

how to clean old coins

How to Clean Old Coins: A Comprehensive Guide for Collectors

how to clean old coins is a question many collectors ponder, driven by the desire to enhance their appearance and reveal hidden details. However, the process of cleaning antique currency is fraught with potential pitfalls that can drastically reduce a coin's value. This guide aims to provide a comprehensive and authoritative approach to cleaning old coins, emphasizing the importance of preservation over aggressive methods. We will explore why cleaning is often discouraged, delve into safe and gentle techniques for specific types of contamination, discuss what cleaning methods to absolutely avoid, and offer advice on preserving your cleaned treasures. Understanding the nuances of metal composition, patinas, and historical significance is crucial before undertaking any cleaning endeavor.

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Understanding the Risks of Cleaning Old Coins

The primary reason for caution when considering **how to clean old coins** is the irreversible damage that can occur. Many antique coins possess a natural patina, a surface layer of oxidation that develops over time. This patina is not just a sign of age; it's an integral part of the coin's historical narrative and appearance. Aggressive cleaning can strip away this patina, revealing a bright, shiny surface that looks unnatural and devalues the coin significantly. Collectors prize original surfaces, and any alteration, even for aesthetic improvement, is often viewed as detrimental.

Furthermore, improper cleaning techniques can introduce microscopic scratches and abrasions. These imperfections, known as hairlines, are highly undesirable and can be easily spotted under magnification. Once introduced, these scratches cannot be removed without further damaging the coin. The goal of collecting often centers on preserving historical artifacts in their most original state possible. Therefore, any cleaning should be approached with the utmost respect for the coin's integrity and history.

When is Cleaning Old Coins Acceptable?

While general advice leans heavily against cleaning, there are specific circumstances where some level of cleaning might be considered, particularly for newly discovered or severely neglected coins. The key is to differentiate between removing superficial dirt that obscures details and damaging the coin's inherent surface. For coins that have been unearthed from the ground and are heavily encrusted with dirt or verdigris, a gentle approach might be considered to reveal the underlying details. However, even in these cases, the goal is removal of the foreign material, not alteration of the coin's natural surface.

Another consideration is the type of coin. Modern coins or those intended for circulation are generally less sensitive to cleaning than ancient or semi-numismatic coins. However, this guide focuses on older, collectible coins where preservation is paramount. It is always best to err on the side of caution and consult with experienced numismatists or conservators before attempting to clean a valuable or historically significant coin.

Safe Methods for Cleaning Old Coins

When you decide to proceed with cleaning, it is imperative to use the gentlest methods possible. The aim is to remove surface contaminants without abrading or chemically altering the coin's metal. These techniques are generally suitable for removing loose dirt, grime, or light residue that obscures the coin's details.

Distilled Water Soaking for Basic Grime

For coins with only light surface dirt, a simple soak in distilled water can be remarkably effective. Distilled water is used because it is free from the minerals and impurities found in tap water, which could potentially react with the coin's surface. This method is non-abrasive and preserves the coin's natural patina. The duration of the soak can vary from a few hours to several days, depending on the level of grime. After soaking, the coin can be gently rinsed with more distilled water and dried using a soft, lint-free cloth or by allowing it to air dry on a soft surface.

Olive Oil Soaking for Stubborn Deposits

For more stubborn deposits, such as encrusted dirt or some types of corrosion, olive oil soaking is a popular and relatively safe method. The oil acts as a solvent, gently loosening the grime over time. The coin should be submerged in pure olive oil, free from additives, in a sealed container. This process can take weeks or even months, requiring patience. Periodically, the coin can be removed and gently wiped with a soft cotton swab or cloth to lift away loosened debris. After the desired level of cleaning is achieved, the coin must be thoroughly degreased by soaking it in a solvent like mineral spirits or acetone, followed by a final rinse with distilled water and careful drying. This is a slow but often effective way to improve a coin's appearance without causing significant damage.

Gentle Swabbing for Surface Dirt

Once a coin has been soaked and loosened debris is evident, gentle swabbing can be employed. This should always be done with a soft, inert material such as a cotton swab or a piece of soft cotton cloth. The goal is to lift away the softened dirt without applying pressure that could scratch the surface. Never rub or scrub the coin. Instead, use a dabbing or very light rolling motion to pick up the residue. This technique is most effective when combined with a soaking method, as it allows you to remove loosened particles.

Advanced Techniques for Specific Contaminants

For more complex issues, such as severe verdigris (a green powdery corrosion) on copper or bronze coins, more specialized techniques might be considered, though these carry higher risks. Electrolysis or specific chemical treatments can sometimes be used by experienced conservators to remove harmful corrosion. However, these methods can easily damage the coin if not performed correctly and are generally not recommended for the amateur collector. If dealing with significant corrosion, consulting a professional numismatic conservator is the safest course of action.

Methods to Absolutely Avoid When Cleaning Old Coins

The temptation to make an old coin look new can lead collectors to employ methods that are ultimately destructive. Understanding which techniques to avoid is as crucial as knowing the safe methods.

Abrasive Cleaners and Tools

Never use any form of abrasive cleaner, such as scouring powders, toothpaste, or metal polishes, on old coins. These products contain fine abrasive particles that will scratch the coin's surface, creating hairlines that permanently reduce its value. Similarly, avoid using abrasive cloths, steel wool, or stiff brushes. Even gentle rubbing with a rough cloth can cause micro-scratches that are detrimental.

