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## Congressional Involvement in the Design of Circulating Coins

In April 1792, the Coinage Act (1 Stat. 246) established the United States Mint. Pursuant to the act, Congress prescribed various aspects of the design of circulating coins. For example, the Coinage Act directed the U.S. Mint to strike coins of specific denominations—Eagles (\$10), Half Eagles (\$5), Quarter Eagles (\$2.5), Dollars (\$1), Half dollars (\$0.50), quarter dollars (\$0.25), dimes (\$0.10), half dimes (\$0.05), cents (\$0.01), and half cents (\$0.005)—with specific images and words, including images of eagles and the words “United States of America.” Additionally, recent laws have prescribed certain images—such as which Presidents appear on the obverse of which coins and what images are to appear on the coins’ reverse—through law.

Since its founding, the U.S. Mint has struck circulating coins and Congress has continued to instruct the U.S. Mint on coin designs, inscriptions, denominations, and metallic contents. Except for the 1976-1977 Bicentennial issues, the designs on U.S. coins have remained similar since 1964, when the John F. Kennedy half dollar was first minted.

**Figure 1** shows the obverse design for current coins.

**Figure 1. U.S. Mint Circulating Coins Obverse**



Source: U.S. Mint.

Note: Images are not to scale.

### Current Coinage Requirements

Most aspects of circulating coinage are required by law. Pursuant to statute (31 U.S.C. §5112), Congress instructs the Secretary of the Treasury, through the U.S. Mint, to issue specific denominations of circulating coins and specifies the coins’ size, weight, and metallic content. For example, the U.S. Mint is to issue “a quarter dollar that is 0.955 inch in diameter and weights 5.67 grams” and is made of a copper and nickel alloy (5 U.S.C. §5112(a)(3) and (b)).

In addition to specific denominations, size, and metallic content, Congress also requires that certain design elements be present on coinage. This includes specific words such as

“Liberty,” or “E Pluribus Unum,” as well as which president appears on any given coin. For example, pursuant to law, all nickels must include the image of Thomas Jefferson on the obverse (5 U.S.C. §5112(d)(1)) and all pennies must show an image of Abraham Lincoln (P.L. 109-145).

For other aspects of coin design not specified by Congress, the Secretary of the Treasury is authorized to change the design or die of a coin only once within 25 years of the first adoption of the design features for that coin (31 U.S.C. §5112(d)(1), unless Congress specifies otherwise.

### Recent Special Coinage Programs

In recent years, Congress has enacted legislation to change the design of circulating coins to honor the states, national parks, American women, youth sports, and former presidents. These design changes were specified by law, which mandated the issuance of more than one coin design in a given year.

#### State Quarters

From 1999 to 2008, the U.S. Mint issued five different quarters each year with designs on the reverse side emblematic of the 50 states, the District of Columbia and the territories—Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands (31 U.S.C. §5112 (1)(1)(A)). Coins were issued in the order in which states entered the Union, beginning with Delaware and ending with Hawaii. Designs reflected important events and symbols from each state, but were prohibited from containing portrait images of any person, living or dead. **Figure 2** shows the first state quarter—Delaware—and the last state quarter—Hawaii.

**Figure 2. Delaware and Hawaii Quarters Reverse**



Source: U.S. Mint, *50 State Quarter Report: 10 Years of Honoring Our Nation's History and Heritage*.

#### America the Beautiful Quarters

In 2010, Congress authorized the America the Beautiful Quarter program. The American the Beautiful Quarters were a 12-year initiative that created 56 different quarter reverses to honor national parks and other national sites in each state, territory, and the District of Columbia (31 U.S.C.

§5112(t)(3)(1)(i)). **Figure 3** shows the 2016 America the Beautiful Quarter reverse images.

**Figure 3. 2016 America the Beautiful Quarters**



**Source:** U.S. Mint, “America the Beautiful Quarter Program.”  
**Notes:** The 2016 quarters are the Shawnee National Forest (IL), the Cumberland Gap National Historic Park (KY), Harpers Ferry National Historical Park (WV), Theodore Roosevelt National Park (ND), and Fort Moultrie at Fort Sumter National Memorial (SC).

**George Washington Crossing the Delaware**

Following the conclusion of the America the Beautiful Quarter program, for 2021 the quarter’s obverse featured a new image of George Washington and the reverse “contain[ed] an image of General Washington crossing the Delaware River prior to the Battle of Trenton” (31 §U.S.C. 5112(t)(8)(A)). **Figure 4** shows the 2021 George Washington Crossing the Delaware Quarter.

**Figure 4. 2021 Washington Crossing the Delaware Quarter**



**Source:** U.S. Mint, General George Washington Crossing the Delaware Quarter.

**American Women**

The Circulating Collectable Coin Redesign Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-330) authorized the U.S. Mint to honor prominent American women on the quarter. Between 2022 and 2025, the U.S. Mint will issue five quarters each year featuring five women. The quarters will feature George Washington on the Obverse and a prominent woman on the reverse. **Figure 5** shows the 2022 American Women quarters’ reverses.

**Figure 5. 2022 American Women Quarters**



**Source:** U.S. Mint, “American Women Quarters Program.”  
**Notes:** The 2022 quarters depict Maya Angelou, Dr. Sally Ride, Nina Otero-Warren, Wilma Mankiller, and Anna May Wong.

**Semiquincentennial and Youth Sports**

The Circulating Collectable Coin Redesign Act also authorized future quarter redesigns. In 2026, the quarter’s reverse will be redesigned to celebrate the semiquincentennial (250<sup>th</sup> anniversary) of the United States, with up to five different designs. At least one must be “emblematic of a woman’s or women’s contribution to the birth of the Nation or the Declaration of Independence or any other monumental moments” in American history. Then, between 2027 and 2030, the reverse will feature images “emblematic of sports played by American youth.” Each will feature a single sport, with up to five sports celebrated each year.

**Presidential Dollars**

In the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress (2005-2006), Congress authorized the redesign of the \$1 coin to honor past U.S. Presidents (31 U.S.C. 5112(n)). Coins were issued between 2007 and 2016 for each President who has been deceased for at least two years. Following the death of President George H.W. Bush, Congress authorized a \$1 coin to honor him (P.L. 116-112). Following the conclusion of the presidential \$1 program, the design of the \$1 coin reverted to the “Sacagawea-design” \$1 coin (31 U.S.C. §5112(n)(9)). **Figure 6** shows the George H.W. Bush \$1 Coin.

**Figure 6. 2020 George H.W. Bush Presidential \$1 Coin**



**Source:** U.S. Mint, George H.W. Bush Presidential \$1 Coin.

Jacob R. Straus, Specialist on the Congress

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