

# The Evolution and Extinction of Lady Liberty

## A story in U. S. Coins, 1792-1947

Robert J. Stern

**C**OINS ARE A UNIQUELY INTERESTING FORM OF DURABLE ART. About 3,000 years ago in Greece, people started using lumps of metal emblazoned with representations of authenticity for buying and selling, and they have evolved ever since then. Wikipedia defines a coin as "... a small, flat, round piece of metal used as a medium of exchange or legal tender. They are standardized in weight and produced in large quantities at a mint by a government in order to facilitate trade. Coins usually have images, numerals (date and value), and text (value, national mottos) on them. Obverse and reverse refer to the two flat faces of coins. In this usage, obverse means the front face of the object and reverse means the back face. The obverse of a coin is commonly called heads, because it often depicts the head of a prominent person, and the reverse *tails*."

This description says nothing about the artistic value of coins. The people who are most interested in coins (numismatists) are often focused on other aspects, especially scarcity, errors, and how worn or unworn they are, or on collecting sets of coins. Some old coins are worth millions of dollars to collectors. An often overlooked value of coins are the glimpses they provide us of how the nations that produced them choose to present themselves to their people and the world. According to Cory Gilliland:

Coins... serve as brilliant reflecting mirrors of the age in which they were produced. One finds that coins represent their era as loudly and forcefully as do paintings and sculpture from the same period. Considering their diminutive size, the practical reason for their production, and their everyday usage, it is fascinating, if not miraculous, that such lowly pieces do mirror the same cultural and artistic visions as do the more famous and aristocratic works of art: the architecture, sculpture, and painting.

Coins are an alternative way to see governments and societies through time as they saw themselves, or as they wanted to be seen. Coins give us another way to put ourselves in dead people's shoes, unfiltered by modern perspectives or prejudices.

Assuming that coins do provide important insights into the societies that created them, why don't we see more studies using this approach? Until recently, it was not easy to study closely coins unless you owned them. Their small size and value makes them attractive and easy to steal; therefore, they are traditionally displayed by museums behind glass, where they are difficult to study and appreciate. Today, because of modern photography and the internet, we can better study coins as history. Anyone with interest and the internet can find and examine a high-resolution image of just about any coin that was ever made. This is possible because museums and dealers like Heritage Auctions in Dallas post high-resolution images of the coins in their collections or that they auction.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the most beautiful unworn coins (uncirculated and/or proof coins) can be studied better by downloading and enlarging JPEG images from a quick search on the internet, than in your own hands.

This essay takes advantage of the new ways of studying coins to explore how women were used on U.S. coins to symbolize our national aspirations from 1792 to 1947, the last year that a symbolic Lady Liberty appeared there. Two key points result: first, Lady Liberty evolved a lot over this time, from a disembodied head with hair to a full-bodied human, in concert with the growing power of U.S. women. Second, the national narrative, as shown by the people on U.S. coins, shifted from abstract and aspirational to concrete and historical in the first half of the 20th century. Representations of historical women briefly re-appeared in 1979 on the ill-fated Susan B. Anthony dollar and in 2000 on the Sacagawea dollar, which continues to be produced today, but these interesting episodes are not discussed here. Instead, this essay investigates and focuses on how women were portrayed on U.S. coins up to 1947.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See [coins.ha.com/?ic=Task-coins-121913](https://coins.ha.com/?ic=Task-coins-121913).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that my training and expertise is in the Earth sciences, not art history or gender studies. I do have an affection for U.S. coins, having collected these as a boy.



Figure 1 Marianne, the French symbol of liberty and inspiration for U.S. lady liberty.

A (left) *La Liberté*, by Jeanne-Louise “Nanine” Vallain (1767-1815), painted in 1793-94. Notice the Phrygian cap atop the liberty pole. The painting is in the Louvre. B (right) *Liberty leading the people*, by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), painted in 1830. This painting commemorated the July Revolution of 1830, which toppled King Charles X of France, but its spirit is that of the French Revolution. Note her Phrygian cap.

### Inspiration and Motivation

The Coinage Act (or the Mint Act), passed by Congress on April 2, 1792, set the dollar as the country’s standard unit of currency, established the coinage of the United States, and provided for a federal mint in Philadelphia to make coins. The first draft of the Act stipulated that all coins would use a portrait of the president on the obverse. President Washington objected, because he felt that such personification was too reminiscent of the monarchy from which the new republic had just freed itself. (Can you imagine what he would think about today’s coins, with a president on every denomination, including his own on the 25 cent piece and also on the dollar bill?) The Mint Act that he signed into law heeded this objection by calling for an emblem of liberty and the word “liberty” to appear on the obverse. What that emblem of liberty should be was unspecified, but Secretary of State Jefferson—who Washington asked to supervise mint activities—had an idea. He had returned in 1789 from serving as ambassador to France, which was in the early stages of its own revolution. The French Revolution began with the storming of the Bastille prison in 1789, but became increasingly bloody after the



Figure 2 U.S. cents, 1792-1859.

