

What Numismatists Do

by [Michael E. Marotta](#)

If you go to a coin show, you will see people buying and selling coins. Many will be using small, powerful hand lenses to examine the minute details of their merchandise. As curious as this behavior is to watch, it is but a small part of what coin collectors really do.

Coin collecting is properly called Numismatics. Most numismatists specialize in several areas of the hobby. Some collect bus and train tokens, others collect 19th century American banknotes, still others are drawn to coins from ancient Greece and Rome.

An intense interest in history is generally a habit of all coin collectors. Sometimes a coin is the only evidence we have of a a dynasty or of a failed attempt to become the emperor or king. Lost languages such as Etruscan and sacred scripts such as those from Tibet have fascinated numismatists as they take on the roles of historians and linguists.

Numismatists even study civil engineering. After all, we pay for public transportation with tokens, tickets and cards. Transportation tokens are called "vectures" and a "vecturist" might spend hours at city hall reading the records that show how and why buslines were created, chartered, closed or abandoned, as urban mass transit moved through the horse and buggy, and on to gasoline and electric power, as cities evolved into multi-county metropolitan regions.

Any kind of money from any place or time is a proper study for a numismatist. Money reflects the basic fabric of society and numismatists teach themselves economics, sociology, anthropology, and foreign languages in their quest to understand more about what money is and how people use it.