



STORY BY PETRA STOCK

National treasure

As small coins disappear from daily use, we reflect on their unique Australian designs and remember Stuart Devlin, the man responsible for these remarkable works of art.



Stuart Devlin draws a 20c coin while being filmed for the UK's Pathé News.

► The echidna on the 5c, lyrebird on the 10c and platypus on the 20c coins were part of the original family of decimal currency featuring Aussie critters.



“IN COME THE DOLLARS, in come the cents,” sang the animated Dollar Bill to the tune of the traditional Aussie bush ballad “Click Go the Shears”. The year was 1966, and the jingle was part of an extensive advertising campaign preparing Australians for the introduction of decimal currency on 14 February – a date dubbed C-Day, or Conversion Day.

Today’s version might be more like “out go the dollars, out go the cents”. Contactless payments by cards, phones or digital watches have largely replaced physical currency, so much so that Ross MacDiarmid, former CEO of the Royal Australian Mint, has predicted the “graceful death” of 5c and 10c pieces within the next 10 years.

Although the global pandemic has hastened the decline of coins and accelerated the rise of contactless transactions, the demand for coins had fallen steeply even before COVID, with the number of 5c and 10c coins minted annually sliding from about half a billion in 2006 to 64 million in 2019.

I’ve always loved the ‘tails’ of Australian coins, the way the native creatures curl, swim and unfurl on bronze and copper-nickel surfaces. In 1990, when the 1c and 2c coins were set to be withdrawn from circulation, 10-year-old me stashed away \$2.57, crammed into a green-and-gold Commonwealth Bank money box. Given Ross MacDiarmid’s comments, it seems a new hoard of 5c and 10c coins is in order.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA calls the switch to decimal currency a defining moment for the country. The decimal coins’ designer, Stuart Devlin, would go on to become what the Design Institute of Australia considers to be one of our most noted artisans. So, with the small silvers soon disappearing from daily use – and no longer accumulating in pockets, purses or jars by the front door – it’s timely to reflect on the significance of the shift in 1966, and the design legacy of the coins’ uniquely Australian ‘tails’.

If you look closely, you’ll find Stuart Devlin’s initials etched on each coin – below the echidna’s bottom, behind the lyrebird’s foot and contained within a platypus ripple. Geelong-born Stuart was one of six artists commissioned to prepare alternative coin designs. Despite being some 15 years younger than his competitors, his designs featuring Australian wildlife were ultimately chosen.

Australia’s decimal coins have endured for more than 50 years, retaining their size, composition and wildlife designs. Initially, a feathertail glider (1c), frill-necked lizard (2c), echidna (5c), lyrebird (10c) and platypus (20c) made up a family of Aussie critters, linking to the emu and kangaroo on the 50c coat of arms. The \$1 with a mob of roos was added later in 1984 (see image previous page).

In the meantime, other countries made their coinage smaller and lighter to save costs. New Zealand, for

A brief history of Australia’s coins



1800

NSW Governor Captain Philip Gidley King declares 10 international coins official currency on 19 November 1800. Indigenous peoples used bartering and First Fleeters previously had no need for money.



1813

By punching holes in 40,000 Spanish coins, convicted forger William Henshall, employed by Governor Macquarie, creates two coins. The outer rings became ‘holey dollars’; the inner circles find new lives as ‘dumps’.



1825

Australia receives an injection of coins from Britain, worth £30,000, when the Sterling Silver Money Act is passed by the British government and the pound becomes the only legal currency in Australia.



1855

Sovereigns go into production at the new Sydney Mint, a branch of The Royal Mint in London. Other branches open in Melbourne (1872) and Perth (1899), which is the only one still operating today.



1910

At last, our own national coins are struck, modelled on the British system of pounds, shillings and pence. The need for an Australian currency had been raised following Federation in 1901.



Decimal currency posters and manuals were distributed to schools as part of a public education program.



◀ The animated Dollar Bill was the face of the decimal currency advertising campaign.

“In come the dollars, in come the cents,” sang Dollar Bill.

example, dropped its 5c and reduced the size and weight of its 10c, 20c and 50c pieces in 2006.

Ian Wong, an expert in the history of industrial design at Monash University in Melbourne, says coins from other countries don't possess the same sparkle and lustre as Stuart's. It's work that Ian describes as “extraordinary in its beauty”. “I look at the platypus and I can hear the magpies and feel myself on the Yarra River, looking at the flowing water... it puts me there,” he says.

Ian says Stuart's design prowess deserves national recognition akin to that of sporting legends such as Donald Bradman. The coins capture a sense of shared national pride in a way the Australian flag doesn't, he says, noting, “I can't think of another individual whose work has been part of Australian life as much as [Stuart's].”

Stuart took a modern approach to the traditional task of coin design, Ian elaborates. Signature elements include the emphasis on line and form, the placement of the numeral and dramatic elements, and depiction of the “essential character” of each animal. Stuart's echidna presents as a

“cuddly, gorgeous sort of vulnerable animal” instead of highlighting its spikes or aggression, Ian says. Furthermore, every aspect of the designs belong to Stuart – from concept and initial drawings to physical plasters.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR the designs was almost universal, according to Selwyn Cornish, the Reserve Bank's official historian. When announcing the winning designs in 1964, the then treasurer, Harold Holt, praised Stuart's “remarkable job in adapting his designs to suit the circular metal shapes of the coins”.

