



TEACHER LESSON PLAN

Small Works of Power

Grades 5–8 • Art • Portrait, symbol and inscription

James Tissot (1836–1902), Brooklyn Museum

THE 45 MINUTES

5 min
HOOK

12 min
LOOK AND TEACH

23 min
DESIGN

5 min
SHARE

BY THE END OF THIS LESSON

You will be able to:

- 1 name the three things a coin designer works with: portrait, symbol and inscription
- 2 explain how the coins of the New Testament used them to declare power and belief
- 3 design a coin, front and back, that says something on purpose
- 4 **GO DEEPER** read the clues that give a fake coin away, and explain what causes them

WHY THIS MATTERS Coins, flags and logos all speak before anyone reads a word. Seeing how a design makes its claim lets you read every image that asks for your attention, and make your own say what you mean.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

What students will understand

Students will read a coin as a work of art that carries a message. They will identify the three elements a coin designer works with — **portrait**, **symbol** and **inscription** — and explain how the coins of the New Testament used them to declare power and belief: an emperor's face, a pagan god, symbols chosen because a face was forbidden, and symbols chosen to provoke. They will learn how a coin was struck, read the clues that expose a fake, and design a coin of their own that says something on purpose.

SKILLS AND THEMES

- **Visual literacy** — reading image, symbol and text together as one message
- **Design** — composing inside a circle; letters as part of the design; front and back as a pair
- **Materials and process** — relief, the struck coin, and how casting and false dies betray themselves
- **Art and faith** — why Jewish law forbade human images on coins, and how sacred art tells a story

MATERIALS NEEDED

- The coin images on page 3, projected or printed; the exhibition online if you have a screen
- Any coin from a student's pocket or purse, and a magnifying glass if you have one
- Pencils and fine black pens; differentiated handouts, one per student

HOOK · 5 MINUTES

The smallest public artwork

Hand a coin to a student and ask the class: “*Who designed this? What did they choose to put on it, and what did they leave off? Who is it trying to impress?*” Then: “*Two thousand years ago, people in Jerusalem carried coins that made claims about gods and emperors. Some designs were chosen to cause offense. Today we read them as artists.*”

LOOK AND TEACH · 12 MINUTES

Four design choices

A ruler’s face. Show the Tribute Penny (a museum-quality replica). One side carries the face of the emperor Tiberius; the other reads PONTIF MAXIM — *High Priest*. The portrait says *this man rules*; the inscription claims religious authority too. Point out how the letters run around the rim and frame the image.

A god’s face. Show the Shekel of Tyre (also a replica). Its face is the pagan god Melqart. The Temple accepted only this coin for its tax because its silver was so pure: the purity of the metal overrode the offensiveness of the image.

No face at all. Show Herod the Great’s prutah. Herod’s coins carry no human image, because Jewish law forbade it. His designers had to say *king* with symbols alone.

Symbols that provoke. Show Pontius Pilate’s prutah, minted in 29/30 AD. A simpulum, a Roman libation ladle, on one side; three bound ears of grain on the other. The exhibition calls both deliberately provocative pagan symbols on Jewish coinage. A symbol can be as loud as a face.

How a coin is made. A genuine ancient coin was struck between two dies, one for each side. Striking leaves crisp detail and die-stress lines; two thousand years of handling soften the high points evenly. Forgers struggle to fake those marks — which is how experts catch them (page 3).

DESIGN · 23 MINUTES

Students choose a handout. All three levels look at real coins, then design a coin of their own, front and back.

GREEN LEVEL MORE SUPPORT

Label the portrait, symbol and inscription on the Tribute Penny and on Pilate’s prutah, match three words to their meanings, then design a coin with a picture on the front and words on the back.

YELLOW LEVEL GRADE LEVEL

Compare Herod the Great’s coin, which has no face, with the Tribute Penny, which does. Explain what each design says about its ruler, then design a coin with **no face** whose symbols carry a message.

RED LEVEL GO DEEPER

Analyze how three coins communicate power and belief, critique a sand-cast fake from *Real or Replica?* by its visual clues, then design a coin and write an artist’s rationale for every choice.

SHARE · 5 MINUTES

Lay the designs out as a gallery. Each student points to one choice on a classmate’s coin and says what message it sends. Close with the question the coins keep asking: *what is the smallest thing you could make that would still say who you are?*

Put the objectives back on the screen, asked as questions: “*Can you now...?*” For each one, students show a thumb up, sideways or down. Ask one student to answer each aloud; for the last, ask a Red Level reader.

MINI MUSEUM CONNECTION

Visit the exhibition: the four coins of this lesson sit in Cases 6 and 7, each with a magnified view of both sides. Then play *Real or Replica?* — five pairs of ancient coins, one genuine and one fake. All of it is online too.

minimuseumproject.org/exhibitions/in-their-hands

SHOW YOUR CLASS

Design elements, up close

Project or print this page for *Look and teach*, or take it to Cases 6 and 7. The Tribute Penny and the Shekel of Tyre are museum-quality replicas; Herod's and Pilate's coins are genuine.



FROM REAL OR REPLICA?

How a fake gives itself away

HOW THE FAKE WAS MADE

Casting — molten metal poured into a mold of a real coin

Sand casting — a real coin pressed into fine sand to make the mold

Die transfer — a mold from a genuine die, struck on a new blank

False dies — hand-engraved copies of the original dies

Modern reproduction — a widow's mite made new

THE VISUAL CLUE

An unnaturally uniform surface; no die-stress lines; small bubbles; softer detail, like the blurred feathers on the fake owl

A grainy, soft surface; mushy hair on the portrait; a different edge; patina sitting on the surface

Flatter and grayer; details lack the sharpness of the original strike

Artificial wear from a tumbler or sandpaper instead of high points softened evenly

Too clean, too symmetrical; a genuine lepton is crude and off-center

QUESTIONS TO ASK IN FRONT OF THE CASE

- Cover the inscription on the Tribute Penny with your thumb. What does the coin still say? What does it lose?
- Herod's designers could not use a face. If you had to say *king* without a face, what would you draw?
- Why might a ladle or three ears of grain offend more than an emperor's portrait?
- The Temple accepted a coin with a pagan god on it because its silver was pure. What does that tell you about how people valued the image and the metal?

VISUAL STORYTELLING

The Gospel Timeline sets each of the eleven coins beside its scripture passage and a painting. Nine of the paintings are by James Tissot (1836–1902). Ask students how a painting tells a story over a whole wall while a coin must say everything inside one small circle — and which one they would trust more as evidence.

CROSS-CURRICULAR AND ASSESSMENT NOTES

- **Religion:** Matthew 22:15–22 — “*Whose image is this? And whose inscription?*”; Exodus 20:4, the commandment against carved images
- **Social Studies:** the coins show who governed — emperor, client king, prefect
- **Science:** patina, alloy and wear as evidence of age
- **Assessment:** the coin design and its explanation; an exit ticket — “*Name one choice on your coin and the message it sends.*”