



Quarter of the Month

by Greg Johnson, LSCC #1460

Weak Strikes

Coin descriptions often include reference to strike. Phrases such as “weakly struck”, “fully struck”, “strongly struck”, or “hammered strike” grace dealer and auction catalog descriptions with some frequency. It’s not a challenging concept to understand. Coins are made by what manufacturing people call a stamping operation. In that stamping operation, obverse and reverse dies are used to form a coin from a blank metal planchet. If the coin presses are not controlled precisely enough, the obverse and reverse dies remain too far apart and insufficient pressure is applied to the planchet. This “weak strike” results in a coin on which the parts of the design in highest relief, representing the deepest areas of the dies, may not be fully formed. Those areas of highest relief for most Liberty Seated quarters are Liberty’s hair, the eagle’s left leg, the arrow feathers, and perhaps unexpectedly, the stars.

In addition to starting with coins of high enough grade that wear doesn’t mask lack of originally struck detail, conclusively identifying a weakly struck coin requires another critical piece of information. You need to know what detail was originally present on the die used to strike the coin. This can be a particular challenge for many quarters struck in New Orleans. Not surprisingly, it was difficult to prevent rust and other forms of damage when storing coinage dies in New Orleans during the 1840’s and 1850’s. Evidence of those challenges remains in the form of coins produced from badly rusted dies and coins produced from heavily polished dies. It is possible to speculate about the most likely cause for missing detail on a particular coin, especially when the areas of weakness are not in the areas of highest relief, but difficult to be certain.

But, what does it matter? Whether the weakness in the coin design is from a weak strike or a die that did not have the detail to begin with is not necessarily an interesting question for all collectors. Type collectors who simply avoid coins without full detail, collectors of low-grade coins, and collectors who focus on filling holes in their set without strict regard for appearance may not concern themselves with the distinction between causes of missing detail. It starts to get interesting for date and mintmark set builders who seek “fully struck” coins, meaning coins with full detail. Some issues either do not exist or are very rare with full details. It gets very interesting for variety and die marriage collectors. There are many die marriages, particularly among New Orleans Liberty Seated quarters, that appear to be unknown with full detail. This is often abbreviated as “weakly struck” but is probably due to lack of detail on the die in many cases.

There are too many Seated quarter die marriages with “weak strike”, or less than complete detail, to discuss in one column. I will, however, point out a few examples. An additional, interesting feature of these coins is that they tend to be overlooked by type collectors and even many date and mintmark set builders, when other more completely realized die marriages of the same issue are available. Opportunity then, for variety and die marriage collectors who can appreciate coins without complete detail as important examples of what the mint was producing at the time. Coins with a character that says, “we’re doing the best we can, but this is a hard job in a life and a world full of challenges.”



(Continued from previous page)

The reverse die in Figure 1 is an 1857-O Reverse B, as listed in “The Comprehensive Encyclopedia of United States Liberty Seated Quarters” (Briggs, 1991). There are 8 listed die marriages of 1857-O and one unlisted which I have cataloged in my own notes and collection. Of the nine die marriages (known to me) Reverse B was used on 5 of them. I have very rarely seen an example of a coin struck from Reverse B with full detail on the eagle’s left (facing) leg, it is typically very weak as seen in the Figure.



← 1857-O
Reverse B (Fig. 1)

(Fig. 2) 1853-O →
w/ Filled O Reverse



The obverse pictured in Figure 2 is an 1853-O quarter with filled O reverse. Interestingly, for this die, it is not the head and hair that is particularly weak, it is the central part of the obverse design as seen in the Figure. It was noted in Brigg’s reference noted above that uncirculated examples can appear to have only the detail expected from a choice VF. This is a very interesting die marriage for which I’ve written a Gobrecht Journal article (GJ #105, July 2009). It is also included in the Top 25 Liberty Seated Quarter varieties (GJ #111, July 2011). There were 35 examples of the variety reported in the Top 25 survey (GJ #119, March 2014), with only nine grading better than fine and a single one of the 35 examples certified by a TPG.

The final coin is the 1850-O quarter. The issue is known for weak head and hair detail on the obverse, but it can be found with quite strong detail with some patience. The interesting thing about the issue is that there are three die marriages, but almost all examples with complete obverse detail come from a single die marriage, Obverse 1 - Reverse B. Figure 3 shows Obverse 2 with missing head and hair detail. Figure 4 is Obverse 1 as paired with Reverse B.

If you’ve read this far, thank you. And Happy Hunting!

(END)



← 1850-O (Fig. 3)
Obv 2 - Rev B

1850-O (Fig. 4) →
Obv 1 - Rev B



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