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## REORGANIZING A SMALL COIN CABINET

Tuukka Talvio

National Museum of Finland

In the summer of 1997, the National Museum of Finland closed for renovation. An old school building in the centre of Helsinki was converted into temporary office and exhibition rooms, and the national Security Printing House rented us the extra storage space that was necessary. All the numismatic collections were hidden in the cellars of the Security Printing House outside the city of Helsinki. The regular staff of the Coin Cabinet at that time consisted of Mr. Pekka Sarvas, the keeper, Ms. Outi Järvinen, then a temporary assistant, and myself.

The move back to the old museum building took place in the spring of 2000. Shortly before, Pekka Sarvas announced that he had decided to take early retirement, both for personal reasons and also because he thought that it would be better for him not to lead the reorganization of the Coin Cabinet, only to retire shortly afterwards. In other words, he left a free hand to me, his successor.

After the removal vans had gone we learned that our problems were by no means over: there were, and still are, many practical difficulties, especially with the storage rooms. There is also the question of manpower: the present staff of two, Outi Järvinen and myself, is clearly too small in the present circumstances.

Prompted by this sad situation, I would like to comment on some of the problems which today are facing us as well as other numismatic collections. First, however, a few words about earlier times.

### **Past and Present**

The Finnish National Museum has had a coin cabinet only since 1920, but the cabinet is older, for its main constituent is the Helsinki University Collection, the history of which goes back to the mid-eighteenth century (see *Compte rendu* 38, 1991, pp.72-74). In the 1860s, when the collection had already existed for a hundred years, its then keeper, Professor Wilhelm Lagus, formulated a collecting programme, according to which the primary objects of interest were the older coin finds, medieval minting in Finland, and medals related to Finnish history. Finnish coins, as well as Swedish and Russian coins which had formerly been used in Finland, were collected in sets, other coins and medals more selectively.

Numismatic research at that time was mainly concentrated on coin finds, for until 1883 Helsinki University was the institution in Finland which had the right of redeeming finds of coins and other antiquities. Lagus undertook important work in this field also, but as the staff of the University collection normally consisted of only one person, the keeper,

and his position was honorary, it is hardly surprising that most of the finds in the collection were not studied in detail until a much later period.

Although a full-time keeper was appointed when the university collection in 1920 was transferred to the National Museum, the situation did not at first change much. From 1920 to 1970, the regular staff never included more than one academic person at a time - and some of these academics were not seriously interested in numismatics. The result was that the backlog dating from the nineteenth century was never quite dealt with.

Since 1970, the duties of the Coin Cabinet have increased. Not only is there more bureaucracy than before, but publishers and advertising agencies have discovered the value of coins and medals for illustration purposes, and this service now takes more of our time than we would wish. At the same time, requests to borrow coin finds and other material for exhibitions keep coming in from other museums.

As a national collection our main goal is still to document the monetary history and medallic art of Finland. Foreign coins and medals are acquired mostly on the basis of their historical or artistic value. In recent years, orders, decorations and heraldry have also come to be included among the Coin Cabinet's specialities.

According to Finnish law on the protection of ancient monuments, finds of coins, whose owner is unknown and which can be assumed to be over one hundred years old, must be reported to the National Board of Antiquities, which has the right to redeem them from the finder. Naturally, only a part of the finds are redeemed, but the Coin Cabinet keeps a file on them, and information is also collected on old and lost finds. Unfortunately, with the present work-force we are not well-equipped for coping with field work, and here we must rely on the help of archaeologists.

The find archives are generally in good order, but as already mentioned, the same cannot be said of all the collections. The care of the collections is now our main problem, and it is one of the reasons why we urgently need at least one more employee. Such problems are not necessarily visible to outsiders, most of whom only see the exhibitions.

## **Exhibitions**

Although our exhibition is in relatively good shape it is in fact one of the parts of the Cabinet which in my opinion is very much in need of reorganization. The medal part has already been renewed, but the coin exhibition is still the same one that opened in 1993. This was the first wholly new exhibition in the Coin Cabinet since the 1970s, and new and rather costly showcases were built for it. They were designed by a well-known interior designer, Antti Nurmesniemi. Nurmesniemi seems to have based his work on the early nineteenth-century showcases of the Helsinki University Collection. Drawings for these elegant mahogany cases

had been made by Carl Ludvig Engel, who is better known as the creator of the neo-classical architecture of the Helsinki city centre.

The style of the new showcases is modern but the basic form, familiar from old museums all over the world, is traditional: the coins are placed on a sloping desk covered with glass. The distance between the bottom and the glass is 5-25cm.

