibility, namely the creation of a cabinet of regional medals. The starting point is not necessarily a large numismatic collection but a collection with a personality, an original character concerning the scientific and museological level. Even a relative modest collection could be the starting point of a series of activities giving more value to a regional museum. An example can convince you better than theoretic statements.

In 1981 the permanent deputation, the executive institution on provincial level, of the Belgian province of Limburg, took the decision to organise a temporary exposition about the monetary history of their province. During the preparations of this exposition, the organising committee recorded the following two facts:

1. The provincial authority possesses a numismatic collection that is fairly interesting but strongly dispersed and very much neglected.
2. The numismatic history of the province is exceptionally rich because of the existence of about thirty coin factories in a relatively small territory (about 2,400 km²).

The success of this exposition made the politically responsible aware of the numismatic potential of the region. They organized a *cessionnaire* about the possibilities of the valorization of this part of the patrimony. The owners of the two other public numismatic collections were very quickly convinced of the possibilities of collaborating on a common project. Now a collection with a large regional attachment is created. It is essentially based on three elements:

1. Roman coins of which most were found in Tongeren, the ancient *Atuatuca Tungrorum*.
2. An important series of coins stamped in local factories.
3. A representative choice of coins that circulated in the region during the Middle Ages and Modern Times.

This entity is completed with pennies and medals, part of which is closely connected with regional history.

As there was no regional historic museum, they had to find a museological surrounding qualified for the museological valorization of this collection. After some hesitation they chose the Provincial Gallo-Roman Museum at Tongeren.

Two objectives were set down. Not only the creation of an active cabinet of medals was important, but this cabinet had to be the starting point of reactivation of the whole museum.

The concept of the permanent presentation, opened to the public in 1985 did try to take this double aim into account as much as possible. A wide public without much previous knowledge is confronted with an effort to demystify coins. They show how and where coins were stamped, where treasures were found and also how our ancestors appraised and counted their coins. The choice of the coins and some elements of the presentation did stimulate the visitors to participate actively in their visit to the cabinet of medals. The second part gives a chronological survey of the stamped coins and of the types that circulated since the Gallo-Roman period till the 18th century. This was completed by some medals of regional interest. A workshop with a precision balance and a microscope interconnected the cabinet of medals with a documentation centre of numismatic and archaeology, both accessible to the public. Parallel to the creation of the cabinet of medals, a series of activities was organized to sensitize the public for the numismatic patrimony. The contacts with private collectors and amateur archaeologists are systematically developed. Concerning medals one decided to organise an annual exposition of the Belgian production of medals and pennies. The administration took the initiative to create some medals by young artists.

Because of important renovations of the Gallo-Roman Museum, the cabinet of medals had to close its doors in spring 1991. It was at that moment that the close link with the public could break down. Therefore we decided to continue the activities during the period of compulsory closure. This could be achieved thanks to the extraordinary and generous collaboration of the Historical and Numismatic Museum of the National Bank of Belgium and her collaborators. They didn't hesitate to look after our collections during the renovation, they even organised three expositions with part of the coins. So the cabinet of medals didn't lose the contact with the public, quite the contrary. The other activities followed each other on the normal rhythm. A campaign for recruiting donors was organised and was very successful. During the period of closure, the cabinet of medals could set up a little collection as a general reference and above all the section of medals and pennies became more important.

The reopening of the cabinet of medals on the first of July, this year (1995), caused a lot of administrative and technical problems. The location in the Gallo-Roman Museum is not the same anymore, the presentation is new and the concept had to be improved. The medals are no longer part of the basic collection that concentrates mainly on the role of coins as archaeological objects. In return you can find a new element: para-numismatics. The experience of the last years showed us that the numismatist is more and more confronted with a wide spectrum of money-like objects, pennies of all kind of types and shapes, leaden seals. The visitors appreciate these often unusual objects and the information they provide very much.

The cabinet of medals remains associated with a workshop and a documentation centre that has the aim to become a meeting place between professional researchers and amateurs. A computerized inventory and an

iconographic data bank increase the importance of the documentation centre. They both allow the accessibility of the entire collection for every visitor. Nowadays the computerized inventory can only be used for a part of the coin collection. During the coming years, a large part of our energy will be spent to complete this needful tool.