



Coins Struck as Planets Line Up

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On May 5 the five naked-eye planets will line up, but instead of the disaster predicted by some, we will get a shiny new coin. In fact, we'll get 5,000 of them. But they won't rain from the sky.

Rather, the Perth Mint in Western Australia struck the 10-ounce, 99.9 percent silver "Planetary Alignment" coin, commemorating the rare celestial event. Its face shows a printed color image of the sun and six planets in alignment. The design also features planetary names, astrological signs and graphics of the Roman and Greek gods whose names they bear.

This is the second space-related collector's coin produced by the mint. The first was a limited-edition series of 30,000 silver and 7,000 gold Millennial coins depicting Year 2000 dawning on Earth -- as seen from space, said Alison Puchy, spokeswoman for the mint.

"The Millennial coins sold out in a week, we've never had anything sell out that quick," she said. "Then we started looking around for other space themes." The idea of basing a coin on the May 5 planetary alignment was suggested by Dr. James Biggs, director of the Perth Astronomical Observatory. The observatory is seeing a lot of interest in the event from the public, underscoring people's primal fascination with the heavens, he said.

"In many ways, astronomy is the [most] popular and accessible of the physical sciences -- all you need to do is walk outside at night and use your eyes," Biggs said. "The movement of stars and planets always has been a part of human culture, and this coin is just another way of expressing that."

Puchy said the mint worked with Biggs to ensure the coins were as technically accurate as possible. That should enhance their value to space buffs, she said.

Australia has two mints -- the Royal Mint in Canberra and the Perth Mint. The latter is among the world's most active in producing commemorative coins -- particularly those featuring innovative color designs printed directly on the metal.

For years, the mint has been striking coins based on popular and well-known Australian animals, such as the kangaroo, kookaburra, emu and koala. More recent subjects include endangered species and significant dates on the Chinese calendar.

According to Puchy, we may not have to wait long for another space-themed coin. If the Planetary Alignment coin is popular, the Perth mint could well strike others with cosmic themes in coming years.

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