



William L. Bischoff
*OUT FROM UNDER: THE QUEST FOR
NUMISMATIC SPONSORS AT AN
AMERICAN REGIONAL ART MUSEUM*

*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. 96-98

Downloaded from: www.icomon.org

**OUT FROM UNDER:
THE QUEST FOR NUMISMATIC SPONSORS
AT AN AMERICAN REGIONAL ART MUSEUM**

William L. Bischoff
Curator of Numismatics
The Newark Museum
Newark, USA

The title of my talk is deliberately provocative: "Out From Under", but from under what? Well, from under circumstances in which numismatics stand in the shade of more showy, popular museum departments. I will treat my own situation as typical for purposes of discussion and I will suggest some radical measures to counteract the marginalization of numismatics.

I have worked for the Newark Museum - albeit only three days a week - as its curator of Numismatics since 1991. When I signed on, the positive aspects of the job seemed to outweigh the negative. For example, the Museum embraces a multitude of fields and activities, housed in a recently completed, award-winning building. The Museum boasts a multiplicity of curatorial specialities - Asian Art, American Decorative Art, Ethnography, Classics, Painting and Sculpture, Science and Numismatics.

This context benefits my department in three ways:

- Competition from many other art museums in the area mandates a high standard of exhibition design and installation, carried out by a full-time staff of four professionals.
- Part of the Museum's heritage is a down-to-earth philosophy of art Curatorship. Thus, non-numismatic exhibits at the Museum even today frequently include numismatic objects in an attempt to demonstrate what daily life might have been like in different areas and cultures. To give a couple of examples:
 1. An Asian Gallery includes a panel of Tibetan coins, stamps and paper money;
 2. The Classical Gallery includes an ancient coin balance from Nubia;
 3. Ethnography has a case that shows objects used for divination in French West Africa, including French coins of around 1910. Being able to show numismatic material side-by-side with art and ethnographic material gives numismatics a chance to reach audiences that would otherwise be inaccessible.
- The synergy also works in reverse. When I mounted an exhibit called "In the Wake of Columbus" in 1992 to commemorate the Quincentennial of Columbus' First Voyage, other in-house curators provided me with some items of great interest, such as:
 1. Chinese Export Porcelain from the Manila Galleons, and
 2. China gold jewellery that, by way of exception, escaped the Conquistadors' melting pot.

But Now, The Bad News

- Except for YAP money, perhaps, numismatic objects are simply too small to captivate the average museum browser. They exist, as it were,

- in the shadow of larger, more glamorous objects from other collections.
- Our discipline is widely if inaccurately regarded - by Museum administrators as well as by the public at large - as the province of amateur collectors: collectors of the same ilk as those who collect hairpins, beer cans or dog tags. I think this is largely the result of the financially low threshold of entry for the collector.
 - But American museums today face declining or even disappearing government support - which places a premium on support from wealthy, sophisticated constituencies.

In a situation calling for a kind of triage among the Museum's various collections, the department with the lowest profile and the fewest advocates is bound to be marginalised, subject to atrophy and even death. That is the ominous cloud over museum-based numismatics in our time.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

- I. Raise the numismatic profile by designing exhibitions for a non-expert audience
 - A. Avoid the hobbyist and academic penchant for completeness. The motto should be: "Better fewer, but better!" No general audience wants to see specimens from all the English mints that issued pennies in the 9th century.
 - B. Associate numismatic material with non-numismatic Signature Objects that are big enough and familiar enough to draw the uncommitted eye from one display to the next, at each of which the viewer learns to relate the small and the new. For example, ancient South Italian pottery cups bearing the head of Arethusa framed by dolphins can lure the visitor to view the smaller Sicilian tetradrachms that inspired the design. A colorful Byzantine mosaic can attract attention to a small hoard of otherwise drab 11th century anonymous folles and the copper pot they were originally buried in.
 - C. Don't underestimate the audience's need for interpretation that brings home to the visitor the greater-than-a-mere-hobby importance of numismatics. In a project for reinstallation of the Numismatic Gallery at the Newark Museum, for instance, I propose to illustrate the contribution of our discipline to the study of economics, archaeology, art history, technology and political science.
- II. Recruit numismatic sponsors - i.e., Benefactors - from an elite, affluent and sophisticated constituency.
 - There are 45 coin clubs in New Jersey. After decades of assiduous cultivation, the most impressive support from these hobbyists to date was an OHAUS electronic balance sensitive to 1/10 of a gram. I hope for more success by identifying the one or two most sophisticated clubs - and cultivating their most sophisticated members as museum patrons. Obviously, sophisticated here is just a code word for wealthy and generous.
 - Instead of spreading your few purchases among a multitude of dealers, select one or two that are, if not themselves sophisticated in the

sense I just explained, at least on good terms with collectors and potential benefactors who are wealthy and generous. This tactic paid off handsomely for me when a dealer of the starving-scholar variety referred a numismatic widow with a half-million-dollar collection for donation to the Newark Museum rather than to a commercial auction house or a more prestigious research institution.

- Think creatively about how to find benefactors, and remember that not all benefactions need be in the form of cash or objects:
 1. Benefits can come in the form of political support - i.e., from within the governing structure of your own institution. Soon after I began to work at the Newark Museum, the Director admonished me to look for a purchase that was too expensive for him to authorize. He said that unless I requested funds for objects in the same range as the fine-arts curators did, the Acquisitions Committee would forget that we had a Numismatic Collection!
 2. Last year, I convinced a New Jersey businessman with an art-history background to lead a Newark Museum tour at the Frick Collection in New York to see the exhibition of Renaissance Medals he organised. This not only capitalised on the Frick Collection's aura to enhance the standing of an important numismatic speciality, it made a group of about 35 day-trippers aware, for the first time, that medals are different from coins, and that some of them rank as a genuine art form. Moreover, having done the Museum's Numismatic Collection one favour, I think this benefactor is a likely prospect for more in the future.
 3. This year I intend to draw up a list of potential sponsors - people with financial or political clout - to include in a support group called "Friends of the Numismatic Collection" - and decide on at least two or three interesting activities to involve them in each year. The membership fee should be high enough to make the effort worthwhile and to exclude low-threshold collectors. A small group like this soon develops a special *esprit de corps* and can help identify additional sources of support.
- But how to select potential sponsors for such a list? Sophisticated Dealers and Sophisticated Collectors, as discussed above, are likely sources. Another amount to a project I should have begun much earlier - to compare the current list of our Board of Trustees with the Registrar's records of previous donations of numismatic material. I need to cultivate such people: their political position can do more to get me - or you - 'out from under' than the most outstanding scholarly article or catalogue we might author.

I think the programme steps I have suggested today are the kind of things that need to be done to get numismatics 'out from under' and into the public eye. Some of them sound elitist and are elitist, hardly in keeping with the "Museums and Communities" theme of the conference. I am convinced however, that without such *Realpolitik* both numismatic collections and their curators are endangered species. And we need both if the public is to be served as it should be.