

# The Care and Preservation of Your Coin and Medal Collection

## 101 – The Basics

*By David Terry*

**T**his is the first of several coin collecting articles [Boscastle Coin Supplies](#) will publish over the next few months about all subjects relating to the buying and using of various coin supplies and coin accessories.

*We know it can be quite intimidating for a new collector to go into a coin store, or go to a coin show, and ask the busy dealer questions about some of the basics of coin collecting and how to properly use the equipment. And when faced with a huge selection or array of products to choose from the decision for the coin collector is made a lot harder.*

*In these articles we hope to unravel some of the mysteries of why you should use various supplies and accessories, and we'll try and make the selection of which one to buy a little easier.*

*Our goal is to make the coin collecting hobby more accessible and enjoyable for juniors and beginners, for collectors who are rediscovering the hobby later in age, and to remind more serious numismatic collectors about the basics.*

### ***How to look after you coin and medal collection – 101 - The basics***

**T**raditionally, coins and medals have been made from three metals and their alloys: gold, silver and copper. The alloy component varies and can be summarized as: silver or copper in gold coins; copper in silver ones; and tin or zinc in copper coins. This last group is often referred to as "bronzes."

*In recent years, additional metals such as iron, aluminum and copper-nickel alloys — have been used in coin and medal production.*

*It's important to know the metallic content of your coins and medals because different types of metals and alloys will react differently in the atmosphere and with storage. As coins and medals become more popular to collect and as many are treasured family heirlooms, you need to ensure they can be looked after for many generations to come.*

## ***Coins and Medals can get easily damaged***

*All coins and medals (except those that are pure gold) are likely to show some deterioration over time, especially if stored in damp or polluted conditions.*

### ***Iron-based Coins and Medals***

*Dampness is especially damaging – so knowing the origin of your coins can help as buried coins for example can keep on corroding if not treated. Iron coins for example, that have been buried get corrosion products on the metal surface will contain salts absorbed from the soil that allow continuing corrosion of any remaining metal to continue if moisture is present.*

### ***Copper-based Coins and Medals***

*Coins and medals made of copper or its alloys can result in a condition called "bronze disease." Bright powdery green spots appear on the surface. If this corrosion process is not corrected, it can destroy the coin. Such corrosion problems should be treated immediately with some delicate dipping solutions especially formulated to treat copper, silver or gold coins.*

### ***Lead and Zinc –based Coins and Medals***

*Pollution also damages coins and medals. Many materials used in manufacturing everyday objects, including furniture, emit organic acids into the air. These organic acids cause zinc and lead to corrode, resulting in a covering of white crystals. This corrosion is difficult to stop unless the source of the organic acids is removed.*

### ***Copper and Silver –based Coins and Medals***

*Copper and silver will tarnish in reaction with hydrogen sulphide, a pollutant given off by decaying animal matter (which is naturally present in the atmosphere). However, some paints, textiles and other household materials also emit some sulphur-containing organic compounds and these also cause copper and silver to tarnish.*

*\* Boscastle Supplies carries a full range of Coin and Medal Cleaning Dips and Liquids that will help to clean and protect many gold, silver, brass and nickel Coins and Medals – Check Out [www.boscastlesupplies.com](http://www.boscastlesupplies.com) \**

*Light can also damage the ribbons that are attached to medals. Silk is especially prone to fading and needs to be stored in a stable or inert environment, and if valuable, a conservation expert might have to be consulted.*

## ***Handling and Storage of Coins and Medals***



Boscastle Watermark

*It is best to handle coins and medals by their edges and, if possible, to wear cotton gloves (not latex). Cotton gloves will protect the metal from the corrosive oils and acids found on our fingers and hands. This is particularly important with perfect proof coins, which should never be handled, and which have a mirror-like surface, because any mark on them can disfigure the coin and lessen its value.*

*\*Boscastle Supplies carries a range of quality cotton Coin Gloves for the coin and medal collector – Check Out [www.boscastlesupplies.com](http://www.boscastlesupplies.com) \**

*Coins can be stored individually in "flips" or "flippettes" preferably made of Mylar, an inert and stable plastic that causes no damage to a coin. These holders have two pockets: one for the coin and one that can hold a piece of paper where you can write information about the coin. They come in a variety of sizes.*

