Critical Report: Curating the Holst Family Coin Collection

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1. Process of Collecting, Digitising, and Datafying

The project began with the Holst Family Coin Collection of 75 coins. Each coin was systematically photographed on both sides with a OnePlus 8T and measured (weight, diameter) using digital tools. These physical and contextual details (monarch, mint, catalog reference) were entered into Google Sheets. Later on, 6 duplicates of existing coins in the collection were excluded.

The dataset was organised into 25 variables: Identification (ID, Year, Country, Monarch), Physical Attributes (Material, Weight, Size), Numismatic Details (Mint, Rarity, Reference), and Collection Management (Condition, Current Worth). This process transformed the heterogeneous objects into a structured archive. By doing so, the collection became not only preserved but also reconfigured into a tool for comparative analysis.

2. Critical Reflection on Design Decisions

The choice of variables was shaped by a dual purpose: to serve both numismatic cataloguing and personal collection management. Therefore, standard identifiers like Year, Country, and Reign are essential for any coin dataset, enabling classification and historical placement. Additionally, variables like Material, Weight, and Diameter objectify the coins through measurable, quantitative properties, aligning with traditional numismatic practice.

The decision to include a subjective "Condition" grade creates a limit to the collector's personal perception. Furthermore, sensory experiences like the coin's "feel" or the detailed historical narrative behind a design change (e.g., the shift from silver to aluminium bronze in Danish coins post-WWI) were lost, as they resist easy quantification into spreadsheet cells. More significantly, ‘Mintage Quantity’ was excluded; a key variable for objectively assessing rarity. Instead, rarity was approximated using Numista.com’s 0 - 100 index, where 0 denotes common and 100 denotes extremely rare.

3. How Decisions Shaped the Dataset

These design decisions fundamentally shaped the resulting knowledge. The tabular, quantitative structure of the spreadsheet makes comparative analysis exceptionally efficient. One can instantly filter all coins from Margrethe II's reign or sort by weight to see material changes over time.

However, this structure also flattens the objects. The coin as a holistic historical artifact is fragmented into discrete cells. The rich, contextual stories behind the coins; why a particular motif was chosen, the economic conditions influencing a metal change, are silenced in favour of comparable data points. The dataset hereby becomes limited to the grid, as discussed by Dourish (2017). The grid is defined as an "anticipatory" structure that dictates what information is relevant. By choosing variables like "Current Worth," the dataset is framed through a collector/market lens, elevating economic value as a key metric of importance. The omissions create a silence, limiting the dataset's utility for deep numismatic research and making it reliant on external catalog references (KM#, Schön#) for authority.

4. Connection to Course Theories and Concepts

First, the very act of datafication resonates with the concept that "raw data is an oxymoron" (Gitelman & Jackson, 2013). The coins themselves are not data. They become data only through a series of deliberate, "cooking" processes: selecting which coins to include (excluding duplicates), choosing which attributes to measure, and defining categories like "Colour" (Silver, Golden) or "Condition." Each variable represents a choice about what is worth capturing, transforming the messy reality of physical objects into a clean, structured dataset. This dataset is not a neutral reflection of the collection but a constructed representation shaped by my decisions, tools, and purposes.

Second, the design decisions exemplify the power and limitations of quantification (Wernimont, 2021). Quantification is an agential practice that makes the world manageable and comparable. By turning traits like material composition and size into numbers and labels, the coins were digitized for sorting, filtering, and analysis; the core functions of a spreadsheet. Yet Wernimont argues that quantification is not merely descriptive, but also world-making. The inability to capture a coin's historical narrative or aesthetic appeal means these aspects are excluded from the dataset's 'official' knowledge, showing how quantification empowers some forms of knowledge while marginalizing others.

In conclusion, curating the coin collection into a dataset was an exercise in knowledge creation, not mere transcription. The resulting spreadsheet is a powerful tool for specific queries, but is also a product of specific curatorial choices that highlight certain truths while silencing others.

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