

While coinage "may have been a major force in helping to advance civilization," as one numismatic authority claims, coins are a pain when you return home from overseas with a jingling pocketful of foreign metal. ☉ I stare balefully at my small collection gathered over the years and would gladly toss them into the nearest fountain, but I know that instead of having a wish granted, I would probably be arrested for desecrating public property. Instead I drop the coins into the most convenient desk drawer where they absolutely refuse to multiply. ☉ Have you ever seen departing tourists at an airport trying to get rid of their last few coins? Yes, the money changer will gladly take paper, but you're stuck with the hard metal. So, the desperate homebound voyager rushes about, trying to come out even with a candy bar, a miniature bottle of the local joy juice or a letter opener in the shape of a dagger. ☉ It's all a plot on the part of the local bank, the duty-free shop, and the minister of finance that you will never come out even. No matter what, you will arrive home with a fistful of strange looking stuff. ☉ I have round coins, square coins, scalloped coins, coins with holes in the middle and coins so small that they snag the threads in trouser pockets. I have coins with engravings of great national heroes and some who have fallen into disrepute or worse since the date of issue. Other coins glorify native habitats and wildlife, such as the polar bear on Greenland currency, the kangaroo on Australian coins, the hammer and sickle (naturally) on those from the Soviet Union. ☉ I'm envious of the Near Eastern belly dancers who are said to have sewn patrons' tips of silver and gold on their costumes. Later the money became part of their dowry. Once married, their public wiggling was over. ☉ I'm also glad that I never received as change that Swedish 10-dollar plate that weighed 44 pounds and measured 14 by 24 inches and was one-half inch thick. Actually, it was reported to be worth two cows. I haven't even got room for a small calf. ☉ According to one expert, coinage goes back 25 centuries. It's supposed to be "a miniature mirror of the story of mankind. Coins have served as mini-newspapers, art objects, and even sources of propaganda." But can you imagine a Roman legionnaire in Gaul offering an Emperor Octavius coin in exchange for a fancy spear and the native quizzically asking, "What's that?" At least almost everyone everywhere recognizes the U.S. dollar. ☉ The only thing my collection is good for is to remind me of places and events, such as the memory associated with the 100-yen coin I picked up at the 1970 Osaka World's Fair. It was a blistering August day—the same day that 800,000 Japanese had decided it was an appropriate time to visit the fair. Have you even been in the midst of 800,000 people whose main ambition is to get their souvenir books stamped at foreign pavilions? I'd rather be in the Calgary Stampede. ☉ The Greek drachma calls to mind the fee for climbing the steps to the acropolis in Athens. No one warned me it was a low-cost stress test to make it to the Parthenon. I was having second thoughts until I saw a fellow on crutches painfully pulling himself up step by step to see this wonder of the ancient world. I thought, If that poor man can do it on crutches, then I, with two intact legs, can do it too. I did. ☉ The Soviets, who normally trust no one, do have an honor system on their public buses. A passenger puts a five-kopeck coin in the fare box and takes a slip of paper. No one collects it. There is always the possibility that an inspector may board the bus and ask to see the slip, but I never had such an experience. Thus, I have accumulated several five-kopeck pieces. ☉ The English shilling? Well, the less said about it these days the better. ☉ In any foreign business transaction it's not always easy to make rapid calculations. Money converters work for major dealings, such as a hotel bill or merchandise purchase, but they never help when one is trying to pay a harried taxi driver or overworked waitress. My method, known as the Trust or Bust Method, is to extend a handful of coins and let them help themselves. Thus far I haven't gone broke. Taken advantage of? Perhaps. Broke? No. ☉ Periodically I go through my foreign treasure trove and wonder what to do with it. I hate to toss it out—on the flimsy pretext that some day I might return to the country of origin and a coin at the right moment may help to avert a crisis, even if it's only worth two cents. I also have to consider that by the end of a return visit I will have accumulated more strange metal. The process is self-defeating. ☉ Obviously the coins are metallic symbols of a well-traveled past, but they are beginning to get mixed in with my monthly bills. At my spouse's suggestion I have turned the collection over to a neighbor's son. He's delighted. Perhaps the coins will stimulate an interest in geography, history and metallurgy. If so, the coins will have far surpassed their actual monetary value—a grand total of \$3.53! _Ray Kovitz ☉ ☉ ☉ RAY KOVITZ,
thought he'd empty his pockets at EXPO 86 this summer, but came home loaded down with Canadian coins instead.