A 1792 Flowing hair B 1794 Flowing hair with liberty pole and Phrygian cap C Flowing hair with curls and ribbon D 1810 Liberty crown, 13 stars E 1830 Liberty crown, curly hair, 13 stars F 1859 Indian head penny. Lady Liberty masquerades as a native American.



Figure 3 U.S. silver dollars.

A Seated Liberty (1840-1873) B Morgan dollar (1878-1904, 1921)



Figure 4 Early 20th-century depictions of Lady Liberty.

A Winged Liberty or Mercury dime (18mm; 1916-1945) B Standing Liberty quarter dollar (24mm diameter; 1916-1930) C Walking Liberty half dollar (1916-1947) D Peace dollar (38mm diameter; 1921-1935) E Saint-Gaudens double eagle (\$20) (34mm diameter; 1907-1933). A-D are silver, E is gold. Note that these coins have different sizes.

beheading of the royal family in early 1793. The growing chaos and violence of and international reaction to the French Revolution that continued until 1799 was very much on the minds of the leaders of the vulnerable, young American republic.

Any national government requires a narrative that defines and legitimizes it, and this is especially true for revolutionary governments. For the first three years following the fall of the Bastille, the old national symbols were adapted to represent the revolution. This became impossible after King Louis XVI was guillotined in 1793, causing a “crisis of representation” requiring new legitimizing symbols. The Jacobins addressed this by adopting a female allegory of liberty known as Marianne (Figure 1A); note the red felt Phrygian cap, symbol of emancipated slaves of ancient Rome, atop a liberty pole. Liberty pole and Phrygian cap were ancient Roman symbols of liberty that originated following the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.

Female symbols of civic virtues and principles of government were well known in 18th century Europe. The casting of women as universal abstractions for civic virtue and freedom can be traced back to the classical republics of Greece and Rome. The Swiss Confederacy, the only non-monarchy on the French border, used the female allegory “Helvetia” beginning in the 17th century. Because of this romantic imagery and because the common people of France were fighting for their rights, it seemed fitting to name the Republican heroine after a representational woman with a common name: Marie-Anne. Rebel accounts of their exploits often referred to Marianne wearing a Phrygian cap of freedom (Figure 1B). Marianne inspired the French revolutionaries, and she symbolized the many women who served the revolution. Marianne stood for *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, the aspirational virtues of the nascent French Republic. Together, Marianne and the Phrygian cap were the two most important symbols of the French revolution. The clear link between the U.S. and French abstractions of liberty is shown by the fact that U.S. cent obverses in 1794 through 1797 also showed a Phrygian cap and liberty pole (Figure 2B). The symbols reappear on the dollar coins minted from 1836 to 1839 and 1840 to 1873 (Figure 3A). A Phrygian cap is worn by Lady Liberty on the U.S. silver dollar in 1878 (Figure 3B) and on silver coins of the early 20th century (Figure 4). It is one of the ways we recognize her.

### Early Years

President Washington made a startling decision—not to ask Treasury Secretary Hamilton to oversee the new Philadelphia mint and the first coins, but to put Secretary of State Jefferson in charge. This was likely because Washington was both wary of Hamilton’s monarchist tendencies, and impressed with Jefferson’s ideas of what the first coins of the new nation should show. Once in charge of the

new mint, it was only natural that the Francophile Jefferson refashioned a young American Marianne to put on the first U.S. coins, in 1792. Abstracted women as symbols of liberty on U.S. coins contrasted starkly with the personification of British and Spanish monarchs on their coins (although coins bearing the image of a young Queen Victoria in British coins from the 1830s to the 1850s are remarkably similar to U.S. coins of the same period). The irony that women were used to symbolize Liberty while real U.S. women were deprived of civil rights was apparently missed by late 18th century U.S. leaders. Apparently, U.S. white male leadership recognized nothing hypocritical about ascribing lofty ideals to womankind while excluding real women from the public and political realm. To them, it somehow made sense.

