



Trashmagination Podcast #100 – Money – Coins and Bills

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. This is the 100th episode of the Trashmagination podcast. I asked my husband – what topic should I research for this milestone episode? He suggested I research coins – because in French, the word “cent” means 100 and also means penny. That was not a topic I had in my research queue because normally I only research items that get thrown away. There is not much chance people will throw away money! However, people sometimes do treat pennies like trash – meaning that they might not pick it up off the ground. So when I started my research, I was surprised to find that money is creatively reused by many artists.

A few years ago, my family visited the US Mint in Philadelphia where you can see money being made. When we were waiting to enter, we received a small bag of shredded paper money. That was the first time I realized that money is also recycled on a regular basis [<https://www.frb services.org/resources/financial-services/cash/exception-processing/mutilated-currency-coin.html>]. On the Federal Reserve website, it says money is destroyed when more than 50 percent of a bill is missing or damaged. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing has an office in Washington DC called the Mutilated Currency Division which evaluates damaged money. If you have a bill or coin that is in bad shape, but you don't want to lose the value of that money, you send it to that office. They research it and reimburse you based on their study of what is left of the money [<https://www.npr.org/2019/08/11/749351330/cash-back-guarantee-the-u-s-redeems-damaged-bills-because-the-dollar-depends-on->]. They have many funny and odd stories about the weird things that have happened to money that they had to evaluate!

In 1999, the US Mint started a program to make one new quarter design each month for each of the states in the United States [<https://www.usmint.gov/learn/coin-and-medal-programs/50-state-quarters>]. That was the first time I collected coins for fun. We collected a set for ourselves, then a set for my sister and brother, as well as some friends in Canada. And that's when we started to learn about numismatics, or the study or collection of currency.

Before we dive into this type of creative reuse, I want to address a question, which is – is it legal to make art from currency? What I read was that here in the United States, as long as you don't change the money and then try to use it as legal tender, then you are okay. You break the law when it can be shown that you had the intent to defraud someone [<https://www.ecommercebytes.com/guides/coins-paper-money/cutting-coins-is-it-legal/>]. This is different in other countries though, so check your nation's laws if you want to incorporate money into your art.

So let's talk about the various techniques that artists use to creatively reuse money. As always, you can see photos of the artwork and projects at the Trashmagination Pinterest board - <https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/money/> - and in the show notes.

Carving and Engraving Coins

The first technique is when an artist carves or engraves designs on a coin. There is a sculptural art form called the “hobo nickel.” It was art that people could take with them even they were a hobo or not living in one place for very long. These artists chose a nickel because it was the softest metal and a bigger size than a penny, plus it was not worth that much. To make a hobo nickel, many artists would use the face on the coin as a starting point and then decorate that face to look like a different face [<http://www.hobonickels.org/>]. Another way people would change coins was to smooth down one or both sides to make something called a love token. They would then engrave the coin with initials or images.

While hobo nickels have been a popular art form for a few centuries, that style of art has evolved and many modern artists carve, cut or engrave coins. Shaun Hughes carves many flowery shapes into the faces on coins. On his Youtube channel, he demonstrates how he carves such delicate curly shapes in the coins.

- https://www.instagram.com/shaun_hughes_engraving_uk/
- <https://mymodernmet.com/shaun-hughes-hobo-coins/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE2rGFm1-xs-WIEHfY1enjA>

Roman Booteen makes hobo nickels that are extra complicated because he makes portions of the coin move. For example, he made a bug with wings that flap and a mechanical beating heart. He does this by carving out sections of the coins and then building a tiny mechanical apparatus within the coin.

- <https://www.instagram.com/romanbooteen/>
- <https://mymodernmet.com/heart-coin-hobo-nickel-roman-booteen/>
- <https://mymodernmet.com/gold-bug-coin-hobo-nickel-roman-booteen/>

Stacey Lee Webber is an artist I'll mention a few times in this episode because she makes art from money using many techniques. But one of her techniques is to cut out the shapes from a coin. She made a series about Abraham Lincoln where she cut out his shape and mounted them in frames.

- <https://www.staceyleewebber.com/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/staceyleewebber/>
- Imagery from coins - <https://www.staceyleewebber.com/s-imagine>
- Abe Pale Enamel MIA - <https://www.staceyleewebber.com/art/abe-pale-enamel-mia-11>

Jessie Driscoll makes jewelry from coins. Her parents were antiques dealers, and through them she learned about trench art, or art made from bullet casings and coins by soldiers and sailors. Her father found a bracelet made from Australian coins where each coin had been cut to look like a daisy. Just like those love tokens I mentioned, one side of each coin was sanded down and then carved with images like hearts while the other side was left intact. Another reason why she ended up working with coins is because her grandfather had a pet shop in the Bronx, and he saved every coin he received in payment because he thought they would be worth more some day. So she had this giant collection of coins combined with this knowledge of coin carving and off she went.

