

## THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF STEPHEN SACK

A number of technical books on the art of photography already exist which show how to photograph coins. There are also innumerable books which celebrate the beauty of coins through photographs. Almost every year, another 'coffee table book' appears with appealing pictures - of Roman sestertii, for example - showing the minute details of the coin designs and the magnificent colours and textures of their patinas. For such photography, there are even celebrated masters like Max Hirmer, whose pictures of archaeological artefacts are famous world-wide. Such images have a commercial function too: as coins are often collector's pieces, auction houses need to obtain high quality illustrations for their sale catalogues in order to attract attention. It is therefore not surprising that a small handful of individuals are recognized as 'the best coin photographers in the world'. Their task is to capture and, often enhance the reality of the original objects through their mastery of technical excellence, and 110 more.

But the artist Stephen Sack (born 1955, in New Jersey, USA) is a photographer of an entirely different order. It is no exaggeration to say that he is taking numismatic photography into a new dimension. His work represents an entirely new approach to photographing ancient coins that radically departs from tradition. His aim is to go beyond mere technical excellence and discover a new reality for the object he examines through the camera lens. Sack deliberately ignores beautiful coins, finding their designs too explicit, too well preserved. Instead he attempts to make beautiful photographs out of the kind of destroyed and neglected material that would ordinarily be ignored by the serious numismatist.

Such an approach may seem unusual, but for Sack himself it is nothing new. Since 1983, he has worked on a epic photographic project entitled *The Chromosomic Memory*. In the various groups of images that make up the series, the artist fixes his camera, without the aid of special effects, on objects that have been corroded and transformed by time. Early in the series he developed an interest in enameled gravestone portraits, which in their badly deteriorated state are unrecognizable and have become ethereal, ghostlike images. Gargoyles on Gothic architecture, medieval docks and the reverse side of eighteenth-century engravings have also provided him with subject matter. Given his preoccupations, it is not surprising that Sack should have turned his attention to numismatics. Coin design, with its official status, is very deliberate; it is intended to endure, but, conversely, rarely does. Coins get used, their designs become increasingly worn, and even the circumstances of their survival in the corroding earth adds to their distress.

Sack's first coin images, made in the early eighties, recognized this fact, but his more recent work takes a bold step forward. Looking at the images produced for an exhibition held at the British Museum last year, we could easily forget the source of the images altogether. The shapes of the coins - mostly circular but sometimes rectangular - are suppressed. The images have no visible edge: the mental frame of the coin is gone. Some of these works are suggestive of crumbling wall frescoes or murals, others are reminiscent of bronze reliefs. In Sack's photographs, each coin is removed from its familiar context and these intimate, hand-held objects are transformed into something monumental. Every viewer will bring their own point of reference to these startling works: the numismatist might recognize the source coin, but this will leave them no better equipped for the imaginative journey on which they will be sent.

Above all, Sack's form of art photography transcends the boundaries of time and place. Roman images look African, ancient faces become abstract modern images. What we see now is not what the objects were then. Sack's achievement is to have

perceived in these everyday objects, another world, and to have captured this alternate imagery in such a poetic way.

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