*More commonly available are cardboard 2x2" coin holders lined with Mylar. These have a circle cut out in the middle that is covered with Mylar. The coin is placed on the Mylar "window" and the other half of the cardboard holder is folded over and stapled on three sides. Both sides of the coin are then visible through the Mylar. Be careful to flatten the staples against the card so that they do not scratch other coins they might come into contact with. Although the cardboard is not acid-free, it does not come into contact with the coin's surface. For the majority of coins, this kind of holder is fine.*

*Important Note – even though we at Boscastle Supplies sell all kinds of Mylar and PVC coin storage products, for valuable coins we recommend avoiding "flips" and other kinds of holders made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) because they can lead to corrosion of coins over the long term.*

*Many coin albums are not recommended because it can be awkward to remove coins from the pockets (they are usually open at the top, increasing the likelihood of coins slipping out when the album is open). But the bigger brand coin supplies companies are now making coin albums that have non PVC pages and easy to use pages to help protect coins. We always recommend checking what they are made of first.*

*Another popular way to storing coins is with coin capsules. These can be purchased in a size appropriate for the coin size to stop the coin moving around inside the capsule. Now, capsules are coming with a rubber edge that will protect the coin from moving around. These capsules can then be placed in an attractive coin capsule display case.*



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*Many medals come with their own presentation cases. These are an important part of the object's history and value and, although the medal should not be stored in the presentation box, they should be kept together. Medals can also be stored in Mylar flips or holders and in many ways be treated as a coin. If you have medals with their ribbons on and without a case, you may want to consider using clear polystyrene boxes (available at plastic supply houses). These are affordable and provide good protection. One medal per box is recommended, with the use of a soft, nonabrasive packing material such as acid-free tissue or Microfoam (an uncrosslinked polypropylene) to line the box.*

*Wooden coin cabinets made of oak are not recommended for storing either coins or medals. They can emit acidic vapors that will cause corrosion. Instead, the best case or cabinet storage method is the use metal storage cabinets (preferably with a powder coating) or containers made of either polyethylene or polystyrene.*

*\*Boscastle Supplies carries a wide range of capsules, trays, cases and cabinets for coin and medal collector – Check Out [www.boscastlesupplies.com](http://www.boscastlesupplies.com) \**

### ***Cleaning and Repair***

*Most numismatists advise against cleaning coins. They often have patinas, toning and tarnish that can develop on the surface of a coin over time. Certain kinds of light tarnishing, called toning, are considered part of a coin's value. In the case of proof coins, practically anything will hurt the coin, so keeping any movement of a proof coin to a minimum, is the wisest.*

*Removing surface dirt from a coin is about the only cleaning that should be done. When handling or cleaning coins, you should wear cotton or polyethylene gloves (not latex). To remove surface dirt, wash the coin in lukewarm distilled water with a mild liquid soap. Do not scrub the surface. To rinse, use a cotton swab dipped in distilled water. Regular tap water contains chlorine, which can leave chloride on the surface of the coin that eventually leads to corrosion. After cleaning, use another cotton swab and acetone to remove any grease (this is*

*called degreasing) that may remain on the surface. Because of its toxicity, acetone should only be used in a well-ventilated area. Allow coins to air dry on a paper towel.*

*The approach to medals is slightly different. It is desirable to maintain the bright surfaces of silver medals, but care needs to be taken with the ribbons that are attached to them. It is advisable to wear cotton or polyethylene gloves (not latex) when handling medals. For surface dirt, use a cotton swab to apply a mild liquid soap to the surface. Rub gently to remove dirt and rinse well in distilled water. Let the medal air dry on a paper towel. Silver medals with light tarnish and bronze medals can be cleaned by rubbing a piece of soft cloth gently and evenly over the surface. After cleaning, degrease the surface of the medal using a cotton swab and acetone. Let the medal air dry on a paper towel.*

*Lightly tarnished silver medals can also be cleaned with a dip cleaner. First remove the ribbon from the medal and then apply the dip solution to the surface of the medal with a cotton swab (do not immerse the medal in the dip). Rinse first in running tap water and then in distilled water. Degrease the surface using another cotton swab and acetone. Allow the medal to air dry on a paper towel.*

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