- <https://youtu.be/XLrccFqbmY0>
- <http://madefromcoins.com/the-handmade-process/>

As you can imagine, not as many artists make art by cutting paper money. But you might remember the artist Yuken Teruya who I mentioned in the episode about creative reuse of toilet paper rolls. He has made a few artworks that involved cutting silhouettes of trees from paper money. One piece was called Money Tree. He also made some art from pretend Monopoly money.

- <https://mymodernmet.com/yuken-teruya-green-economy/>
- Money Tree piece - <http://www.yukenteruyastudio.com/projects-1/money-tree.html>

If you want to try carving or engraving coins, there are great instructional videos that I will link in the show notes.

- Coin cutting - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nIYYV6EeQ>
- Hobo nickel engraving - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eb91IA3H2TM>
- Shaun Hughes demo - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIf9hDfRyYE>

Painting Coins

Some artists paint on coins. Andre Levy paints over the images of people like the Queen or a President with colorful paints so it looks like the coin is now featuring a famous super hero or cartoon character

<https://mymodernmet.com/andre-levy-takes-you-lose/>. Robin Sealark set herself a challenge to do 100 tiny painting on pennies. She called it the Teeny Weeny Art Challenge. They were mostly landscapes. In a video, she shared lots of lessons she learned from painting on pennies. For example, she found it was easier to paint the side with the head on it because it was smoother.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYYQQxQkyoc>
- <https://www.instagram.com/robinsealark/>

Perhaps looking at Andre and Robin's penny paintings will inspire you to paint on coins! But if not, a related activity is coin rubbings. You put a coin under a piece of paper and gently rubbing over the surface with a crayon or pencil [http://www.eparenting.co.uk/activities_for_kids/coin_rubbing_art_ideas_for_children.php]. You can make a matching game by doing the coin rubbings and then matching the coins to the rubbings.

Coin Mosaics

The next type of creative reuse art made from coins is to make a mosaic picture with coins. This is based on the idea that coins are variable in color based on their age and usage. Many artists have made portraits with coins. Adrian Firth made a portrait of Queen Elizabeth called "Lizzie." Ed Chapman had made many portraits from pennies including Nelson Mandela, Albert Einstein, John Lennon and Marilyn Monroe.

A Youtube channel called Vat19.com made a mosaic portrait of Abraham Lincoln from almost 15,000 pennies that was about six feet by nine feet when completed. You can see a video of how they did it [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sxzz77qm6Vk>]. They sell a pattern to make your own miniature Lincoln portrait from pennies with 846 pennies which sounds much more reasonable - <https://www.vat19.com/item/abraham-lincoln-penny-portrait>. They also sell guitar picks from Sacagawea \$1 coins - <https://www.vat19.com/item/gold-us-dollar-coin-guitar-pick>.

Related to mosaics, some people like to take pennies and make a table top or a floor. This involves arranging the pennies in lines, adding grout and then pouring a resin over the pennies to make a smooth surface.

- Penny table - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KF4lewR9SjA>
- Penny table - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KJbk3ITqPA>
- Penny floor - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN5kYIRpNTI>

Coin Stacking

The next technique that artists use to creatively reuse coins is to stack them or balance them on each other to make sculptural shapes.

He Peixi [PIE-Zee] made a portrait of his hometown by stacking 50,000 coins. He carefully stacked the coins using chopsticks and he did not glue them together. He made his portrait from eleven types of ancient and modern currency which provided a variety of shapes and colors [<https://mymodernmet.com/he-peixi-coin-art-hometown-replica/>].

Tanu is an artist who stacks coins. His sculptures look incredible precarious because often the coins are stacked on the thin edge of the coin. His videos showing him doing the stacking with very steady hands are quite popular.

- <https://mymodernmet.com/tanu-coin-stacking-master/>
- <https://mymodernmet.com/thumb-tani-tanu-japanese-coin-stacking/>
- <https://youtu.be/oWU-N6HyhX0>
- <https://www.youtube.com/user/thumbsam1/videos>

Welding or Connecting Coins Together

Many artists connect coins together to make a shape by welding them, punching holes in them and putting an o-ring, or by notching them.

Robert Wechsler notches coins so they connect in a perpendicular way and create a lattice. He had made large cubes from notched pennies. It's really cool to see the light shine through these pieces.

- <https://robertwechsler.com/money/>
- <https://youtu.be/T--n39ocXIM>

Johnny Swing welds coins together to make very curvy pieces of furniture [<https://www.johnnyswing.com/>]. Shaun Gagg welds them together to make people or animal sculptures [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLvdpS1VJI4>].

