

Storage Solutions for Medal Collectors (By Donald Scarinci)

High relief medals, especially 20th century medals that are made in different diameters, depths and shapes, create storage problems for collectors. Most solutions are far from ideal and the methods that medal

collectors use for storing their collections are quite creative.

Historically, coins and medals were kept in felt-lined drawers in mahogany wood cabinets. Some of these cabinets are luxurious pieces of furniture and are works of art in themselves. Cabinets today are made of wood and hard plastic and some of them are viable storage methods. Unfortunately, some woods and plastics can be harmful to metal. Cabinets also require more space than any bank safe deposit box allows.

In the 19th century, proof coins and medals were often wrapped in jeweler's tissue and stored in sulfur-free thick paper envelopes. Many old-time collectors continue this practice, or they may substitute polibags for jeweler's tissue because they are sold by numismatic suppliers. Some collectors substitute paper envelopes with clear 4 X 4 PVC-free plastic flips so they can see their medals without removing them.

Unfortunately, the lack of knowledge and the commercial unavailability of storage systems for large medals have led collectors to store their medals in flexible PVC flips. Many classic medals today have an invisible slime that impairs the medals' beauty and, if left unremoved, causes irreparable damage over time. A medal's patina or coating applied at manufacture protects the surface longer than on a coin, but eventually, PVC will damage the surface of a medal as it damages any coin. Just look at the 76mm U.S. Mint medals that are left in their original boxes and soft plastic sealed bags. That surface corrosion is not removable.

There is a preferred method recommended by most early American copper (EAC) collectors for storing United States Large Cents. It is the same preferred method recommended by most colonial coin collectors (C-4). The coin is placed in a cotton liner, which is then put inside a sulfur-free 2 X 2 paper holder. Unfortunately for medal collectors, there is no manufacturer of 4 X 4 cotton liners or 4 X 4 or larger sulfur-free thick paper envelopes.

Cardboard boxes are an even safer way to store medals if they are wrapped in jeweler's tissue and placed inside a cotton liner, as well. The boxes used by the Medallic Art Company for their Society of Medalist medals, NYU Hall of Fame medals and other products up to the late 1980's have stood the test of time. Medals stored in them have retained their originality and do not seem to have experienced any damage due to the container. Unfortunately, again, there is no manufacturer of these sulfur-free cardboard boxes, or the cotton liners required to prevent medals from banging loosely inside the box.

During the last 30 years, PVC-free hard plastic flips have become popular. Cointains and other hard plastic tight-fit holders, made in many diameters to prevent a medal from moving, are probably the safest method of storage available. These hard plastic holders include capital plastic holders, airtight holders, coin capsules and other PVC-free products.

While there is no shortage of hard plastic storage solutions for coins and medals up to 42mm, if the diameter of a medal exceeds 45mm or if it has high relief or extra thickness, the storage choices available to conservation-conscious collectors begin to narrow dramatically. Numismatic suppliers offer a hard plastic round container manufactured by Airtight Holders, but it comes in only four diameters—63 inch, 65 inch and 76 inch and 101 inch. Only the 76 inch is extra wide. This holder fits most modern U.S. Mint medals and Franklin Mint Calendar art medals perfectly. For most high relief medals, however, the depth is not adequate.

Hard plastic holders are expensive. Currently, the only hard plastic holder for high relief or large size medals is available either from Capital Plastics or NGC. Yes, the latter will authenticate and grade many medals before encapsulating them, although not all medals qualify for the service.

NGC containers, known as "slabs," are a very effective storage solution. Medals can be reviewed and encapsulated by professional

graders for less than the price of a custom Capital Plastic holder. If a collector wants to remove the medal from the holder, it is easy enough to do with a few taps of a hammer or a little pressure from a vice on the edges. But once removed, the medal cannot be placed back in the holder without returning it to NGC and paying another fee.

Capital Plastic holders have the advantage of allowing the medal to be removed by unscrewing the edges. But they may not always fit exactly right. Also, the insert holding the medal is made of hard plastic and it is sometimes difficult to pop the medal out. NGC inserts are soft plastic and the medal comes out easily, without much risk of damage by bending the plastic.

NGC has begun encapsulating medals that are larger than 45mm using their jumbo slab, sometimes referred to as the "slab on steroids." Unfortunately, this slab is much too large for most medals and requires too much storage space. It is likely that NGC will develop an intermediate size slab to better fit medals between 46mm and 80mm, the size range for most medals.

While the custom Capital Plastic holder and the NGC slab might be the optimal storage methods, they can be too expensive for most collectors and for medals which typically cost less than \$100. A custom Capital Plastic holder for a large medal might average about \$70, unless buying in bulk. The large NGC slab might cost as much as \$42 (the grading fee of \$16.50 for medals valued at under \$300, plus the jumbo slab fee of \$25). Spending this money to store objects that cost under \$100 is not something that most collectors consider to be prudent.

