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Minting history - Integrating the curriculum

[Arts & Activities, Jan, 2003 by Gary Kohl](#)

All over North America, coins have suddenly become very decorative and beautifully designed. In both Canada and the United States, coins are reflecting both history and culture, and proving to be very popular with collectors. Several students brought their coin collections to school, and we talked about what was featured on the coins and why.

This all connected splendidly with our inquiry unit in which we were examining conflicts throughout Canada's evolution from colony to nation. Could I transfer this concept of visually capturing history to my grade-four classroom?

The significant historical moments had already been chosen by the students and included the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, World War I, the arrival of the earliest explorers, the War of 1812, and so on.

The challenge was for students to depict, simply and clearly, something symbolic of their chosen historic period.

Several students had already brought in coins that they noticed were distinctive. It was these coins that we looked at and discussed as a class. We

talked about how easy the images were to see and how simple they appeared in design. Then came the next challenge: each student had to create a simple yet powerful design, along with adequate space for the year and country name.

This year's class was influenced by the events of September 11, 2001, as we examined the role of conflicts in shaping a nation. Some students decided to focus their commemorative coins on this event. We discussed the current events as news was broadcast, and contrasted and compared it to the historical events we had already been examining.

We spent a period considering various designs. Students came to me with ideas and rough sketches. We talked about translating their images to the coins and focused on the simplicity and clarity of their images. It was necessary to remind them that any writing and dates had to be done in reverse, since it was a template that they were creating and not the coin itself. This led to a great deal of activity around the mirrors in the washroom, where the students had discovered that they could check their numbers and words for accuracy.

When the designs were complete, the students were ready to begin production of their coins. Each student was given a cardboard base, approximately 25cm in diameter, and a small block of plasticine clay (non-hardening modeling clay). On the cardboard, they drew their historic symbols and blocked out their reversed dates and country names. They then took the clay and rolled out long, thin coils that they pressed down firmly over the pencil lines. The thickness of the coils varied slightly with the amount of detail in each image.

When they had covered all the lines, they each cut a long strip of cardboard to go around the circumference of the coin. This was covered with plasticine clay and securely taped down around the edge of the coin. This would serve as the barricade that would stop the advancement of the plaster. A small piece of drinking straw was also placed near the top to create a hole with which the finished coins could be hung for display.

The students anxiously brought their templates forward and watched as I poured in the plaster mixture until each coin was approximately 1.5 to 2cm thick. Students nervously waited to see if their barricade would hold back the advancing plaster. Some leaked, and plaster flowed out onto the table, but quick-acting, strategic-minded students took whatever measures were necessary to stop the tide of leaking plaster. All of the coins were poured, and they sat and dried over the weekend.

On Monday morning, the arriving students went straight for their coins. We all wanted to see what had happened with them. The cardboard and plasticine easily peeled away from the coins, and the results were fabulous. For the final stage, the students decided whether to spray paint their coin silver or gold, or brush on a bronze acrylic. Paint enhanced the images even more, and the results were thrilling to see.

The coins were hung up along with the class time line for history, while some were displayed on a table during the school open house. Included with the students' wall-mounted coins were their historical "proclamations," recounting the events of their time periods. These were given an aged appearance by dunking rice paper into a heavily diluted mixture of food dye and water. The resulting projects were outstanding and very eye-catching.

This project was a tremendous success and a lot of fun to do. Next year we may even add a bit of texture to the plasticine clay images before pouring. I'm certain many students from this year's class will return to see next year's results and share their tips for avoiding and handling plaster leaks.

MATERIALS

- * Rigid cardboard (about 8 1/2" x 11")
- * One small block of plasticine clay per student
- * 2-3 cups plaster of paris per student
- * Masking tape
- * Cut-up straws (approx. 2 inches long)
- * Small sticks, old pens or pencils (for removing plasticine from molds)

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