

The Marvin Tameanko Contest

Paul O. – age 17 – Jt Senior Winner

School Ref # 03 – Lexington Catholic High School in KY

Depictions of the Colosseum on Roman Coins

The Colosseum, the most glorious and well-known edifice constructed by the Romans, inspired awe among the ancients nearly two thousand years ago. The engineering feats of the Colosseum's concrete foundations, travertine piers, and tufa walls on the lower stories topped by brick-faced concrete on the upper levels have enabled it to survive through the centuries. Known to the Romans as the Flavian Amphitheater, the great arena held up to fifty thousand spectators. As a way to commemorate, celebrate, and promote the Colosseum to the ends of the Empire, various emperors issued coins at least three times during the first three hundred years of its existence.

In 72 A.D. the Emperor Vespasian began the construction of the Colosseum, a lavish gift for the Roman people in a location which Nero had previously used for the lake of his private gardens. Vespasian never lived to see the Colosseum finished, but his son Titus dedicated the stadium in 80 A.D., though unfinished, with one hundred days of games. Titus issued a sestertius commemorating the dedication of the Colosseum. The artist of this design showed the entire exterior of the Colosseum and most of its interior using what almost seems like an aerial view. To the left of the stadium rests the Meta Sudans fountain while a two-storied portico is located to the right.



This sestertius of Titus, issued in 80 A.D., is actually a very detailed representation of the real Colosseum. The heads of the spectators can be seen in the cavea, or seating area. The horizontal divisions for the separate classes and vertical divisions created by the staircases hint of the eighty supporting walls that radiated from the arena. The imperial throne is the semicircular shape (indicated by the yellow box

above) with the emperor being the single dot inside. The emperor's presence at the games of the Colosseum strengthened its importance and its popularity. The artist's magnificent representation of the Colosseum must have inspired awe and wonder in any Roman who saw the coin. As a result, this coin probably attracted a great number of new spectators to the Colosseum, or at least aided the imaginations of people of the Empire who would never travel to Rome. The meticulous style of the artist to include even the statues under the many arches, to detail the columns, and to portray the structure at the top of the Colosseum which held an awning, make clear Titus' attempt to promote the architectural wonders of the Flavian Amphitheater and its grandeur. The accuracy and completeness of Titus' sestertius voice the common Roman admiration for the Colosseum.

Domitian, the brother of Titus, completed the Colosseum and celebrated with gladiator and animal fights. However, lightning struck the Colosseum in 217 A.D., resulting in the closure of the stadium for almost six years. Severus Alexander reopened the Colosseum in 223 A.D. and instituted a series of coins in bronze, silver, and gold. The sestertius of Severus Alexander depicts the Colosseum similarly to Titus' image, again featuring the Colosseum between the Meta Sudans on the left and a portico on the right.



The Colosseum itself bears many resemblances to Titus': both coins have a similar view displaying the entire exterior and most of the interior, the size of the Colosseum in relation to the rest of the coin, and the position of the Colosseum in the middle of the coin. The Romans' great respect for their Flavian Amphitheater was the reason for its longevity and mark on the empire. The Colosseum incessantly survived any major change to its structure during its existence, and the Romans seemed proud of this. The artwork of this coin drifts little from the original just as the Colosseum at the time of Severus Alexander had drifted little from its original state.

A large-scale restoration of the Colosseum was started by Elagabalus and completed by the emperor Gordian III in 244 A.D. Gordian III issued medallions that contained an image of an elephant with a rider fighting a bull. On this coin a statue of Apollo stands to the left of the Colosseum and a temple to the right.



The obverse of this coin shows the emperor Gordian III in armor watching the event, but its reverse has a very active drawing. Though architectural elements are still present, this coin draws attention to the events inside the Colosseum. The elephant, its rider, and their enemy bull are the focus of this coin as they are positioned in the center of the whole coin. Also, being surrounded by the walls of the Colosseum makes them more prominent on the reverse of this coin. The symmetry of the architecture on this coin provides a frame for the action created in the center. This depiction of the Colosseum successfully displays the great activity and liveliness of the Colosseum at this time.

The architecture of Rome is truly unique and has endured through time. The most famous and remarkable of Roman architecture, the Colosseum, though antiquated now, was at its prime two thousand years ago. This peak of its history was captured through the coinage of the Roman Empire. Much knowledge of the past can be gained through the study of ancient coins. In seeing what was depicted on these coins one can understand what the ancients took pride in, what inspired them, and what they set out to accomplish. A seemingly insignificant object such as a coin truly can prolong the existence of an ancient culture far through time.

Sources:

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All coin images come from the above website which credits them to Luciani *Il Colosseo*.

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