The American symbol was never formally named, but some female representation of Lady Liberty persisted until Hamilton's vision slowly gained momentum and dead U.S. presidents replaced Lady Liberty on U.S. coins in the first half of the 20th century. The transformation took half a century, beginning with Lincoln on the penny (1909), then Washington on the quarter (1932), Jefferson on the nickel (1938), Roosevelt on the dime (1946), and Kennedy on the half dollar (1964). But until 1947 Lady Liberty graced the obverse of at least one U.S. coin.

Lady Liberty on U.S. coins evolved over her 155 year reign before disappearing after her last and most beautiful representations in the early 20th century. Female allegories for the U.S. ideal of liberty appeared on the obverse of all U.S. coins for 120 years with few exceptions, the most spectacular being the 1858-1909 cent. But we will see that even the native American chief on this cent is Lady Liberty in disguise.

Let's first use the humble penny as the exemplar of Lady Liberty's evolution until 1859 (Figure 2), then switch over to the mighty dollar to show how she evolved over the last half of the 19th century (Figure 3) until her culmination in five beautiful coins of the early 20th century (Figure 4). Take a quick look at all of these coins. What are your first impressions? Figure 2 shows her evolution during the first 60 years. She is only shown in profile, looking right in the 1790s, and left in the 1800s. The three depictions from the 1790s are the most carefree, depicting a teenager or young woman with long, flowing hair (Figure 2A, B, C). The 1794 version features Lady Liberty with a Phrygian cap on a liberty pole over her left shoulder. The Lady Liberty of the 1790s looked like no face on European coins, but by the early 1800s, Lady Liberty looked regal (Figure 2D, E) and was much more circumspect, with her hair restrained by a hairpiece and tied in a bun. In 1859 she bizarrely dons a pearl necklace and an Indian headdress, posing as a native American, but her disguise fools no one. What strange inspiration moved Mint Engraver James Longacre to make this image? Whatever it was, it was a successful design, continuing to be

minted for 50 years until it was replaced by a profile of Abraham Lincoln in 1909. The Lincoln penny was the first of the male presidents (along with Benjamin Franklin) that would replace Lady Liberty on all U.S. coins in less than 40 years.

To follow Lady Liberty's evolution in the last half of the 19th century, we need to see how she was presented on the silver dollar. In the "Seated Liberty Dollar," minted from 1840 until 1873, we see more than just her head (Figure 3A). She is resting on a boulder with her Liberty-emblazoned shield resting against it. She wears no headband, but holds a liberty pole with a Phrygian cap. The design is remarkably similar to Vallain's *La Liberté* (Figure 1A). The design was also somewhat controversial; former Mint Director Samuel Moore had deprecated the use of the Phrygian cap as a symbol. Quoting Thomas Jefferson, Moore had written to Secretary of the Treasury Levi Woodbury, "We are not emancipated slaves." In fact, the Phrygian cap and liberty pole were portents of liberty for U.S. slaves, continuing to be minted for 8 years after the Civil War ended.

When production of silver dollars resumed after a five-year hiatus in 1878, Lady Liberty had a new look: a mature woman in profile (Figure 3B). She again uses the Liberty headband to hold her hair in place. Superficially, she resembles her staid profile on early cents (Figure 2) but there are signs of independence stuffed between her headband and Phrygian cap: wheat stalks, maple leaves, and thistle. Below this her hair flows like a mountain stream.

### The Twentieth Century

Lady Liberty on U.S. coins reaches her artistic peak in the early 20th century about the same time that seismic shifts were happening in the way that women were treated in the western world. Women were slowly becoming more equal with men. This can be seen most clearly in the fact that most major Western powers extended voting rights to women in the early 20th century, including Canada (1917), Britain and Germany (1918), Austria and the Netherlands (1919) and the United States (1920). Surprisingly, France, with Marianne and its revolutionary past, did not allow women to vote until 1944. Today, women can vote in every country that has elections.

In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt began to push to make U.S. coinage more beautiful. Roosevelt was an admirer of ancient Greek coins, especially high-relief designs where the features of the coin project far outward from the coin's surface. He wrote to the Secretary of the Treasury: "I think the state of our coinage is artistically of atrocious hideousness. Would it be possible, without asking permission of Congress, to employ a man like Augustus Saint-Gaudens to give us a coinage which would have some beauty?" The answer was "Yes!" The penny, nickel and gold coins were redesigned during



1907-1913, but redesign of the dime, quarter, half dollar, and silver dollar had to wait until these coins' minimum term (as specified in an 1890 law) expired in 1916. Interestingly, four of the five new coins featuring Lady Liberty were designed by three immigrants, from Ireland (Augustus Saint-Gaudens), Germany (Adolf Weinman) and Italy (Antonio de Francisci).

