Mercury Dimes

The world situation was worrisome at best in 1916, and things were changing rapidly in Europe. The United States was being pulled into WW1, the war to end all wars. Changes were occurring in our country as well, and many people look at 1916 as one of the most significant years in numismatics.

Gone were the virtually identical Liberty bust designs by Charles Barber on the dime, quarter, and half dollar, replaced by the beautiful neo-classic representations of this figure by Adolph A. Weinman on the dime and half, and by Herman MacNeil on the quarter. All three were tied together by the fact that, for the first time, their designs were not similar for each denomination; all three stood on their own as true and lasting works of art.

Weinman was born December 11, 1870. His Winged Liberty Head design for the smallest of these denominations is well covered by David Lang in his Mercury Dime book, with a detailed analysis of each date and mint mark. Coined by the millions from 1916 to 1945, Mercury Dimes remain a familiar image in the hobby, although long vanished from everyday circulation. An entire generation or two have passed since these beautiful little silver pieces were known to every American, and it is only we collectors who now derive benefit from their charm. These coins created by Adolph Weinman, were hailed on their debut in 1916, a rare accomplishment among United States coin designs. Being generally suspicious of change, particularly that initiated by the federal government, Americans nevertheless took the youthful Miss Liberty to their hearts and shed no tears over the passing of her matronly predecessor. The model Weinman used was Elsie Kachel Stevens. She was 27 at the time Weinman created a bust of her image in 1913. He later used this bust as the image to create his Liberty Head design.

The image of a youthful female adorned with wings, symbolizing “liberty of thought”, was new to United States coinage. There were, however, historical precedents in the Ancient World. In the coinage of the Roman Republic, silver denarii frequently included the familiar portrait of a winged Roma. In 1948, the aluminum two francs coin of French Equatorial Africa, portraying Marianne with winged head. The youthful Marianne, symbol of the French Republic and equivalent of our own Lady Liberty, is depicted in a manner nearly identical to Weinman’s dime of 1916.

As charming as the winged liberty portrait of Miss Liberty may have been, the coin's reverse, although skillfully rendered, became a source of some consternation. In 1916, the fasces was nothing more than an ancient symbol of authority dating from the glory of Rome. Is was thus entirely acceptable on an American coin. Three years later, however, the followers of Benito Mussolini seized upon this image as their symbol for a new order in Italy. By 1922, they had achieved their goal, and the fasces would thence forward be associated with tyranny and mob rule. Protests over its continued use on a United States coin were initially few in number, but they grew as the Nazis too asserted their power in Germany. In retrospect, it seems that America's entry into World War II would have required that the fasces be removed immediately from our ten cent piece, as this was basically a struggle against international fascism. Instead, the United States Mint was so overwhelmed with the rapid increase in demand for fresh coinage that it couldn't possibly undertake any design changes for the duration of the war. By 1945, when coinage of the Mercury Dime was finally brought to a conclusion, the crusade against fascism had already been won. Ultimately, it was not fault with the coin's imagery which caused it to be terminated, but rather the desire to honor a fallen leader. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had died during the final months of the war. As he was so closely associated with the March of Dimes campaign to end polio, this denomination was selected to host his portrait beginning in 1946. Thus, the Mercury Dime was replaced at the U. S. Mints by the Roosevelt Dime. With hundreds of millions having been coined during World War II alone, the Mercury Dime remained a familiar item for another twenty years. It was not until the complete disappearance from circulation of all silver coins during the late 1960s that Weinman's beautiful young lady faded entirely from public consciousness. Adolph A. Weinman passed away August 7, 1952, five years after the last of his coins had been superseded by more modernistic coins.

Rarity and strike characteristics by date and mint mark:

1916 Extremely common

1916 D Mintage of 264,000 Key in the series. Comes well struck but 1/3 are fakes in low grade.

1916 S Very common, usually well struck, but not always SB. Mint mark high on 16 and 17

1917 Type of 1916 is common. Type of 1917 common, but well struck

1917 D KEY date. Very scarce in BU and comes poorly struck

1917 S 9 out of 10 are type of 1916. Type of 1917 are scarce, but more common than 17D

1918 Very common. Comes well struck and 50% are Full Band

1918 D Scarce. Come poorly struck

1918 S Come poorly made. A problem coin. Scarce in BU

1919 Comes fully struck

1919 D Fairly scarce. Look for nicely struck coins.

1919 S Small hoard found in BU. Strike is good. Tough to find in AU

1920 Very common. The 0 in date is too close to the rim, flat and fades into rim.

1920 D Not rare in XF to AU, but tough in BU

1920 S Strike is poor on obverse and reverse. Scarce in BU

1921 Overextended dies, 98% SB, but lettering is flat. Scarce, has distinctive 1921 lettering

1921 D Mintage of 1,080,000 Ranking 2/77 Frequently found with die cracks.

1923 Common in all grades

1923 S Not rare, but tough in XF to AU. Poor strike and never comes Full Band. Often cleaned

1924 Common

1924 D Common but well struck. Usually does not have Split Band. Often cleaned

1924 S Very common. Does not come well struck

1925	Very common, does not come well struck
1925 D	Strike problems. Scarce, but can find a nice one if you look long enough
1925 S	Poorest struck in the series. Very eroded dies, clashed and polished out. Never in Gem
1926	Very common
1926 D	Very common in all grades. Does have some strike problems
1926 S	Lower mintage, but BU coins are not tough to find. Tough in VF and very rare in XF
1927	Common
1927 D	Very very scarce due to always poorly struck, poor planchets. Lettering always flat
1927 S	Well struck but usually cleaned. Scarce in VF and higher
1928	Extremely common
1928 D	Very scarce with flat strike. Not as scarce as 1927-D
1928 S	Not rare but usually cleaned or damaged. 1 out of 30 have the large S mint mark
1929	Very common. BU rolls available
1929 D	Very common in BU. Weak lettering
1929 S	Very common in all circulated grades. Choice and Gem are scarce
1930	Hoarded
1930 S	Hoarded
1931	Ranked 8/77. Slightly scarce in lower grades. BU coins are elusive, FB are scarce
1931 D	Ranked 4/77. Very scarce in circulated. Lots of them uncirculated
1931 S	Ranked 6/77. Scarce in original condition. Most have been cleaned