I mentioned Stacey Lee Webber earlier because she cuts out shapes from coins. She actually started working with coins by welding them together into the shapes of tools like a bucket, axe, pitchfork, lantern, helmet, mallet or shovel. This series is called the Craftsmen Series. Her goal was to illustrate how hand work or blue collar labor is undervalued by making these tools from pennies. Meanwhile, they are such incredibly intricate artworks. When you see it leaning against the wall, you might think – that's just a shovel – but then you look and see it's made from thousands of pennies punched into square shapes and welded together.

- <https://www.staceyleewebber.com/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/staceyleewebber/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKRu84-iq6M> – Smithsonian profile

One of the items I was hoping to find for this episode was a dress made from coins. I was sure I had saved an example in my Trash Fashion Pinterest board which is enormous – and I finally found a dress made by Raymond Waters. It's a long sleek dress and along the hem, there is a frame with wheels because my assumption is that the dress is so heavy, it needs wheels to move. Raymond made this dress sculpture in memory of his sister who loved haute couture [http://www.raymondwaters.com/gallery/Haute_Couture_Sculptures.htm].

Incorporating Coins into Other Materials

This next artist incorporates coins into his sculpture in a way that is very imaginative. Hirotoishi Ito makes sculptures from rocks. He cuts into the rocks with very sharp drill bits and then attaches other objects into those crevices in a way that looks like the objects were always in the rock. For example, he can make a rock look like a coin purse by attaching a zipper and coins into a rock. His sculptures look like optical illusions. I will share a video in the show notes showing how he does it.

- <http://www.jiyuseki.com/>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUXfgn_3IgY
- <https://www.instagram.com/itohirotoishi/>

Origami Paper Money

Most of this podcast episode has been about coins, but now I'll talk about creative reuse of paper money. Many artists fold paper money into complex origami sculptures.

- Won Park – Origami - <https://mymodernmet.com/won-park-money-origami/>
- Kristi Malakoff – Origami - <https://mymodernmet.com/kristi-malakoff-money-pieces/>
- Siphon Mabona – Locusts - <https://mymodernmet.com/siphon-mabona-locusts-origami/>

If you would like to try folding dollar bills, there are lots of online tutorials. There is also a BuzzFeed video filled with ideas for how to give cash as a gift in a creative way, and many of those ideas relate to origami. Other fun ideas include

making a pizza from bills and coins and putting it in a pizza box, taping bills in a long chain and putting them in a tissue box so you pull them out one-by-one, and folding them in various shapes to arrange like chocolates in a box.

- Origami Butterfly from Dollar Bill – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXfsJuVKGc>
- Giving Cash as a Gift - <https://www.buzzfeed.com/maitlandquitmeyer/dollar-dollar-bill-yall>

Embroidered Paper Money

The next technique that artists use with paper money is to embroider it. I have talked about Stacey Lee Webber twice already, and here she comes again because she also embroiders paper bills - <https://www.stacyleewebber.com/art?category=Embroidered+Bills>. One of her pieces shows the Queen embroidered to look like a bee – i.e. she is the Queen bee.

Another artist who embroiders on paper money is Noora Schroderus. She did a series called “Female Money” where she sewed hair on the men featured on paper money [<http://www.nooraschroderus.com/project/female-money/>]. More specifically, she sewed wigs like the Disney princesses on American money, and she sewed wigs like European folktale characters on European money. For example, Abraham Lincoln was featured with Cinderella’s hair, George Washington with Snow White’s hair, Andrew Jackson with Ariel’s hair and Ulysses Grant with Belle’s hair.

Games to Play with Coins or Bills

I’ll end this episode by talking about games you can play with coins and paper money. There are many logic puzzles and magic tricks that you can do with money [<http://www.bestpartygames.co.uk/categories/coin-games>]. There are games like coin football and coin hockey [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8c4bTWXy_JI]. In terms of paper money, some people do the “money face challenge.” You know that most paper currency has the face of a famous person on it. So the way you do the challenge is that you fold the bill so half the famous person’s face is visible, and then you hold the bill at the correct angle so your own face completes the image, and then you take a selfie [<https://mymodernmet.com/money-face-challenge/>].

Of course, you can also see if your older coins are worth money. You can check the website cointrackers.com to see the average value of various coins.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening to the 100th episode of the Trashmagination podcast. I wonder how many of you have listened to every single episode? If you have, please let me know which was your favorite episode at trashmagination@gmail.com. Did any episode inspire you to try a new type of creative reuse? In my next episode, I’ll talk about the lessons I learned making 100 podcast episodes, and what my plans are for the next 99 episodes. Until next time, may you see coins and paper money as a source of art in your life!