The vanguard of the five new coins was Saint-Gaudens's stunning \$20 gold piece, first issued in 1907 (Figure 4E), three years after Roosevelt started his crusade and the same year that Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907) died of intestinal cancer. A triumphant, young Lady Liberty stands rampant, locking eyes with the viewer. She is dressed in a loose blouse, fastened at the shoulders, and a long dress. Her flexed left leg is braced on a large rock, allowing her to thrust a long torch towards the viewer while her outstretched left arm clutches an olive branch of peace. Her long hair billows in the breeze. A small capitol building in the distant background is backlit by a rising sun. The scene is festooned by 46 stars, one for each of the states in 1907. Sunrise, striding strength and beauty, torch and olive branch. Such optimism and hope, signs of an increasingly confident nation. This coin was last minted in 1933, the year that the U.S. went off the gold standard.

The next three of the new coins—dime, quarter, and half dollar—came out together in 1916. The dime startled, the quarter shocked, and the half dollar dazzled. The ten-cent piece, generally known as the Mercury dime (Figure 4A), was designed by sculptor and medalist Adolf Weinman (1870-1952). This coin features a right-facing young Lady Liberty with Phrygian cap, out of which small eagle wings emerge. Weinman wrote that he considered the winged cap to symbolize "liberty of thought." The public, however, misunderstood Weinman's intent, thinking her to be the Roman god Mercury, who often was shown with wings coming out of his cap. The coin was last minted in 1945, when it was replaced by a dime with the just-deceased President Franklin Roosevelt on its obverse.

The quarter dollar (Figure 4B) was designed by Hermon Atkins MacNeil (1866-1947). MacNeil's original design showed Lady Liberty on guard against attacks. The Mint required modifications, and MacNeil's next version included dolphins to represent the navy. His final design is only slightly less militaristic; Liberty faces to the viewer's right in the direction of Europe and World War I, and her shield also faces that way. She holds an olive branch as she strides through a gap in a low wall that is inscribed, "In God We Trust." Her short hair is mostly covered by a Phrygian cap, and her right leg is bare up to the mid-thigh. According to art historian Cornelius Vermeule, "Liberty is presented as the Athena of the Parthenon pediments, a powerful woman striding forward." Vermeule opines that, but for the Stars and Stripes on her shield, "everything else about this Amazon calls to mind Greek sculpture of the period from 450 to 350 B.C." The shocking feature of

MacNeil's design was Lady Liberty's bare right breast, reminiscent of Delacroix's Marianne (Figure 1B) and a far cry from the mostly disembodied Lady Liberty of the 19th century (Figure 2,3). This was covered in 1918 by a chainmail vest, but the quarter was doomed to have the shortest lifetime of the five early 20th century coins, as it was replaced in 1932 by the Washington quarter that is still minted today.

The half dollar (Figure 4C) is the most beautiful of the 1916 silver coins. Weinman designed this, taking inspiration from his mentor Saint-Gaudens's double eagle, but turning Lady Liberty to stride left. Saint-Gaudens's rising sun, rough terrain, sandals and armful of olive branches remain, but the torch is gone. Instead, she stretches out her right hand to someone or something unseen. Her hair is much shorter, underneath a Phrygian cap. Her principal article of clothing is the U.S. flag, part of which billows behind her and her outstretched hand. This coin was minted until 1947, when Lady Liberty was replaced by Benjamin Franklin.

The last of the new 20th century coins was the silver dollar, which features the head and neck of Lady Liberty. Antonio de Francisci designed the coin, using his wife as the model. Lady Liberty's most striking feature is her spiked crown, surely inspired by what was by then the best-known representation of Lady Liberty: French sculptor Frederic Bartholdi's 1886 Statue of Liberty. Sailing beneath this into New York to land at Ellis Island must have made a strong impression on the eighteen-year-old De Francisci when he arrived in the U.S. in 1905. This coin was produced intermittently until 1935, when the U.S. stopped making silver dollars.

