

The Trade Dollar

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On July 11, 1873, the first Trade Dollars were struck at the US Mint in Philadelphia.

At the time, the Mexican peso was the preferred silver coin for trade with China. The Mexican government earned a lot of foreign gold by selling her silver to international trading companies. To help advertise American merchants, and to facilitate trade with the Orient, Congress authorized the US Mint to create a trade dollar.

The US Trade dollar shows Liberty seated on a bale of cotton and wheat, extending an olive branch to the left. On the reverse of the coin, the American eagle stands over the words "420 grains 900 fine." At 420 grains of silver, the Trade Dollar was about 2% heavier than a standard US dollar.

Once in the Orient, these dollars were often stamped with so-called "chop marks." The "chop marks" are the identities of Chinese merchants who tested and approved the new coins for use in their own trade.

In five years, from 1873 to 1878, over 30 million Trade Dollars were struck. Unfortunately, the Trade Dollar was not successful. In 1876, Congress declared the coin valid only for export, and demonetized it as legal tender. After 1878, only a few thousand proof specimens were struck and by 1887, they were just another page in history.

However, there is no denying the dramatic artistic effect of this coin. The classical Liberty and the American Eagle were the work of chief engraver William Barber. Most issues from most mints cost several hundred to several thousand dollars in uncirculated condition.