Having sat on the Reserve Bank's Design Advisory Panel for Australian banknotes, Professor Angela Woollacott, the Australian National University's Manning Clark Professor of History, is familiar with currency design choices. She says Australia's decimal coinage was conceived in the '60s amid a period of “cultural nationalism”. Stuart's wildlife designs reflected the broader cultural and social shift away from Britain, and increasing interest in Australia, its landscape, and its flora and fauna. ▶

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1937

A design change is made to Australia's threepence; the coat of arms was replaced by three stalks of wheat. The penny and halfpenny follow in 1938 and '39, with a kangaroo featured on both coins.



1966

On 14 February, Australia converts to decimal currency. Operation Fastback sees the distribution of 600 million coins (worth \$24 million) from Australian and London mints to all state depots and bank branches.



1969

The dodecagonal (12-sided) 50c coin is introduced, replacing the circular coin which was too easily mistaken for the 20c coin. Approximately 14 million 50c coins are produced in that year.



1984

The paper \$1 note is replaced by the \$1 coin. In 1988 the paper \$2 is also replaced by a coin. There is also a one-off issue of 3 million \$5 coins to mark the opening of the new Parliament House.



1992

The 1c and 2c coins are withdrawn from circulation. Cash payments are rounded to the nearest 5c. It was due to the loss of purchasing power through inflation and the cost of minting the coins.



2015

The 50th birthday of the Royal Australian Mint. The Mint, which has the capacity to produce 2 million coins per day, also makes commemorative coins such as this Remembrance Day \$2 released in 2012.



◀ **Stuart Devlin**, who died in 2018, is seen here still hard at work at age 78, carving one of four £1 coins for The Royal Mint in London in 2009.

Stuart Devlin went on to become goldsmith and jeweller to the Queen.

the study and collection of currencies), says the anticipation of currency changes such as the lead-up to C-day heightened interest in coins and numismatic clubs. Indeed, in the lead up to C-day in 1966, a letter in *The Australian Women's Weekly* documented thousands attending a coin exhibition at Melbourne's Town Hall and the first publication of the magazine *The Australian Coin Review*. Darren anticipates a similar surge with the coming demise of 5c and 10c coins. Despite being an avid coin and medal collector, he isn't sentimental about the coins' departure. "I stopped using cash quite a while ago," he says, explaining that he now pays for most things using his Apple Watch.

Darren says 5c coins dated 1972, which are a relative rarity because fewer were minted that year, are sought after. Collectors often go "noodling" for such coins, he says. They "get a big bag of change" from a bank and "put it on the desk and rifle through it looking for key dates". Although the Queen's effigy for the

'heads' side was initially designed by British artist Arnold Machin, Darren says it's Stuart's 'tails' that make Australian coins identifiable and distinct.

AFTER DESIGNING AUSTRALIA'S decimal coins, Stuart Devlin moved to the UK, where he designed coins for more than 30 countries and went on to become goldsmith and jeweller to the Queen, until his death in 2018.

When the 5c and 10c pieces go, the greater part of Stuart's iconic Australian coin designs will have disappeared from daily use. For some, their imminent loss may provoke a sense of nostalgia for piggy-bank savings, crayon rubbings and 10c worth of lollies from the corner shop. Stuart is unlikely to have shared such sentiments. His widow, Carole, says although Stuart was proud of the coins and their long circulation run, he was always "looking forward". For example, he was early to embrace the use of computer-aided design.

And yet, with dwindling coin use and the imminent departure of the echidnas and lyrebirds, it seems vital that Stuart's legacy be remembered. One way to pay tribute would be to remember his core design principles: "That the future is more important than the past. That skill is fundamental. That creativity is paramount. And the justification for being a goldsmith is to enrich the way we live and work." But then you could also just hold on to a stash of silvery small change. **AG**

It's notable, also, that the introduction of decimal currency coincided with the beginning of the post-Menzies era. The nation's longest serving prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies, retired from office on 26 January 1966, handing the baton to Harold Holt. This was a time of post-war prosperity and growing national confidence, as well as shifting social attitudes and civil rights movements, including anti-war, women's equality and Aboriginal rights campaigns.

Stuart Devlin was part of a burgeoning local design scene and growing Australian sensibility among artists, musicians, writers and filmmakers. In exhibits for Expo 67 in Montreal, pre-eminent Australian architect Robin Boyd included Stuart's coins and cutlery alongside chairs by acclaimed designers Grant and Mary Featherston and a model of the Parkes Radio Telescope. Boyd chose these exhibits to represent "the best in Australian design and manufacture in arts, crafts and industry". Expo 67 was the first world fair with a dedicated Australian pavilion, and satellite television broadcast the event live to audiences at home, with performances by The Seekers and Normie Rowe.

During the decimal currency roll-out the sense of national pride extended to the distribution of 600 million coins (worth \$24 million) from the London and Australian mints to state depots and bank branches. Code-named Fastbuck, the operation was achieved "without major incident or the loss of so much as a single coin", reported the Decimal Currency Board. In tandem with the television ads and the catchy jingle, 11 million leaflets were distributed to schoolchildren, along with posters and manuals for teachers, and booklets and conversion tables for the public.

Darren Burgess, secretary and past president of the Numismatic Association of Victoria (which encourages

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