### Interpretation

How can we best interpret the evolution of Lady Liberty on U.S. coins from 1792 until she disappears in 1947? She changed a lot over these 155 years; only the word "Liberty" remained constant. Over this century and a half, she went from only showing her head (Figure 2) to being a body at rest (Figure 3A) to being a body in motion (Figure 4A, C, E). Certainly, much of this evolution reflects improvements in mint technology and the increased artistic skills of U.S. designers. Does any of her remarkable transformation over this time reflect the changing roles of U.S. women? Women's place in American society changed dramatically over this time, as our nation's economy shifted from rural and muscle-based to urban, mechanized, electrified, and mobile. By far the most spectacular change was passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, which gave women the right to vote. It almost seems as if Lady Liberty on Weinman's half dollar is striding towards and reaching out her hand to receive this right. But many other incremental improvements and opportunities for women

happened during this time as well, in education, medicine, and employment. Women didn't have all the opportunities and political power they enjoy today, but they were well on their way. I like to think that this is at least part of the story that the evolution of Lady Liberty on U.S. coins tells.

And what are we to make of the disappearance of Lady Liberty from U.S. coins, replaced by U.S. presidents and founding fathers? Considered solely from the perspective of gender, it is a striking reversal of our national narrative as captured on our coins. The timing of this reversal is intriguing: abstract Lady Liberty disappeared from U.S. coins within 27 years after real U.S. women got the right to vote—the most important right of a U.S. citizen. Did this subtle backlash reflect powerful patriarchy's fear of women's growing equality? Or perhaps women's increasing equality with men made it too difficult to accept abstract, idealized women as depicted as Lady Liberty?

The explanation that I prefer is that the disappearance reflects a major change in our national narrative, from aspirational to historical. After 155 years of history—of wars, expansion, and innovation—our narrative could no longer be purely aspirational and abstract. It had to become more historical. The narrative had to tell how our experiment in self-government turned out. Long before the middle of the 20th century, the U.S. had a story to tell. It was time to replace earlier abstract representations of liberty with concrete examples of leadership.

The history of the U.S. is personified by some of our presidents. For example, the Civil War and ending of slavery is personified by Abraham Lincoln, and by the tragedy of his assassination. It was natural that our increasingly historical national narrative be reflected by celebrating past presidents, and that this process began humbly, with Lincoln appearing on the penny on the 100th anniversary of his birth.

There is some support for this interpretation. Our nation began celebrating past presidents in the mid-19th century with construction of the Washington Monument, which took 40 years to complete (1848-1888). The Lincoln Memorial (1914-1922) followed, then the Jefferson Memorial (1939-1943). The massive monolithic monolith of four U.S. presidents, each with 18-meter (60-foot) heads carved into Mount Rushmore granite and undertaken privately between 1927 and 1941, would awe even the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses. More than any other monument, the colossi of South Dakota signaled that the national narrative was no longer aspirational and embodied by Lady Liberty. The continent had been civilized and tested in great wars. The U.S. narrative was now historical, as personified by our presidents. It was time for Lady Liberty to retire, leaving behind only her signature phrase "Liberty," which is still found today on the obverse of all U.S. coins. A

## Further Reading

Burdette, Roger W. 2005. *Renaissance of American Coinage, 1916–1921*. Great Falls, Va.: Seneca Mill Press LLC.

Day, Sara. 2001. “‘With Peace and Freedom Blest!’: Woman as Symbol in America, 1590-1800.” [guides.loc.gov/american-women-essays/woman-as-symbol](http://guides.loc.gov/american-women-essays/woman-as-symbol)

Gilliland, Cory. 1986. “Coins: Mirrors of Art and Reflections of Taste.” [chicagocoinclub.org/projects/PiN/cma.html](http://chicagocoinclub.org/projects/PiN/cma.html)

James, Ray. “The Female Form as Allegorical Representations of Liberty on Coinage.” March 8, 2019. [www.govmint.com/coin-authority/post/The-Female-Form-as-Allegorical-Representations-of-Liberty-on-Coinage](http://www.govmint.com/coin-authority/post/The-Female-Form-as-Allegorical-Representations-of-Liberty-on-Coinage)

Luebke, David M. “Symbolizing the Revolution: Marianne and Hercules.” [pages.uoregon.edu/dluebke/301ModernEurope/301Week09%20Marianne%20&%20Hercules.htm](http://pages.uoregon.edu/dluebke/301ModernEurope/301Week09%20Marianne%20&%20Hercules.htm)

Wikipedia entries on “Adolf Augustus Weinman,” “Anthony de Francisci,” “Augustus Saint-Gaudens,” “Coins,” “Coinage Act of 1792,” “Indian Head Cent,” “Hermon Atkins MacNeil,” “History of Coins,” “Jacobin,” “Liberty pole,” “Marianne,” “Mercury Dime,” “Seated Liberty Dollar,” and “Woman’s Suffrage.”