The Heraldic Eagle: The Story Behind The Bird
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Old habits die hard. After renouncing almost a thousand years of kings and queens, banners and lineage, the founders of the United States of America went searching for a symbol of national heritage. Ironically, the one they adopted had its roots deep in the class structure of the Old World�a heraldic symbol, or coat of arms, dating from the knights and nobility of 12th-century Europe.

With their faces covered by helmets, medieval knights wore identifying emblems or symbols on the tunics covering their armor, giving rise to the expression �coat of arms.� After the Crusades, the concept of heraldry spread throughout Europe, adopted by both noble and patrician classes, and later by lawyers, companies, colleges and towns. European countries adopted the practice of placing heraldic shields on the reverse of their coinage. Scudo, the word for shield, even became a denomination of gold currency, as in Scudo de oro. Heraldic symbols on coinage were soon used all over the world.

The first precious metal coinage from the U.S. Mint, however, presented no such symbol, only depictions of the national bird, a naturally posed American bald eagle. These coins received widespread criticism, however, with the bird gracing their reverses derided as either a �scrawny eagle� or a �turkey cock.� As officials pondered the poor reception afforded the early designs, the preference shown by both Americans and Europeans for the more familiar coins of Old World origin was also on their minds. Adopting a heraldic motif would at once make U.S. coins more acceptable from both an artistic and practical standpoint. The closest thing the republic had to a coat of arms was the eagle on the Great Seal of the United States. Designed by William Barton, a Philadelphia lawyer and numismatist, the Great Seal was adopted by both the Continental Congress of 1782 and the U.S. Congress of 1789. Primarily used on treaties and other diplomatic documents, its heraldic design would make its first appearance on the quarter eagle of 1796, and next on the eagle, in 1797.

As Chief Engraver of the United States Mint since late 1793, Robert Scot was charged with adapting the Great Seal to coinage use. Scot�s design featured a cruder and less regal bird than that on the Great Seal, and to many, was artistically inferior to the small eagle on earlier U.S. coins. The new eagle, with the Union Shield on its breast, holds thirteen arrows and an olive branch in its claws, and a scroll inscribed E PLURIBUS UNUM in its beak. Above the eagle are thirteen stars enclosed by an arc of clouds, with UNITED STATES OF AMERICA surrounding the border. While Scot�s design has both admirers and detractors, he did make one obvious technical error: He placed the arrows�symbolizing armed might�in the eagle�s right (dexter or honorable) claw, and the olive branch of peace in the left (sinister) claw, reversing the placement seen on the Great Seal and heraldically conveying a warlike message rather than one of peace. Whether this was an honest mistake or a reflection of his own hawkish sentiments, no one will ever know, but no change was made to this arrangement throughout the design�s life.

Although Scot is credited with the Heraldic reverse, numismatic researchers believe that he was aided in the preparation of the first dies by assistant John Smith Gardner, who started work at the Mint in 1794, but quit less than two years later, supposedly unsatisfied with his compensation. No doubt he was also weary of Scot�s jealousy and constant harassment, which the marginally competent Chief Engraver heaped on anyone he thought might threaten his position. For years, Scot�s authority and position would go unchallenged, and his designs continued to reflect his limited skills.

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