

## Walter Breen's Research Methods

This has been written in response to the letter from Stewart W. Jones as published in Issue #67 of the journal concerning an interview he had with Walter Breen in 1990 at the ANA Convention in Seattle. I have the following comments to make about his remarks.

Mr. Jones noted that "Breen had previously spent time viewing the coins in the Eliasberg Collection, so I asked him several questions about varieties that had surfaced in his supplement in the Valentine reprint of 1975." In short, Walter Breen's comments concerning the Eliasberg Collection coins in certain of his published works did not always correlate with specimens of coins that actually existed in the Eliasberg Collection upon careful inspection and the cataloguing of these coins for sale.

It might be relevant to note that the observation of such discrepancies in Breen works is hardly new, and in some instances the actual coins have differed in variety and finish from those in Breen's published works. While it has been my observation that the vast majority of Walter Breen's comments provide valuable references, there are occasional lapses.

I give as a related reference my comment under Lot 401 of our recent Eliasberg Collection sale, a 1795 half cent in superb condition, which I note was "omitted from the Breen census for unknown reasons." It was curious that other Eliasberg Collection coins had been mentioned by Breen, but this coin had been forgotten, even though it had been in the collection when Breen examined it. I noted as a footnote to Lot 401 that discrepancies among half cent censuses might be explained as follows:

Walter Breen would have almost certainly seen this coin when the others were reviewed, although it is known in other contexts that his notes concerning this and other great collections were sometimes incomplete. For example, he omitted mention of the 1827 original quarter dollar in the Garrett Collection in his Proof coins Encyclopedia. On at least two occasions many of his notes on New Jersey coppers, colonials, half cents and Proof coins were lost and he had to reconstruct them from memory, which in most cases was excellent.

Walter's modus operandi was to make notes in pencil on sheets of typewriter paper or to later write up his comments after viewing a coin or having a conversation with another individual. I have found that Walter Breen's comments are an excellent general guide and, in fact, are the best thing in print. But to use them as gospel truth would be a dreadful mistake, as there are many errors with regard to his recollections and notes about the Eliasberg Collection. Not only did he lose some of his notes, but I believe that he never had the chance to examine these coins under carefully controlled lighting conditions while they were out of their display cases. For decades the Eliasberg Collection coins were sealed in large wooden and glass frames.

During his lifetime I knew Walter Breen on a numismatic basis as well as anyone I know, collaborated with him on numerous projects and helped him with his books. It is relevant to mention that in addition to errors of memory or transcription, errors were caused in some instances by the input of faulty information from other people. Walter was without guile, had not a mean bone in his body, and often dutifully recorded what anyone would tell him. Thus, if someone told him at a coin show in Peoria that he had seen a Proof coin in a museum in Iowa, Walter would make a note of it. This would later appear in print as "a Proof exists in an Iowa museum collection", or something similar,

although Walter hadn't actually seen the coin. Whether or not it was a Proof may well have been a matter of conjecture. However, the reader of a Breen work would have no clue as to the tentative nature of the Proof attribution.

Similarly, listings in auction catalogues or notices in publications were often recorded by Walter Breen as fact. Moreover, although Walter was an excellent attributor of die varieties, and did in fact discover many new varieties in various series, he was not particularly well versed in grading coins in my opinion. Further, he frequently made many errors in his differentiation between Proof and Mint State finishes.

However, in a lifetime of numismatic productivity which extended from 1950 to 1994, Walter left a legacy unmatched by anyone else in the history of our hobby. Walter was the first to spend extensive time in the National Archives, examine Mint records, and take a scientific approach to coining procedures and die preparation, often relating what he found to history, science or other academic disciplines. Walter's knowledge in many areas outside of numismatics was immense. All of this was done with a sense of altruism devoid of promotion or market bias.

Walter brought an extensive amount of information to light while first working under the auspices of Wayte Raymond in the early 1950s, and later with John J. Ford, Jr. as his sponsor. In effect, he revised the hobby's way of thinking on many numismatic topics. His 1988 book, *Walter Breen's Complete Encyclopedia of U.S. and Colonial Coins*, stands as his masterwork and a monument to much of what he did in numismatics.

If Walter were living today he would be the first to admit that his work could often stand correction. Indeed, he realized this in his lifetime. A comparison of his articles on gold coins in "Hewitt's Numismatic Information Series" in the 1950s and 1960s with his later works will vividly demonstrate this. Walter was always agreeable to learning new information, making changes, and revising theories. In fact, he was one of the most open minded people I have ever met.

To a large extent, Walter built a foundation which the current generation of numismatic researchers has expanded. All of those who knew Walter or consult his works are grateful for the many contributions that he made to the field of numismatics. However, when reading what Walter had to say about a particular variety in a specific collection, it must be remembered that while the vast majority of his information is correct, there are also numerous instances in which his information is wrong. But, the numismatic fraternity has yet to produce any researcher who does everything completely correct.

I hope that this information sheds some light on the research methods pursued by Walter Breen during his lifetime.

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