The mastery of the designer is evident in the very even lighting of the showcases: none of the objects are in shadow and the texts are easy to read. Unfortunately, the cases also have their bad side: only relatively small objects can be placed in them. Moreover, the fact that the cases are free-standing and practically identical places many restrictions on the planning of exhibitions.

This is not the designer's fault: the starting point of the 1993 exhibition was that it should be a 'numismatic' one, with coins and medals placed in rows, systematically type after type. In the 1980s, when the work with the showcases began, such exhibitions were still very common in numismatic museums.

It should perhaps also be pointed out that a few decades ago coin cabinets often did not have permanent exhibitions at all. The idea that the public has a right to demand that collections are put on display is only relatively recent!

After our exhibition opened we soon found out that it satisfied neither the specialists nor the public. The former would have liked to see more than just the main types of the coins, and the latter were simply bored with the long rows of coins and medals. The only showcase which always attracted visitors was the one with coins from their own lifetime. Quite clearly most people are genuinely interested in coins and banknotes, but if they cannot relate them to their own world of experience, there is no hope of their visiting us again.

It seems clear that this type of exhibition now belongs to the past. There is, of course, nothing wrong with having coins in even rows, but they should be shown in a way which highlights their historical context. This means that the exhibition should include coin finds, non-numismatic objects connected with coin use, and pictorial material. There are good examples of this approach in several museums, such as the British Museum and the Swedish Royal Coin Cabinet.

These modern exhibitions are built in more flexible types of showcases than those which we now have at Helsinki. As, however, we cannot afford to abandon our well-made modern pieces of furniture - which, as already mentioned, have very good lighting - we must simply try to use them in more flexible ways.

The idea that coins are shown in their historical setting does not in itself determine the substance of the exhibition. At the ICOMON conference in Buenos Aires, Mr J. F. Hocquard told us about a new exhibition which he was planning for a bank museum in São Paulo. Using the latest technology and the results of various museological and behavioural studies he had devised a way of illustrating the history of Brazil with the help of numismatic material. Coins and medals, he suggested, are in fact ideal for illustrating not only economic but also political history. The iconography of coins, banknotes and medals certainly has more to offer than is usually thought, and they also have more general appeal than some other antiquities, such as weapons or porcelain. However, if they are only or mainly used for illustrating something else, they do not tell us much about numismatics. I have not seen Mr Hocquard's exhibition but I think that we must distinguish between the exhibitions which are concerned with monetary history, medallic art etc., and those in which numismatic material is used for other purposes. It seems natural that the exhibition of a coin cabinet or a money museum should aim at telling primarily about numismatics - not forgetting, of course, that one of the uses of numismatics is that it can also teach us about other subjects.

Considering that money and medals have different functions, a single exhibition is in principle not enough. Naturally, there should also be special exhibitions, both permanent and temporary. Special exhibitions are not only a way of attracting the public and utilizing the museum's resources: museums often have special collections which can be best exhibited as such. In the Helsinki Cabinet, for example, there is the Antell Collection. This is the best collection of Swedish coins outside Stockholm, and the numismatic exhibition in Helsinki has always been largely based on it, for Swedish coins were used in Finland for some 700 years. The original purpose of Dr H. F. Antell (1847-1893) was, however, to collect as many varieties as possible of every Swedish coin type, including multiple ducats and other rarities. Such unusual pieces should be shown in a special exhibition, both in order to do them justice and not to give a distorted picture of monetary circulation.

Temporary exhibitions are, incidentally, a field where modern computer technology can be very useful. Nowadays one does not need to be an expert in desktop publishing to produce texts for showcases - provided that the construction of the cases allows for the easy changing of texts. Most texts in our exhibition are now printed on paper. Earlier, we often used texts printed on film which are much more troublesome to replace.

To sum up: although I feel that my main duty as a museum curator in the present situation is to restore order in the collection, I see it as no less important to present the collection to the public by means of exhibitions. Coins and medals were in the past usually shown alone, as is still often done with glass, silver, porcelain and other so-called collectibles. This can be quite natural in special exhibitions, but the main purpose of a coin

cabinet or money museum is to relate the numismatic material to economic and cultural history. If the exhibition is meant for the general public, it is not enough to show the coins themselves but we must also show how they were made and used and how their design related to their times. The needs of a more specialized public – numismatists – can be met with special exhibitions.

**Figure 1.** An exhibition of medals in the Helsinki Coin Cabinet. Photo Outi Järvinen.

