



CARVING OUT A NICHE

Hobo nickels exhibit a range of individual artistry.

Have you ever seen a Buffalo nickel carved to look like a man wearing a hat, a train car, or a guy with a walking stick? How about a Morgan dollar transformed into a skull, or a Kennedy half dollar turned into a Storm Trooper? If you have seen strange pieces like these, you may have wondered what they were, and if you haven't seen one yet, I bet you're curious now. These unique pieces are called hobo nickels, and they are an art form that's been around since before the Great Depression.



In the early 20th century, hobos (a 19th-century term describing a migratory worker or a homeless drifter) carved coins for various reasons, predominantly to trade them for necessities. Carvers were sometimes able to exchange their coins for food, clothing, or shelter for a night. Some people were even able to use them to bribe train conductors to let them catch a ride for a short distance. Carving coins also was a way to pass the time when hobos were bored and couldn't find work, and some used them as a way to record memories of people or places.



ZECHMAN carved the pieces above using her Airgraver power tool.
Not Actual Size

Collection SUGGESTION

WHAT: Hobo nickels, of course!
WHY: They cater to a variety of interests—you can collect traditional or traditional-inspired carvings focused on the history of the art form, or you can collect modern carvings that depict some of your favorite pop culture icons.
HOW: Look online, attend coin shows, or participate in the Original Hobo Nickel Society's annual auction.

Not Actual Size

Traditional hobo nickels were created using rudimentary tools—a simple hammer and nail usually did the trick. If those weren't available, a rock, a pocketknife, or any sharp object would suffice. If the artist wanted to add some color or toning to a piece, they might carry the coin around in a tobacco tin for a few days—they used whatever they had around them to produce these incredible works of art.

After the Great Depression ended and people went back to work, many carvers continued to make pieces and teach new artists, but the art form slowed. However, it never died off completely, and it was eventually repopularized by present-day carvers, who have modernized the process.

Several modern carvers choose to hand-carve their pieces using a hammer and chisel, but most have switched to specialized power tools, such as a mini, air-powered jackhammer and steel bits. Many carvers now use a jeweler's vice to hold their coins and a microscope to help them carve fine details.

The designs of hobo nickels have been modernized too. Traditional carvings were typically done on

Buffalo nickels and featured a man in a hat with a beard and shirt collar on the obverse in place of the Indian head. They might also have modified the bison on the reverse to look like a traveling man or railroad car. Unfortunately, some antisemitic pieces bear exaggerated noses and ears. While some contemporary carvers choose to honor the history behind these coins by using traditional designs, many carve subjects like superheroes, athletes, and popular movie or TV characters.

Some artists enjoy traveling to coin shows to give carving demonstrations and sell their work in person, while others stick to eBay and social media. If you're looking for traditional pieces, you can find them at coin shows, on eBay, and in the Original Hobo Nickel Society's annual auction, held in January.

These coins are more than just interesting works of art that require a lot of time and skill—they are also fascinating pieces of history that you can hold in your hands. Now that you know the story behind hobo nickels, I hope you stop and take a look the next time you see one sitting in a dealer's case.

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PHOTOS: ABBY ZECHMAN (COINS & AIRGRAVER); HERITAGE AUCTIONS (1913 HOB0 NICKEL); GETTY IMAGES/CALVINDEXTER (ORANGE GRADIENT); BOBLUE (GREEN BACKGROUND) & PETRO BEVZ