



# THE TIME TRAVEL OF COINS

*In this era of cryptocurrencies and virtual everything, the value of a 2 000-year-old coin goes deeper than its material worth. It's like holding a piece of history, and could perhaps make your fortune.*

WORDS SHARON FEINSTEIN

**B**RUTUS MADE GOLD AND SILVER COINS to mark the Ides of March and his assassination of Julius Caesar in 44BC. Turning one around in your hand is like holding a piece of history, echoing distant drums of drama and death on the steps of the Roman Senate. Collectors of coins are driven by the passion to own something that will endure. They're on a quest for buried treasure, a journey to the end of a rainbow. It's not just about making money. Ownership of a precious object goes deeper than its worth.

Adriana Russo of Numismatica ars Classica, billed as one of the world's leading firms for ancient coins, describes it as having a sense of power, a fascination with the past and the classical world. 'Collectors are born that way; they're people who like history and stories. Old coins are incredible objects. They speak to you of the past, the great emperors, the Popes. It's like reading a book. When you take one in your hand, you feel an incredible energy, the power and character of the coin. You have a piece of story in your hand, of the past. You imagine how many people have fingered this coin, which emperor. To me the ancient Greek coins are the most beautiful. I feel their passion, the allure of their intricate details, which seem to be reaching out to you from a bygone age. Magnetic. I like the Roman coins less, but men prefer them because they represent power, and everyone knows the story of Rome and everyone wants a piece of that story. My point of view is more feminine. Collectors are mostly men but more and more are women.'

Contemporary coin collecting and appreciation began around the 1300s, becoming a fad amongst privileged classes, particularly kings and queens. For a time King Farouk of Egypt owned a 20-dollar Double Eagle coin that sold for \$18.9 million at a Sotheby's

auction in New York last year. With a face value of \$20, the Double Eagle was the last gold coin produced for intended circulation in America. In 1933, 445 500 were minted, all but the one sold melted down. Its value is directly related to the rarity, state of conservation, historical importance and beauty.

The 2 000-year-old Brutus aurei coins are startling, and hugely precious because of their history and rarity, with only three known specimens in existence. They mark a fork in history, a symbolic moment: the murder of Caesar on the Ides of March (EID MAR). Introduced by Brutus as an audacious celebration of the bloody death, one side of the coin depicts the face of Caesar's former friend and ally, who led the conspirators who killed him, and on the other two daggers, representing Brutus and Cassius. One of these coins sold for the record-breaking amount of £3 240 000 in a London auction in 2020. Another is set to fetch £1.5 million later this year.

In these turbulent times of Covid-19, war in Europe and rising inflation, people are looking for safe havens. Is it prudent to invest in a coin or a Damien Hirst painting or the stock exchange?

Russo says it's personal. 'A painting can be beautiful to share with your friends, a more social activity. Collecting is solitary, perhaps more profound. You don't show off. Sheikh Saud Al Thani, famed for his art collection, told my brother that his favourite works of art were those he could hold in his hand, like coins.'

Nicole Kidman is an aficionado who collects ancient Judean coins. Martin Sheen partnered with the Royal Canadian Mint to design a commemorative silver \$3 coin featuring a relief of his Muskoka summer home, now a Canadian classic.

The South African Mint produces several series of silver and gold coins for investors and collectors each

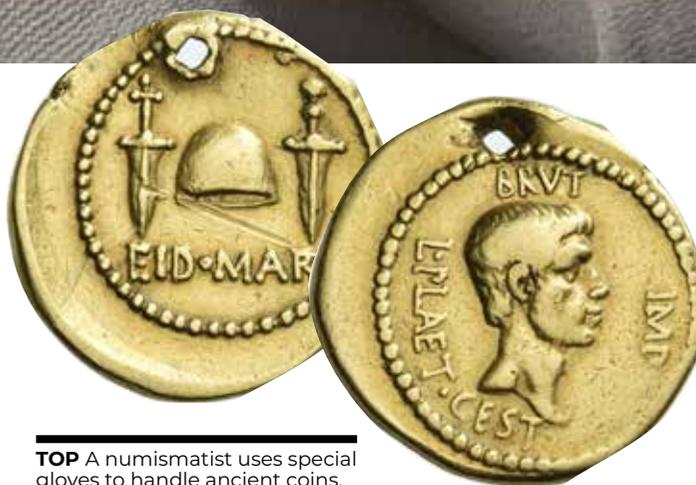


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year, like the Krugerrand. The world's first gold bullion coin was originally minted in 1967 to help market South African gold. Other South African coins of high value are the ZAR 1892 proof set (of which there may be only 10 complete collections) that is worth approximately R15 million. Created during the Anglo-Boer War in an attempt by the government to garner international recognition, the 1898 Single 9 Pond was sold in 2010 for over R20 million to a private anonymous bidder. It is deemed to be in the top-five most-expensive rare coins in the world.

While Elon Musk might only go bitcoin and some investors are now adding cryptocurrency to diversify their collections, old coins remain true art; they have history, reaching back 2 000 years. If Musk tweets something negative about an 1804 silver dollar, it wouldn't affect the market, but bitcoin is another story.

Anyone can buy collectible coins for a few dollars, and Russo says that slowly, slowly coin collection becomes obsessive and captivating. Once hooked, it can change your life and perhaps make your fortune. There are stories of people finding rare and valuable coins in an old coffee can at home or a collection that belonged to a grandparent. Sometimes an ancient coin is found at the bottom of a garden whilst digging up daisies. A piece of luck. A rare coin is probably the oldest things you will ever own. In an age of disposable goods, owning a small and exquisite antique has a magical and unique quality, something so many of us are now longing for. ■



**TOP** A numismatist uses special gloves to handle ancient coins.

**ABOVE** The sides of the Eid Mar coin, Brutus and two daggers, depict Caesar's demise.

Numismatica ars Classica guarantees the authenticity of everything they sell. Their London stock features mostly Greek, Roman and Byzantine coins, while Medieval and Italian Renaissance coins are held in Milan. They hold auctions of hugely prestigious collections in Zürich and Milan three times a year.

The Numismatic Division of the South African Mint produces proof-quality premium products made mainly in gold and silver specifically for the collectors' market. These include the world-famous Krugerrand, as well as our Natura and Protea Series.