Harsh Chemicals and Acids

Acids, even diluted ones, can react aggressively with the metal of a coin, leading to etching, pitting, and the removal of original surface features. This includes household cleaners that may contain acids, as well as more specialized chemicals. While some chemicals might be used by professionals in very controlled environments for specific conservation purposes, they are far too risky for general use by collectors. The unpredictable nature of their reaction with various metal alloys makes them a significant threat to a coin's integrity.

Polishing and Buffing

Polishing and buffing aim to create a shiny, lustrous surface. While this might be desirable for modern jewelry, it is highly detrimental to collectible coins. These processes remove the original patina and can also introduce microscopic scratches. A coin that has been polished will typically appear unnaturally bright and will be significantly devalued in the numismatic market. The natural toning and patina are often what give an old coin its character and historical appeal.

Ultrasonic Cleaners

While ultrasonic cleaners are effective for cleaning many objects, they are generally not recommended for cleaning old coins. The high-frequency vibrations can cause microscopic damage to the coin's surface, especially if it has any inherent weaknesses or is made of a delicate alloy. Furthermore, if the cleaning solution used in an ultrasonic cleaner is too harsh or contains abrasive particles, it can exacerbate the damage. For numismatic purposes, the risks often outweigh the benefits.

Preserving Your Cleaned Coins

Once you have gently cleaned a coin, proper preservation is key to maintaining its improved state and preventing further deterioration. The way you store your coins can significantly impact their longevity and appearance. Investing in appropriate storage materials is a wise decision for any coin collector.

Coins should be stored in individual holders to prevent them from touching each other, which could cause scratches or environmental damage. Options include inert plastic flips, Mylar holders, or coin albums designed for numismatic use. Avoid PVC (polyvinyl chloride) plastics, as they can emit harmful chemicals that cause a sticky green residue on coins over time. Ensure that the storage environment is stable, with moderate temperature and humidity. Protect coins from direct sunlight, which can cause fading or heat damage, and from airborne pollutants that can tarnish or corrode the metal.

For valuable or rare coins, consider using inert gas environments or specialized archival boxes for long-term storage. Regular inspection of your collection can help you identify any potential issues early on. Handling coins with cotton gloves is also recommended to avoid transferring oils and fingerprints from your skin, which can react with the metal over time and cause damage. The goal is to protect the cleaned surface from any new form of contamination or physical stress.

Assessing Coin Value After Cleaning

It is crucial for collectors to understand how cleaning impacts a coin's market value. In almost all cases, cleaning an old coin, especially using aggressive methods, will significantly reduce its numismatic value. Collectors and dealers generally prefer original, uncleaned coins with their natural patinas. A coin that appears "cleaned" or "altered" will often fetch a fraction of the price it would command if it were in its original state.

This is because cleaning is seen as a form of damage. The process removes the coin's history and aesthetic integrity. Even if a coin looks visually appealing after cleaning, experienced numismatists can detect the signs of cleaning, such as hairlines, altered luster, or loss of original surface texture. Therefore, the decision to clean a coin should be based on a desire to preserve it for personal enjoyment or to reveal details for study, rather than an expectation of increasing its monetary worth. For any coin with significant potential value, it is always advisable to seek professional appraisal and advice before considering any cleaning.

FAQ

Q: How can I tell if an old coin has been cleaned?

A: Signs of cleaning include an unnaturally bright or shiny surface (especially on older coins), the absence of natural toning or patina, microscopic scratches (hairlines) visible under magnification, and a "scoured" or

"worn" appearance in the details.

Q: What is the safest way to store cleaned old coins?

A: The safest way to store cleaned old coins is in individual, inert holders made of Mylar or inert plastics, coin flips, or in archival quality coin albums. Ensure the storage environment has stable temperature and humidity, and avoid direct sunlight and PVC-containing materials.

Q: Can I use household cleaners to clean old coins?

A: No, you should never use household cleaners, especially those containing acids or abrasive chemicals, to clean old coins. These substances can cause irreversible damage, etching, and discoloration to the coin's surface, significantly reducing its value.

Q: What should I do if my old coin has severe green corrosion (verdigris)?

A: For severe verdigris, it is highly recommended to consult a professional numismatic conservator. While some gentle methods like soaking in distilled water might help for minor cases, aggressive chemical treatments or electrolysis can easily damage the coin further if not performed by an expert.

Q: Is it ever okay to polish an old coin?

A: No, it is never recommended to polish an old coin. Polishing removes the coin's natural patina and surface details, creating an unnatural shine and introducing scratches. This process drastically devalues the coin for collectors.

Q: How long should I soak an old coin in distilled water?

A: For light grime, soaking in distilled water can range from a few hours to a few days. For more stubborn dirt, longer soaks might be necessary. Periodically check the coin's progress and gently rinse and dry it when you achieve the desired result.

Q: What is the difference between cleaning and conservation of old coins?

A: Cleaning typically involves removing dirt or tarnish to improve appearance, often with the risk of altering the coin's surface. Conservation, on the other hand, is a professional process aimed at stabilizing a coin, removing harmful corrosion, and preserving its historical integrity with minimal alteration.

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