

# Morgan Proofs and Specimens

*Many collectors are enamored with these special, limited-mintage issues struck by branch mints.*



ROOF AND SPECIMEN examples of Morgan dollars struck by branch mints are among the most desirable and sought-after coins of the series. These pieces display bold detail for the date, although weak strikes are acceptable on those issues that typically are not sharp. Proof and specimen examples exhibit square or wire rims because of the extra pressure put on the planchet during the striking process. Since the U.S. Mint did not dump these Morgans into sacks following their manufacture, they are devoid of bagmarks, although other damage can be present. Such coins should exhibit deeply reflective proof fields (a result of the specially polished planchets and polished dies). Lastly, all the coins have mintmarks.

A lack of any one of these characteristics does not disqualify a coin from being a proof or specimen, but the absence of several certainly puts the coin in question. Keep in mind that the equipment at the branch mints was inferior to that at the Philadelphia Mint; consequently, their products tended to be of lesser quality.

This brings up another challenge. As professional numismatist Andrew Lustig points out, there virtually is no way even an expert can distinguish specimen coins from branch mint proofs; as such, there is no practical reason to differentiate them in this discussion.

Let's look at the 19 issues reported to date by a variety of sources, keeping in mind the general absence of "reliable" or "factual" information. A mintage of 12 examples is considered

"common"; interestingly, fewer than 50 coins of all dates and branch mints have been verified:

**1878-S:** The sale of the Louis Eliasberg Sr. Collection (1996-97) featured an engraved presentation piece. A similar coin—without engraving—was offered as part of the Samuel Mills Damon Collection (March 2006); both are ultra rare. The Damon specimen is listed as VAM-58 in the *Comprehensive Catalog and Encyclopedia of Morgan and Peace Dollars* by Leroy C. Van Allen and A. George Mallis. Morgan dollar expert Michael Fey has identified the Eliasberg specimen as VAM-60.

**1879-O:** Twelve were authorized and later struck on February 20, 1879. Four were certified by Numismatic Guaranty Corporation (NGC) and six by Professional Coin Grading Service (PCGS). These likely include two reported by author Don Taxay and three by numismatist Walter Breen, one in

the Smithsonian Institution's National Numismatic Collection, and Leo Young's "finest known" coin reported by expert Wayne Miller.

**1881-O:** A lone, light-gray coin with square rims, owned by professional numismatist Kevin Lipton, was reported by Miller.

**1882-CC:** Bruce Amspacher identified a single, light-purple proof (photographed by Miller). In addition, two specimens have been certified by NGC.

**1883-CC:** One has been certified by NGC, and three by PCGS.

**1883-O:** Twelve were authorized and subsequently reported in 1884. Taxay reported only two, and Breen verified one in the Herbert Bergen Collection sold by Superior Stamp & Coin Company in 1979.

**1884-CC:** Only one—probably Art Kagin's coin reported by Breen—has been certified by NGC. However, Miller thinks two specimens exist.

**1884-O:** One specimen has been certified by NGC.

**1887-O:** Miller reported a light-blue and yellow coin once owned by Amon Carter. A second piece has been certified by NGC.

**1890-O:** Breen reports only one, in the Willis H. duPont Collection.

**1891-CC:** Some experts, including Lustig, consider this Eliasberg coin (graded Mint State-68 Prooflike by PCGS) to be a specimen or branch mint proof.

**1891-O:** Breen reported two in the Carter Collection, though Miller doubts their existence.

**1892-CC:** One was reported but unverified by Breen.

**1892-O:** One was noted in the Carter Collection, but was unverified by Breen and doubted by Miller.

**1893-CC:** Twelve were authorized,



▲ One of two 1882-CC proofs certified by NGC.

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with eight certified by NGC and eleven by PCGS. (Clearly, some pieces were authenticated by both services!) Four were known to Breen, pedigreed to John W. Garrett, Bruce Todd, Carter, and Manfra, Tordella & Brookes (MTB).

**1895-O:** Three proofs and two specimens have been certified by NGC; all look pretty much the same.

**1895-S:** Three were known to Breen, all of which are doubted by Miller.

**1896-O:** One specimen has been certified by NGC.

**1921-S:** Breen reported that his mentor, Wayte Raymond, told him that 24 were authorized. Numismatic entrepreneur Farran Zerbe claimed he had a dozen made for him. Breen reported one in the American Numismatic Society's collection and one in the Chase Manhattan Bank collection. Miller conservatively suggests the existence of about five.

*berman@money.org*