

AMERICAN ICONS IN QUARTERS

December, 2008

I filled my coin book with the 50th state quarter last week. Begun 10 years ago, the series of commemorative quarters allowed each state to choose its own obverse-side design. The series provides a unique view of American culture. What icons have the citizens of each state chosen to represent themselves and the places where they live? What do the quarters tell us about what things, ideas and events are important to our people?

I classified state icons into eleven categories: 1) Agricultural plants, 2) Buildings and structures, 3) Geologic features, 4) Historical persons or events, 5) Livestock, 6) Mottos or adages, 7) Native plants or plant communities, 8) State maps, 9) Statues or monuments, 10) Wildlife, and 11) a miscellaneous category. The average number of categories minted per state quarter is 2.8.

Minnesota takes the prize for most categories presented, with five (a loon, a forest scene, the state map, a motto and a recreational fishing boat).



At the other extreme, Connecticut and Oregon tied with only one category (Connecticut – the Charter Oak; Oregon – Crater Lake). However, Wyoming has the simplest, almost boring, quarter; presenting us with a motto and a cowboy. What happened to the Grand Tetons, Devil’s Tower or pronghorn antelope – which Wyoming has more of than the rest of the world? Do Wyomingites see themselves so simply?



Most states, 36, added a motto or adage to their quarters. Minnesota is proud of its 10,000 Lakes; New Hampshire admonishes us to “Live free or die”; New Mexico sells “The land of enchantment”; and Alaska proclaims it is “The great land”. Each motto promotes the state or its history. Mottos represent the states and their people well.

Next in abundance are historical persons or events, with 17 states. George Washington crossing the Delaware River, Lewis and Clark, Oregon trail pioneers, Abraham Lincoln and the placing of the golden railroad spike in Utah are among the persons and events represented. I conclude that historical roots are important to most Americans. If we view ourselves as states and a nation on a journey, as individuals participating in that journey, there is still hope for the future.

Next are wild plants and landscapes from 16 states; and native wildlife species from 15 states. There are a sunflower, palmetto, oak, maple, forest scenes and a saguaro cactus. There are a wren, a scissor-tailed flycatcher, California condor, bison and a grizzly bear. Combined, these icons represent 25 states. (Six states have both a wild plant and a wild animal.)



Geological features, including Yosemite, Chimney Rock, Mount Rainier, Grand Canyon and mountains and lakes are found on 14 state quarters. Considering geological features, wild plants and native wildlife, elements of the natural environment occur 46 times on 32 state quarters. Most of these occur on coins from western states.

The American bison is the most frequent single icon on the 50 quarters. It is found on coins from Kansas and North Dakota; and as a bison skull on Montana's quarter. (This is appropriate, as wild bison are extirpated from Montana today.)



The built environment, represented by buildings and bridges (7 states) and by statues and monuments (4 states) occurs 11 times on 11 state quarters. Domestic livestock and agricultural plants occur 6 times on 5 quarters. These numbers pale in comparison to the frequencies of icons from the natural environment on 32 quarters.

Clearly, Americans cherish wild places and wild things, even as we continue to replace native North America with a built, developed and exploited environment. Perhaps this pecuniary nostalgia indicates that Americans resent what is happening to their land and its wildness. If so, why doesn't this aspect of our culture impel us to tread more carefully and lightly on the land? It seems we are too busy to combat greed and selfishness, or to recognize the slow but steady loss of things we care a great deal about.

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