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# SECURITY IN NUMISMATIC COLLECTIONS AND EXHIBITIONS

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The most commonly stolen art objects in the world are coins. Not the everyday coins out of your pocket or purse, but those from collections both private and public. As such, numismatic security is a very significant issue deserving our full attention. Today we can take the opportunity to begin to discuss the issues.

First of all, we have to think about why numismatic theft is ranked so high in the world of art thefts? There are several reasons for it, some of which indicate weak points in our security preparedness.

When I am speaking about coins in this contribution, please understand that I mean all numismatic objects including tokens, paper money etc. Generally, coins are small and easy to transport. To take a coin and hide it away a thief needs no help and no container. They only have to pick it up and drop it in some small bag or simply in their pocket - and the thief can go out of the room, without any of the suspicious signs which they would have if transporting larger art works like a painting.

Further, coins are normally not unique pieces of art but results of mass production. Unique coins look to the average person like any others of the same type. This means, it is very difficult for a non-numismatist to realise that a coin found in the pocket of a thief may be something extraordinary. Again, it is difficult to show that a piece that seems to look like so many others, is the exact piece involved in a particular theft. Most police are

not familiar with even as simple a thing as the year, often very small on a coin. As such, they would find it nearly impossible to identify quickly a unique coin - for example 20 Kronen of the last Austrian emperor Karl I, Vienna, 1918, which could not be in the possession of any person - from gold coins with former years which anyone could have.

If the coin is not unique, but only one of many originally produced, how could you explain in a court, that the exact coin found in the house of the thief is the coin from your collection? It is not impossible, if the 'thief' is a serious collector, that they have a second, third or fourth item of exactly the type?

One of the most important things in preparing a secure collection is to prepare exact documentation which will allow you later to precisely identify your coin. This means that you have both a written record detailing matters like the weight and annotations about specific things on the coin (dark dot at the obverse right over the head etc.) but also good colour photographs. Only with such documentation can you hope to persuade others, that a specific coin belongs to your collection.

The next questions we may ask are: when a coin theft could happen; how it might occur; and who might be the thief.

This is a very complex topic that we should consider in two common coin theft circumstances: theft from the collection storage and research

system, and theft while on exhibition.

In terms of collection security, the worst collection storage system would be in small paper bags with a description of the content written on the outside of each bag. With this approach you will always have to open each bag and look into it to ascertain if it really contains the coin that it should.

Open trays in a cabinet are much better, especially if you have prepared the trays for use: for every coin there should be a short description, so that you can be certain that the actual coin in a place is really the piece that should be there. Empty places within the drawer should be marked by a special paper, paper which is not available for everyone. Otherwise a person could pick up the coin together with the description paper and put in a similar paper for the free places.

Do not trust anybody.

If visitors are coming, even those who have written a letter to your office/museum - that they are working for a book or anything else, and need to work with your coins - be careful. A few years ago, in the Vienna coin cabinet, a man from Belgium sought access to the collection of early Netherlands coins to rewrite an old publication. After one week of intensive work more than forty coins had been replaced; some unique and many very rare specimens were substituted by common coins out of the same era. The man was later found in Belgium, but was in possession of none of the missing coins. He denied having done anything illegal. We then made a second important mistake in that we did not inform our colleagues about

the theft. The 'friendly' man was as a result able to visit the Copenhagen Coin Cabinet where he also exchanged coins. The colleagues from there informed others so that it was possible to catch this thief when he tried again, in Munich. Fortunately this man was keen, or silly, enough to use his real name. How to protect your collection against similar dangers?

First of all, use a file, in which everybody who wants to work with the items of your collection has to sign in, and everybody has to show his identification by a document with a photograph. This document you can either photocopy or note on the file, so that you have a definite ID of the user.

Second, do not allow him to take his bag or other things to the working place which you should have in your department especially prepared for visitors. He should be only allowed to have papers, books and pencils - things he needs for his documentation - on his working table.

Third, it is nearly impossible if a researcher needs to spend entire days studying your collection to have somebody personally supervise him. Use TV surveillance with tape recording. You can inform or not inform your guest about it. This may depend also on the regional laws you have to respect. Keep this tape till after you have had the opportunity to carefully examine the tray and to find out, that really nothing happened. Record in the sign-in book the trays (s)he had used and when.

If you realise, that something must have happened, do not hesitate to call the police. It is better to do it in the quickest way. If the 'guest' is still

there, police can ask him in another way than you would be allowed to do. They know their job, you know yours, you will be useful to the police in identifying the missing piece(s), and giving them numismatic background help. If you discover a theft which happened perhaps days before, it is not only useful but necessary to prepare a description, photographs and if possible also an estimated valuation of the stolen objects. Do not touch or clean the objects around the missing object - police could find important evidence, which would be destroyed by your cleaning. And then make a short statement to coin cabinets in the neighbourhood and others you can reach - today by e-mail it is easily and quickly done. This warning message should be distributed by snowball-method.

The danger to coins on exhibition highlights other areas of security weakness. For example, the most important dangerous times in an exhibition are the moments of installation and finishing it. At these times there may be a lot of people in the room doing different jobs. The coins are placed in the display cases, waiting for the descriptions but the cases are not locked. Then it happens that somebody makes the quick shot, picking out a coin, and nobody may realise for hours. Be careful and uncompromising when you are mounting an exhibition or bringing items for loan. Work one case at a time and make sure the case is locked immediately after you place the objects in.

Show cases are a special problem themselves. They should be made from good wood or steel and glass, must have good locks and should be equipped with alarms (opening and glass break detectors combined or ultrasonic and infrared detectors).

But what does it help, if the glass break detector is set off but somebody has already stolen a coin and quickly disappeared. Electronic alarms can only inform not protect. Therefore it is necessary that a good plan is in place in case of alarms and that everybody knows what he has to do. It should be guaranteed that in between the moment of the alarm and the fact of the theft there is a period of time that allows the responsible persons to react. This means that the best protection could be a bullet proof glass for the show cases. But as all of us know, this sort of glass is thick and does not allow a good view of the display. Therefore, it is best to put under the glass which is protected by a glass break detector (today only acoustic-glass break detectors should be in use) a second polyester glass layer. In this case the thief causes alarm by smashing the glass, the alarm goes to the central station and alerts the guards before the person can reach the object which is protected by a second glass level.

In any case, make a full documentation of all exhibition and loan objects so that it will be possible to inform police and colleagues about the stolen object.

And there is one more rule you should respect in your exhibition. It sometimes happens that you have to remove a specimen for photography, scientific research or conservation inspection. At such times, replace it by a short document that you, your guards and also the visitor can read. It should state when, by whom and for how long the piece was taken out, it should be signed and should be on official paper. If you would like to increase security within the show case in a very simple and easy way: write somewhere in a corner the number of exhibits shown in this

case, and it will be easy for the guard to control it.

These ideas are only some fundamental thoughts about security in numismatics. I am sure, that we could discuss them for hours and

hours exchanging experiences. In this we would all have the one target, to save our collections for the future, for the next generations.