Many collectors choose to store their medals in 4 X 4 PVC-free plastic flips. Medals larger than 90mm create storage problems and they need to be kept in either felt pouches or in cabinet drawers. Medals less than 65mm swim in the 4 X 4 and fit better in the more standard 3 ¼ X 3 ¼ flip. Medals between 50mm and 40mm fit best in 2 ½ X 2 ½ flips.

For collectors who use PVC-free hard plastic flips, the 4 X 4 size is available only from one manufacturer, Paul Phiel at Frame-a-Coin in Madison, NJ (<http://www.frameacoin.com>). Unfortunately, no container is available for storing collections of medals in flips larger than 3 ¼ X 3 ¼, so it is necessary to find a commercial alternative. Tupperware or similar containers can be purchased to store the 4 X 4 size flips. These have the added advantage of being airtight. Inserting a packet of silica gel and some Intercept Shield material or Z-Rust products in these containers creates a fairly safe environment for long-term storage.

While PVC-free plastic flips are the most cost-effective way to store medals, it is not the safest way. Even when a medal is first placed in a PVC-free polybag or wrapped in jewelers' tissue, it can still rub against other medals and cause friction. The flip offers no protection against accidentally dropping it or moving it around too roughly.

A cost-effective uniform storage system for medals is badly needed. The system should include up to four standard size sulfur-free boxes, expandable high gauge paper, or cardboard holders with extra thick cotton liners to fit inside them. These boxes or flips should come with larger containers that can hold up to 20 medals each.

It would be interesting to compare the average medal sizes of other collections, but based on this writer's collection, the four box sizes that would be most needed are: 2 ½ X 2 ½ for medals up to 55mm; 3 ¼ X 3 ¼ (similar to the Medallion Art Company's box for the NYU Hall of Fame medal), which would hold medals from 55mm to 76mm; the 4 X 4 box for medals between 76mm and 90mm; and a 5 X 5 box for larger medals between 90mm and 120mm.

A strong argument could be made to favor expandable thick paper or cardboard flips over boxes. Medals vary in thickness as well as diameter. It is as bad for a medal to jiggle loosely in a box as it is to rub snugly against other medals. Boxes for the two larger sizes

would need to be made in half inch and one inch sizes to accommodate the thickness, the relief and the cotton liner. Cardboard flips could be made to expand to 1 inch regardless of the medal and still fit tightly if the medal has a lesser thickness. Thus, expandable high gauge paper or cardboard flips would not need to be manufactured in different diameters and could be more uniform and more cost-effective than boxes.

Whatever size, style or color is ultimately preferred and manufactured, uniformity is important. There is nothing as aesthetically unappealing as a collection stored in a mixture of containers. Unfortunately, this is the current state of our collecting area.

Recommendation:

For the best combination of ease of use and cost effectiveness in a safe storage system for medals, I recommend three sizes of expandable high gauge sulfur-free paper holders--3 1/4 X 3 1/4; 4 X 4; and 5 X 5. Cotton liners, also expandable, need to be manufactured to fit these holders, as well, so the medal can be placed in a cotton liner and inserted in a paper flip. Just about every medal should fit into one of these, even though the 45mm to 60mm medals might float a bit. There is no storage problem for medals under 45mm because they fit within existing products.

After ample discussion and airing of different views on the subject, I recommend that the Medal Collectors of America (MCA) should proactively communicate with numismatic suppliers and manufacturers with specifications for a medal storage system.

David Alexander's comments about medal storage are reprinted here in full:

"My experiences with medal storage go back to 1953 when my late brother and I received our first medal, a bronze portrait piece of then-Archbishop Francis Spellman of New York as Ordinary of the U.S. Armed Forces. This was a quasi-papal medal by Aurelio

Mistruzzi and was followed by several thousand more medals down to the present. Storage was always a problem, especially when those PVC flips became available and were highly seductive until their true nature emerged."

"Some decades ago I inherited an oak map or blueprint cabinet some six feet in height, more than a yard wide and deep with space for 30 sliding drawer-shelves. These were missing, off course! A skilled carpenter fabricated a full set of replacements, which we lined with felt. Several hundred large diameter U.S. Mint, U.S. and world medals now occupy these shelves, organized by topic or country."

"Many small-diameter pieces are housed in a colorful jumble of Lembit cases, mini-coin cabinets intended for ancient coins and a variety of other ad hoc containers."

"Specialized collections include my research collection of Circle of Friends of the Medallion and Society of Medalists (SOM) issues. I have about 310 SOM's, housed in their original cardboard boxes from Medallic Art Co. The Circle of Friends were released in 1909-1915 in tan-covered books, stored on library shelves while the medals repose in similar small boxes. All have cotton lining courtesy of SOM and are housed in a gray steel medical records cabinet of 30 drawers. Here they are safe and accessible."