1934 Common in all circulated grades. Weak 4 in date. FB coin are elusive

1934 D Fairly scarce. Was not hoarded

1935 Common in all circulated graded. Little challenge in FB. Original rolls certainly exist

1935 D Very scarce and underrated. Look for and buy multiple nice BU coins

1935 S Common

1936 Common

1936 D Common

1936 S Common

1937 Common

1937 D Common

1937 S Common

1938 Common

1938 D Common

1938 S Common

1939 Common

1939 D Very attractive in high grade. Comes well struck and nicely made

1939 S The most scarce in Full Band for the series. Search for and buy FB coins

1940 Come well struck and common

1940 D Come well struck and common

1940 S Come well struck and common

1941 Common in all grades including Full Band gems. Original rolls do exist

1941 D Common in all grades including Full Band gems. Original rolls do exist

1941 S Common in all grades including fully struck gem. Original rolls do exist

1942 Common date, but tough in Full Band

1942/1 VF are not scarce with F to VF most available. Four rolls found in 1954 estate

1942 D Common in all grades including fully struck gem. Original rolls do exist

1942/1 D Scarce to rare in all grades, mint state especially so

1942 S Common in all grades including Full Band gem. Original rolls do exist

1943 Common in all grades including fully struck gem. Original rolls do exist. Scarce in FB

1943 D Common in all grades through fully struck gem. Original rolls do exist. Comes in FB

1943 S Common in all grades, with the exception of Full Band coins. Original rolls do exist

1944 Common in all grades less than fully struck gem. Fewer FB than all other dates in the 1940s. Original rolls do exist

1944 D Common in any grade desired. Original rolls exist

1944 S Common in all grades, with the exception of Full Band coins. Original rolls do exist

1945 Poorly struck, commonly broad struck. Look for in Split Band. No FSB

1945 D Common in all grades including fully struck gem. Original rolls do exist

1945 S Common in all grades, with the exception of fully struck gem. Original rolls do exist

1945 Micro S One in ten are Micro S, but not difficult to find in FB

Proof Mercury Dimes

The delay in readiness of the new design in 1916 led to a situation which has aroused the curiosity of collectors ever since. The question is often asked why there were no proof dimes and quarters of the Barber type dated 1916 when such pieces were made for circulation. The answer lies in the fact that these coins were not struck for circulation until midway through the year and only because the demand for additional dimes and quarters could not be met from existing stockpiles. The Mint never intended to coin silver pieces of the old type in 1916 and thus did not include them in the proof sets for that year. In any case, the Mints position regarding the further manufacture and sale of proof coins was summed up in the following letter of November 21, 1916 in a reply to Commodore W. C. Eaton:

The coinage of the proof coins has been abolished by order of the Director of the Mint at Washington, D. C. We will supply the proof nickel and cent only for 1916.

A. C. Williamson, Medal Clerk

Williamson's letter points out another interesting fact; that is that no gold proofs were coined in 1916 as well. Still, there were those of taste and influence who desired proof specimens of the new coinage, and it's likely that one or more proofs were coined of the quarter dollar, and half dollar, as well as the dime. The only proof 1916 Mercury Dime currently resides in the Smithsonian Institution, transferred there by the Mint in 1923. Proof dimes do exist from 1916 and 1917, and have a satin or slightly matte finish, as is the case of the Smithsonian coin. Presumably, other 1916 proof dimes were produced and gone to persons linked with their production. These may have been the artist Weinman, Chief Engraver Barber, the Treasury Secretary, and two successive Mint Directors that served during 1916.

As far as collectors are concerned, the coinage of proof Mercury Dimes started in 1936. They were sold individually for twenty cents plus eight cents postage. They were packaged in celluloid bags for the first few years, but this resulted in deep toning over time. It was replaced by cellophane bags through the end of 1942. The proof dimes from 1936 to 1942 were intended to be fully brilliant, but some early 1936 proof dimes were only slightly mirrored, possessing a finish which has been described as satin-like.

Proof issues:

1916 One with the Smithsonian and non-collectable. Four to five known

1917 Non collectable, but one **full** proof set exists for 1917 according to Walter Breen in 1977

1936 Type 1 Rare. Walter Breen only seen eight in his entire numismatic career.

1936 Type 2 Mintage of 4,130 combined for both types Both Ranking 1/7

1937 Mintage of 5,756 Ranking 2/7

1938 Mintage of 8,728 Ranking 3/7

1939 Mintage of 9,321 Ranking 4/7

1940 Mintage of 11,827 Ranking 5/7

1941 Mintage of 16,557 Ranking 6/7

1942 Mintage of 22,329 Ranking 7/7

With all Mercury Dime proofs being offered for sale, beware of well struck circulation strikes which have been polished to simulate proof brilliance.