I like worn coins. They have a lot going for them which you do not get with pristine uncirculated examples. Actually, as far as I am concerned, the more worn the better, as long as there are enough features visible to be able to identify the coin. With very worn coins it can be a lot of fun trying to identify them, and once successful it is very satisfying. If a coin cannot be identified it is just a lump of metal, a dead thing of no interest to anybody, and if it is of base metal it is of no value whatsoever. But once identified it comes alive and has a story to tell.

Upmarket coin dealers and collectors will hate me for saying it, but cheap worn coins can give as much pleasure as expensive high-grade examples, probably more. To support my argument I have chosen five coins from my collection and compared them with high-grade examples that were sold at auctions for many times the cost of the worn coins. A basic premise of my argument, however, is that the collector needs to have a good imagination and be a romantic at heart.

The first coin (Figures 1 and 2) is a bronze prutah minted at Jerusalem in 29 AD. We know it was minted in 29 AD because the Greek inscription on the obverse means ‘of Tiberius Caesar, year 16’ and this number is the number of years since Tiberius became the Roman emperor in 14 AD, and at that time people counted inclusively, i.e. 14 plus 16 equals 29. The head of Tiberius does not occur on coins minted in Jerusalem because the Jewish Law did not allow the Jews to make images of human beings or animals (Deuteronomy 4:16). Therefore Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman governor of Judea from 26 to 36 AD, used a symbol that referred to the emperor. Tiberius was also the Roman high priest and the ladle on the obverse of the coin was an implement used by him to make sacrifices to the gods in Rome. On the reverse the Greek inscription means ‘Julia Caesar’. She was the mother of Tiberius and was also known as Livia. The three ears of grain on the reverse probably refer to her representing the goddess Demeter, known to the Romans as Ceres, the grain goddess.

The coin in Figure 1 is so worn that the ladle and ears of grain appear like shadows and only part of the inscription is visible. It must have been in circulation for at least 20 years. The coin in Figure 2 is graded gVF and cost six times the coin in Figure 1, but soon after it was minted it went out of circulation. We do not know why it went out of circulation: perhaps it was lost or put aside and forgotten. But we have a pretty good idea what happened to the coin in Figure 1. It was handled by all sorts of people in Jerusalem at that time, and it was a very special time. In 30 AD, when the coin was about a year old, Jesus was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem. The foundational events of Christianity were occurring, and in these extraordinary
situations the coin was most likely present. It might have been in the purse of someone in the crowd shouting out to Pontius Pilate to crucify Jesus (Mark 15:13,14). This scene is illustrated in Figure 3. There is a good chance that in the following days the coin was with someone who saw three wooden crosses on a hill outside Jerusalem and wondered why there were dead bodies hanging on only two of the crosses. He or she would soon have heard the claim that Jesus was alive again.

The second coin (Figures 4 and 5) is a bronze coin minted in 31 AD at Antioch, the administrative centre of the Roman province of Syria. Tiberius appears on the obverse and the letters SC on the reverse probably stand for Senatus Consulto, meaning 'by decree of the senate'. It reminded people that they were in the

Figure 3 – ‘Christ before Pilate’ by Mihály Munkácsy, 1881. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 4 – Bronze coin of Tiberius. RPC I 4273.

Figure 5 – Bronze coin of Tiberius. VF. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 180, Lot 102)

Figure 6 – Bronze coin of Claudius. Sear 1862.
Roman Empire and under Roman control.
The coin in Figure 4 is fairly worn and would have been in circulation for at least 20 years. The coin in Figure 5 is graded VF with the qualification that it has a slightly rough surface, but it is obvious that it must have gone out of circulation soon after being minted. So what is special about the worn coin in Figure 4? Because a large proportion of the population of Antioch was Jewish, in the 20 years following Jesus’s crucifixion there would have been much excitement among them caused by the events that occurred in Jerusalem, and the coin would have been handled by people caught up in that excitement. The followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26) and they were influential in spreading the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. In 47 AD Saint Paul set out on his first missionary journey from Antioch. That there was excitement everywhere is confirmed by the action of the emperor Claudius who expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 AD because of disturbances caused by the Christians (Acts 18:2).

