

PRECISION IN



NUMISMATICS



A PLEA FOR THE ADOPTION OF UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES FOR
THE ACCURATE DESCRIPTION AND SCIENTIFIC MEASUREMENT
OF COINS AND MEDALS

By JOHN M. CHAPMAN

N.A.V. No. 899

Having been a collector of medallic Australiana for over 25 years, I have become increasingly aware that the greatest weakness of contemporary numismatics is the lack of consistency, accuracy and logic in its terminology.

At present there is no certainty of appreciating intricate numismatic points on the basis of verbal or written descriptions, without the assistance of high quality photographic illustrations, and consequently, valuable research may be lost through the lack of an effective terminology, enabling detailed observations to be precisely recorded without the necessity to resort to expensive photo-blocks.

Firstly, the use of the English language bears little relation to common usage. To take an example, if I congratulate a friend on forming a "very good" collection, he is flattered, but should I remark that the average condition of his specimens is "very good", he feels insulted!

Who in their right mind could confidently purchase an expensive coin or medal on the basis of the present standards of description, without first taking the precaution of visual examination? Collectors have tended to be apathetically resigned to this very unsatisfactory situation, and the time is long overdue for the development and promotion of a totally new approach to condition terminology. The basic problem is that what is stated does not convey what is meant! Let me demonstrate the absurdity of the current grading scale.

FLEUR DE COIN (FDC) This ultimate grade presents no problem as it is absolute and permits no concessions. It denotes a specimen that is perfect in every respect - a perfect strike in pristine condition. A very small fraction of the production run. (The French is more poetic than informative.)

UNCIRCULATED (UNC.) As issued by the minting authority, but not technically perfect in every respect, due to the tolerances that are accepted in mass production. The design might be slightly off centre, not strongly struck up, or from worn dies. The surface might lack an even lustre, or show production handling marks. Pieces in their original bright untuned state are often qualified as Brilliant Uncirculated (BU), and those with only minute imperfections often rate the term Gem UNC.

The "FINES" (EF, VF, F) This is where we really begin to strike trouble. The definitions of FINE in the Little Oxford Dictionary are "of high quality ... excellent ... imposing ... one of those appealing to sense of beauty". Thus in normal English usage, FINE would more appropriately describe what we call UNCIRCULATED rather than a condition three grades lower as in numismatic terminology. Our "FINE" specimen is far from being "one of those appealing to sense of beauty". The qualifications "EXTREMELY" and "VERY" only compound the misnomer.

The "GOODS" (VG, G) Here we are in even deeper trouble. The Oxford defines GOOD as "having right qualities, adequate ... excellent, worthy ... suitable". Thus in common usage "GOOD" would imply an attractive condition. It would be a brave dealer who would advertise a "G" rated piece as "having right qualities", much less "worthy or excellent"!

FAIR in Normal usage this word denotes "moderate quality", which in its numismatic context would be a gross exaggeration.

POOR Reasonably appropriate, although perhaps an understatement for an object still technically a coin, but virtually a candidate for the melting pot.

The stark reality is that the only rational gradings occur at the extremities of the scale, FDC and UNC at the top, and POOR at the bottom, the intermediate grades being extremely misleading.

Quite apart from its deceptive terminology, the scale taken as a whole shows a deplorable lack of balanced scientific objectivity. Of the nine grades discussed above, seven have positive connotations, one is more or less neutral (FAIR), and only one has a negative connotation (POOR), when in actual fact all grades below VF tend to be avoided by most serious collectors.

