Secrets of Great Coin Photography



It isn’t necessary to spend thousands to capture images of you coins. However, don’t fool yourself. In photography, the more you spend, the more you get. The “more” may just be more bells and whistles.

But most likely, the “more” will be in the optics. The cheaper lenses do not produce as sharp an image especially along the peripheries. It will perform poorly in tougher lighting situations. The general rule here is the more light that gets through the lens, the better the depth of focus. Better light will result in crisper images up close. The better the lens, the more light it lets through.

The body of a lower priced camera will not have the options and “gadgets” that the more expensive models may include. If you are looking for a new digital camera, there are lots of options to choose from.

The expensive models will produce better resolution and have a wider range of file types and sizes to choose from. You will get better results with cameras that have interchangeable lenses. You should outfit these cameras with a good quality macro lens (macro zooms are adequate, I suggest splurging on a dedicated macro lens).

If you’re using an “all in one” point and shoot camera, you’ll still be able to get great images. However, a macro setting is a must. The macro setting is usually a flower icon. You may want to consult your owner’s manual.

If you are planning to image coins sealed in third party holders (or slabs), consider this plastic an additional

“lens”. Before you photograph your coins, be sure that you’ve cleaned the holder to the best of your ability.

Fingerprints and sticker glue will fog the holder. Many holders develop scratches on the surfaces from handling and contact with other holders. These will show-up in high quality images. Some of this can be removed or at least masked using a variety of plastic cleaners and polish.

The heavier scuffs may need a light polishing with the aid of a small power craft tool fitted with a polishing wheel. Practice this before ruining a holder on a prized possession.

You’ll need to stabilize the lens and camera. Trying to achieve anything of quality with a handheld camera is futile. A simple inexpensive tripod at the corner or a low table works as well as a professional photo stand. Remember position your camera where you’ll be able to manipulate your lights, while keeping the camera stationary.



The Lighting

“Lighting is really everything in **coin photography**! Poor light will produce poor results,” explains Anthony Allen Anderson, VP of Sales and Marketing at GSI Exchange in Calabasas, California. There are several ways in which lighting directly affect your images.

Your lighting scheme, the number and how the light is angled at you coin will impact your images. The intensity and color of your bulbs play into the final image. And any lighting adjustments, like the f/stop used by your camera determine the appearance of your coins surfaces and quality of your photograph.

Different light bulbs put off different hues, or different bands of the light spectrum. The result is when using

incandescent lights your “white” coins can take on a yellow or golden tint. Florescent lights will offer a green tinge and even the “full spectrum” lighting can give off a blue hue.

Special bulbs can be obtained from your local photography outlet, and while they cost more than your standard bulbs, the light is balanced and you’ll get truer colors with less tinkering.

Most cameras have some sort of lighting adjustments. Many of these are based on you light source. You can let the camera adjustment the color from using a non-photo bulb. The results here will be acceptable, but may require a few trials until you get results that work for you.



If using florescent bulbs, you may want them to heat up before shooting. Doing so will provide you with more consistent results. A good rule of thumb is to shoot in brackets. To bracket you’ll simply shoot the same coin with similar lighting, but different camera settings (or, same settings, different light). Take notes and compare results.

No single lighting set up works for all coins, different coins require different set ups. Collectors have learned the same coin looks different in different light. Viewed in daylight a coin looks completely different than when viewed in a dark room with a pinpoint light source.

Ideally, you want control over all lighting sources in the photo area. Shoot in a darker room, using two to three continuous lights outfitted in the best bulbs you care to buy. Position them in a manner to best accentuate the qualities you want to highlight (i.e. cameo contrast, spectacular color, blazing luster, etc.).

Start with one high upper light set pointing down from the lens, and use one or two “highlighting” lamps angled at the

coin, from either or both sides.

Try to fill your frame with the coin image. The larger the coin appears in your view finder the more “meat” or resolution likely available in your image file. Small images intended for the web don’t need to be more than 75 dpi.

But, use the camera setting that allows the fewest number or images for best quality. Move the camera as close to your coin as possible when shooting. The distance from the coin and the angle in which it is shot will have major implications to the quality of image produced. This has to do with the lighting set up, but also with the surfaces of the particular coin.

The Luster In Coin Photography

By nature of striking characteristics, proof and mint state coins have different surface qualities that reflect light back in different ways. Proof coins usually have frosty devices juxtaposed to highly reflective fields. The light bounces off each completely differently.

Different lighting set ups will produce images that show the reflective fields as bright white, or in dark contrast to the devices.

Some mint state coins, such as those offered by the United States Mint, can have proof like qualities, but most exhibit luster across the entire surface of a coin. The coin will react to lighting based on this luster.

Understanding which type of luster you’re looking at will determine your image results. For example, understanding the cartwheel luster of a Morgan dollar may require a different set up than, the same grade Peace Dollar which exhibits a bit more matte finish.

Both coins are the same size, same metal, same color, but the lighting needs to be different to achieve quality results. And

to accentuate the qualities that make the coin attractive.

Some coins look good in a variety of set ups, and user preference will have to prevail. Some like to see proof coins as black and white cameos. Others prefer to see the mirror surfaces as white fields. Many auction companies have gone to showing the mirrored fields as half white, and half black.

This can be achieved by tilting the coin, and holding a white or black card up until the reflection of it is detected by the camera. A little playing around and you'll be able to reproduce this affect.

Color on coins can be difficult to capture. Most toned coins exhibit different arrays of color, a palette that changes when the coin is tilted. If you are photographing toned coins, you should try multiple lighting set ups.

Sometimes simple rotating the coin and reshooting will produce slightly different color arrays. Many professionals prop the edge of the coin holder up. This tilt will help highlight iridescent colors or cameo contrasts that don't appear in your image when the coin is parallel to the lens.

Position the coin so that the glare from your lighting is just off the coin surfaces. It is important here to mention a polarizing filter. If you're outfitted with an interchangeable lens you will want to invest in a good quality polarizing filter. This filter will help the camera automatically remove some of the glare off the lighting on your slabs.