The third coin (Figures 6 and 7) is a bronze coin of Claudius minted at Rome in 42 AD. The example in Figure 6 is very worn and just the outline of the goddess Minerva is discernible on the reverse, but it is enough to identify the coin. Collectors who have similar worn coins just have to consult a catalogue or go on the Internet to see what a high-grade example looks like, but the significance of this coin is that it would probably have been involved in the upheaval occurring in Rome in the years leading up to the expulsion of the Jews by Claudius in 49 AD. The coin in Figure 7, however, is an EF example and it would have gone out of circulation soon after being minted. Although it cost 20 times the coin in Figure 6 it was handled by only a few people and had no life at all.

The next coin (Figures 8 and 9) is a denarius of Nero minted at Rome in 64 AD. On the reverse there is an image of the colossal bronze statue of Nero that stood outside the main entrance to the palace he was building in Rome. He wears a radiate crown indicating that he represents the sun-god Sol. The Greek sculptor, Zenodoros, constructed the statue between 64 and 68 AD and therefore the image on the coin predates the actual statue. When Vespasian became emperor in 69 AD he replaced Nero’s head on the statue with one of Sol. The emperor Hadrian moved the statue to

Figure 7 – Bronze coin of Claudius. EF (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 25, Lot 374)

Figure 8 – Denarius of Nero. Sear 1927

Figure 9 – Denarius of Nero. EF (A. Tkalec AG, May 2006 Auction, Lot 133)
be close to the great amphitheatre that Vespasian had built, and the building came to be called the Colosseum after the statue.

The denarius in Figure 8 is low grade although Nero's profile is strangely quite clear. The denarius in Figure 9 is of the highest grade and cost 50 times the coin in Figure 8. So, regardless of financial considerations, why would anyone prefer the coin in Figure 8? Firstly, it is preferred because it circulated during an important time in Roman history whereas the expensive coin did not circulate at all. In 64 AD the Great Fire of Rome occurred and much of the centre of the city was destroyed. Nero blamed the Christians and according to Tacitus, a historian writing in the early 2nd century, “Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals’ skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his gardens for the spectacle.” In a painting by Henryk Siemiradzki we see the human torches being made ready in the gardens of the imperial palace. (Figure 10)

Secondly, a close inspection of the worn coin in Figure 8 reveals that there is some black sooty material just above Nero's head. Apparently the material covered most of the coin but was scraped off except where it adhered to Nero's hair. This means that the coin might have been in the fire.

Thirdly, in modern times there has been a change in artistic taste away from a photographic representation of the subject towards impressionistic and abstract art. The images in Figure 9 are like high-resolution photographs, but in Figure 8 they suggest a different dimension: Nero's face seems to be coming out of a world of chaos, grime and horror. The obverse of the worn coin brings to mind the terrible events witnessed by or experienced by the people through whose hands the coin circulated.

The last coin (Figures 11 and 12) is a brass sestertius issued by the emperor Commodus at Rome in 189 AD. On the reverse Commodus (on the left) holds hands with a senator who is representing the Roman Senate, and the coin is celebrating the award to Commodus of the...
title ‘Pater Senatus’ (Father of the Senate) by the Senate. Commodus holds a scroll in his left hand because he was left handed.

The coin in Figure 11 is very worn and would have circulated during the last years of Commodus’s reign and for a long time afterwards. The coin in Figure 12 cost 88 times more, but it is pristine and did not circulate at all. For many people who handled the worn coin it would have been an anxious time because Commodus was mentally unstable. According to Chris Scarre, the author of *Chronicle of the Roman Emperors*, “He went down in history as a positive monster, a megalomaniac who thought himself a god, had the months renamed in his honour, and delighted in nothing better than playing the gladiator in front of the assembled Roman populace.” In a painting by Edwin Howland Blashfield we see Commodus the gladiator leaving the arena in Rome. (Figure 13)

On the coin in Figure 11 the reddish colour and the blackness around Commodus’s head reflect the dark mood of his final years. The scene on the reverse is not as it seems: the senators were terrified and by awarding the title, Father of the Senate, to Commodus they were trying to ingratiate themselves with him and prevent being executed.

There were frequent attempts to kill Commodus and in 192 AD he was strangled by an athlete hired to assassinate him.

There is no need to pay huge sums of money to enjoy ancient coins. When seen through discerning eyes, worn coins have a lot going for them.