

# The Third Side of the Coin: Three Books You Need

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1. Walter Breen's "Complete Encyclopedia of U.S. and Colonial Coins"
2. "The History of United States Coinage as Illustrated by the Garrett Collection" by Q. David Bowers.
3. "The U.S. Mint and Coinage" by Don Taxay.

The Breen Encyclopedia changed the landscape of American numismatics. Before this book was published, the most authoritative research appeared in auction catalogs. There, the assertions, however right they might be, were seldom backed by documentary proof. Walter Breen changed that. The Breen Encyclopedia brought academic scholarship to American numismatics. Breen footnotes his claims with supporting evidence from primary sources. This is how we learned to write term papers -- and the Breen Encyclopedia is nothing if not a 750-page term paper (with 4000 illustrations). Breen completed a four year degree in one year at Johns Hopkins University. He was brilliant. His genius shines through this work. He does have his prejudices and quirks. He saw paranoia and conspiracies in other people quite readily. However, his editorial assertions are easy to cull. If anything, they enliven the undisputed facts.

The Breen Encyclopedia came out in 1988. In the last 12 years, some new facts have surfaced. For instance, we now believe that among the Shield Nickels, Judd 417 and 419 are back-dated fantasies and Breen 2466 may be a mule fantasy. These little amendments cannot detract from the overpowering value in the Breen Encyclopedia, but instead, prove that all numismatists must continually search for truth rather than relying on authority. That is the one lesson Breen would have liked us all to learn.

Q. David Bowers' book about the Garrett Collection is every bit as correct as Breen's Encyclopedia. However, the presentation is totally different. The Garrett Collection looks like a coffee table book. It has pretty color pictures and the prose is totally non-threatening. Once you look beneath the patina, you realize that you are reading a gem of a book. Two appendices present the 19th and 20th century correspondences of the Garrett family collectors with dealers and other collectors. This book is as much about the history of American coin collecting as it is the history of American coinage.

America's coins come from America's Mints. Donald Taxay lays out the history of the Mint. The subject matter is complex and the temptation to editorialize is easy to see. However, Taxay sticks to supportable facts. This book has become a primary reference because of Taxay's careful and deliberate investigations. For all of that, the writing is lively.

There are a lot of book about coins, most of them by people with some credentials in numismatics. Not all of those books are accurate. Too many writers rely on second-hand sources. They quote each other, instead of citing primary sources. These three books are the highest expression of research into the forms and uses of American money.