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SEEKING A SYSTEM FOR SIMULTANEOUS STORAGE AND DISPLAY OF COINS

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First, I would like to define the problem; second, I will offer a possible solution; and third, I would like to solicit your reactions. To encourage research and study about coins and to display them interestingly to the general public is our problem. It is an issue that relates to the general theme of this conference, *Museums and Communities*, because my concern is that the collection be accessible to our community - the general public, the individual scholars, groups of visitors, and classes of students - that would be interested in seeing the collection without having to handle every coin each time they are shown.

Although I have done an extensive search, there seems to be nothing written that answers the questions I pose. Everything so far seems to be available only by word of mouth.

I came to this issue through work on my own museum's collection. Among the 16,000 objects in the university art museum at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, is a small but significant collection of 220 Greek, Roman, and Byzantine coins, the gift of Parker S. Dickson (1853-1919) to the University in 1916. As a university museum with a general collection, we would like students to study the coins, but we have been unable to encourage such study because of the current inaccessible storage situation of the coins and limited personnel to supervise. Moreover, there has been an interest on the part of university faculty members to conduct a seminar on coins and coinage - offered in an interdisciplinary way through the business school, history, and art department faculties - but it has not been possible to implement such a course. What we need, I have determined, is a system of display and storage that would allow for the accessibility combined with the security that would be necessary. With limited storage facilities and no possibility of leaving the objects out on permanent display in our gallery space, I have been seeking a system that would make the collection both accessible for viewing during study as well as display, secure so that the objects are not too vulnerable to theft, and safe in terms of the conservation of the coins.

Maintaining these multiple aims of keeping collections accessible, secure, and conservationally stable is a difficult issue for many parts of a museum's collection. In the case of a coin collection, where the objects are especially small, valuable and vulnerable, it is a big problem. Coins are subject to damage and theft. They need to be seen from both sides in order to study them properly, and they are so small that it is hard to understand them unless they are magnified. Scholars like to handle the coins to feel the weight and thus gauge their authenticity.

But how do you make them available to scholars so that the museum staff do not have to hover all the time? The Vatican Library's recent experience with a professor from Ohio shows that even those people with impressive scholarly credentials cannot always be trusted. Museums have just cause to be vigilant at all times for the safety of the objects in their public trust. Even without malicious intent, coins are vulnerable to loss and easily misplaced.

They are also subject to damage. Made not only of silver and gold but various alloys as well, they are fragile. We know that they should be stored at not more than 50 to 55% relative humidity and that they should be surrounded by inert substances - not wood. Some museums put a protective coating on the coins: shellac in some cases and a combination of bee's wax and 7% Dammar gum, as recommended by a French museum. There has been a large amount of work published on the metallurgical analysis of coins. How can this information be applied to the issue of suitable joint storage and display?

So the problem is how do you make the coins available to the general public so that these objects can be seen and studied properly while keeping them safe and secure? Storing coins in plastic envelopes of Dupont Mylar Type D, a polyester plastic, is recommended as ideal because of its stability and transparency but it does not solve the problem of vulnerability and accessibility to the public.

I have come up with a design for a cabinet that provides both storage and display possibilities and I have discussed it with a number of professional conservators and designers. My idea is simple and practical. The idea is to store the coins horizontally in specially cut circular slots of foamcore which would be softer than other materials in case the coins were jarred. The foamcore would be sandwiched between two layers of plexiglas. The top layer would be hinged so that this layer could be opened to access the coins, but it would normally be locked. Approximately 25 coins would be housed in each plexiglas holder and they would be labelled on the foamcore for easy identification. The trays would be large enough that they could not be removed from the museum but small enough so that the number of coins in each tray would not be overwhelming to the viewer. Coins of like materials would be kept in the same holder so that differing alloys would be isolated from one another. The plexiglas holders would be contained in a metal case and would be removable by lock and hinge. The trays can be placed horizontally, vertically, or at an angle for easy visibility during display, study and lectures. The most important thing about my system is that they can be flipped over for study both front and back. For the preservation of the metal the only materials that would be used are the non-acidic metal, plexiglas, and foamcore.

In order to magnify the details on the coins for study, the visitor would be provided with a hand-held ring light with a strong lens mounted on plexiglas feet with felt pads to protect the fragile plexiglas trays. I have discussed this with several lighting display companies and have found a manufacturer that could provide such a lamp.

I am assured by conservators that such a system would not damage the silver and other metals over the course of time. The hinged upper plexiglas layer allows museum personnel to remove objects should they be in need of conservation at any time and should a scholar wish to handle a particular coin. Individual students and class groups would be able to study the coins without hovering supervision. The system I am proposing allows for display and study, accessibility and security, safety for the objects, and room for visitors to enjoy the remarkable history and art that these unique objects offer.

I ask you as members of coin museum staff: Have other museums designed and tried such a system? Would my system work in your museum? I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this idea with you after this presentation. Thank you.

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