

The Third Side of the Coin: A New Standard: Vagi Makes Roman Coins Tell Roman History

by [Michael E. Marotta](#)
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Are you looking for a new frontier that brings you the fun and profit you first enjoyed when you discovered Buffalo nickels and Morgan dollars? Roman coins can reward your need to build a complete collection. Roman coins also offer opportunities for collectors of types, mints, varieties, and errors. Until now, anyone who did not learn Roman history by taking Latin in high school had a long row to hoe if they wanted to collect Roman coins. That has changed.

Coinage and History of the Roman Empire by David L. Vagi is a new, two-volume work that delivers Rome on a silver platter. Entering any new collecting area requires an intellectual effort of reading and learning. That is part of the fun; but at some level, the fun becomes too much work. This new book makes the work achievable, reducing the task load, and delivering tools to take yourself where you want to go.

Volume 1 tells the history of the Roman world from 82 B.C. to 480 AD. Volume 2 presents a catalog of known coin types. Each book runs about 650 pages. The books are only sold as a set. The publisher is Coin World and their retail price is \$94.94 (plus shipping). However, if you shop the internet, you can find the set for \$75 (plus shipping), or less. This is a good price for two full-sized, hardcover books. When you consider that \$100 is about the price of one gem coin (either a Morgan dollar or a Roman denarius), the books are a bargain that will pay profits many times over.

For a young man David L. Vagi has achieved much. He is widely recognized among collectors and dealers of ancient coins. He is a frequent contributor to *The Celator*. He won the ANA's Heath Literary Award. He has worked for Christies, Superior Galleries, and Spink America. He was on the staff of Coin World and has been published many times by Numismatic News and World Coins.

Vagi has two degrees from the University of Missouri, one in journalism, the other in history. So it is no surprise that these books bring to life the people who appear on Roman coins. Vagi's work is based firmly on the latest research and scholarship. Even so, these stories read more like a newspaper than a history book. The presentation is at once factual and lively.

Most collectors pursuing Roman coins start by trying to acquire one coin from each Roman emperor. The silver denarius usually offers the most choices in price, grade and type. At several points in Rome's history, more than one man claimed to be emperor.

Vagi presents the stories of the usurpers and pretenders with the same zest and zeal that he invests in the winners. Of course, men were not the only people on Roman coins. The wives of the Caesars also graced the issues of the mints, and their stories also play out in these books.

Collecting coins by type is an alternative to assembling a timeline of people. Gods and goddesses, animals, and ships are available. In addition to the Olympian gods (Jupiter, Diana, Mercury, etc.), the Romans honored "Personifications" such as Justitia, Concordia, and Liberalitas. Among the military types that appear again and again are bound captives under a trophy and a mounted soldier spearing an enemy. Recurring inscriptions include "FEL TEMP REPARATIO" (happy days are here again) and "SECURITAS RES PUBLICA." One way to combine types with people is to collect a single emperor and his family.

Coins served as a the newspapers of the Roman empire. When coins were distributed to soldiers or the people, or when coins were paid to contractors, new types announced military victories, or celebrated the distribution of grain, or glorified dead emperors. Even as an empire, Rome was a republic. Its coins (especially the silver denarii) carry a dating system based on approval by the Senate of the office of the emperor. Roman coins displayed lifelike portraits that captured the character of the man or woman.

Volume 2 of this work is a catalog and price guide. As an American, Vagi understands that price depends on grade. Three grades appear for each coin: Fine, Very Fine, and Extremely Fine. (For some series, this is Fine, Very Fine, and Choice Very Fine.) Clearly, pricing is based on known populations. Fortunately, grading Roman coins is less demanding than grading Morgan dollars or Large cents -- there are no sliders or scudzies.

As an historian and journalist, Vagi understands the need to support his assertions. His bibliography of sources appears at the back of each book. Also, there are two indexes of names, one chronological, the other alphabetical.

Before these books came out, the standard references for collectors were the Seaby books, Roman Silver Coins and Roman Imperial Coins. Those references are essentially 50 years old in their presentation and delivery. This new set is destined to be the standard for the next 50 years. Anyone who buys two sets and stores one will have a first edition classic to sell in the year 2050. Excerpts from this book are running in The Celator.

A sample issue is \$3 from :

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