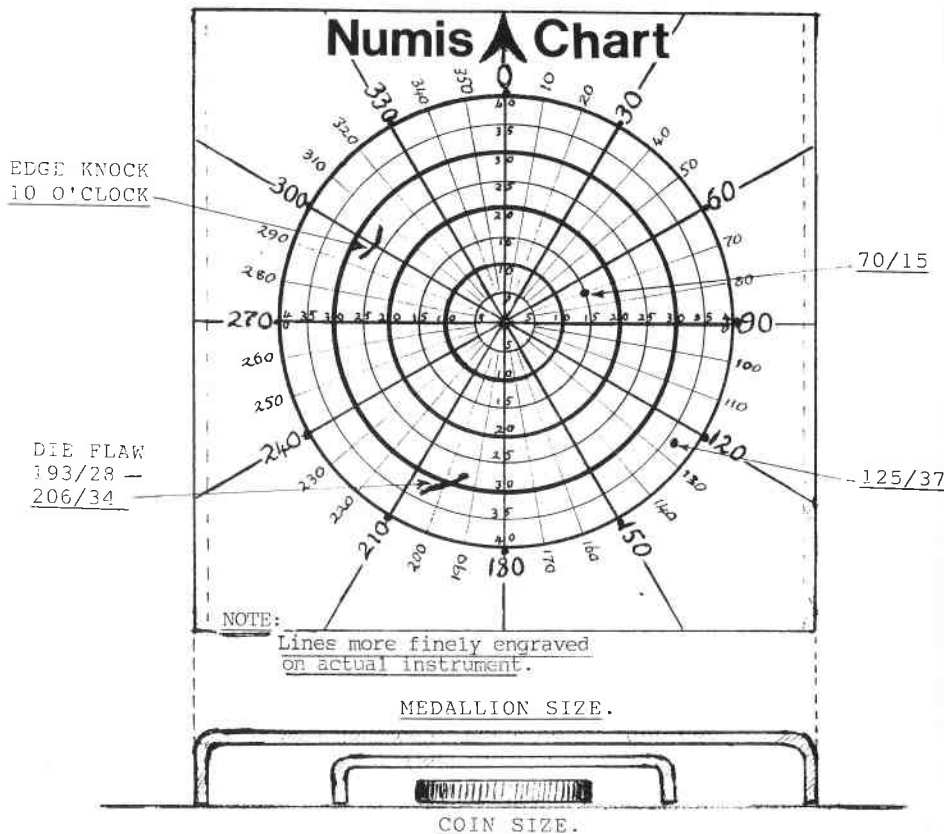
As if the foregoing problems were not enough, we are also afflicted with those infuriating prefixes "ABOUT" and "GOOD". These apparently signify that either the stated grade cannot quite be justified (aEF) or that the piece is within a hairline or two of deserving a higher grade (gVF). Doesn't this reasoning make gVF equivalent to aEF? Paradoxically, if we adhered to the current grading logic, the prefix "g" would lower the grading rather than enhance it! Another interesting point is that the prefixes are inevitably restricted to optimism - who has ever seen the grading "pEF" (poor EF)?

A further couple of absurdities have been creeping into the grading jargon, "OTHERWISE" and "FOR THE COIN". Can we really tolerate the farcical "tiny rims, some scuffing, otherwise FDC", or approve the devious "EF for the coin", when an accurate appraisal would state in fairness to both reader and coin: "F (highest grading known for coin)". For grading to have scientific credibility, the standards must be absolute and not flexible to suit extraneous circumstances.

In my opinion the solution lies in the universal adoption of an objectively balanced, unambiguous grading scale, either numerical, verbal, or perhaps a combination of both. If terms such as Perfect, Uncirculated, Fine, Good, Fair, Poor are considered necessary, it is essential that they conform to normal English usage. As we approach the top of any grading sequence, values escalate out of all proportion to the marginal improvements in condition. Consequently, for a grading system to be a really effective tool, grades above that which by consensus is considered the basic collectable condition, should be decimalised. Consistency would be achieved by strict adherence to criteria demonstrated in a universal reference specimen set (E.G., F.1 to F.10.)

Another serious impediment to the communication of numismatic research is the absence of a simple and consistent method of precisely recording a particular point on a coin or medal. Numismatists have been forced to rely on photography as the only available means for conveying the details of their researches. This is often difficult, time consuming, and costly to reproduce in journals. The alternative verbal description of critical fine points has proved of limited value, entailing lengthy and often confusing explanation based on references to strategic design features. The accurate communication of a specific point in an expanse of field has been a very frustrating exercise.

However, I have devised a solution to all these problems. It is an extremely simple and accurate measuring device, with universal application to the whole numismatic spectrum.



As shown in the diagram above, it takes the form of a grid, engraved in black on a sheet of clear plastic bent at two opposing edges to create a slightly raised measuring surface.

As shown, the grid consists of concentric circles increasing in radius by 5mm. These are segmented by radial lines at 10 degree intervals. The concentric circles ensure easy and accurate centring over the upright coin or medal, and then the co-ordinates of the points of interest recorded. For example, the reference 70/15

denotes a point on the 70 degree line 15mm from the centre. For larger medals intermediate points can be accurately determined visually, e.g. 125/37 (see diagram).

NOTE: Unusually shaped pieces are positioned by ensuring that both their vertical and horizontal extremities are equidistant from the grid's axes.

" N U M I S - C H A R T "

A SUMMARY OF THE MAIN ADVANTAGES OF THIS SYSTEM

- A universal reference covering the entire numismatic spectrum.
- Simple to use; world wide application (no language involved.)
- Does not involve touching specimen.
- Extreme accuracy possible. A magnifier can assist for very small coins.
- References simply communicated and quickly and accurately interpreted.
- For smaller coins or large flaws, "o'clocks" can be substituted by using the 30 degree intervals.
- Excellent for prompt detection of die variations and forgeries.
- A Chinamark pencil can be used to trace out features such as die cracks on the instrument itself.
- Photos showing marked grid over coin would be useful for illustrating papers. (Subsequent enlargement would not affect the validity of references.)
- Can be used in conjunction with a mirror for measurement of Upsets.
- Small and convenient, can be carried in pocket, not damage-prone.
- Simple and cheap to manufacture.
- Could be available in different sizes to suit either coins or medals.

