

Sidedoor S6 Ep. 10 On The Money Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: How many portraits are you carrying right now?

Lizzie Peabody: Let's see. I have four portraits of George Washington in my wallet right now, I actually thought there were more, but oh well. Anyway, here he is, he's looking out at me from the \$1 bill. He has his powdered hair in his floofy cravat, and this is pretty much the \$1 bill I've always known, but the dollar bill definitely did not always look like this. In today's episode, we are guest featuring a fantastic story about the changing phases of US currency. This comes from our sister show, "Portraits," produced by the team at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery and hosted by director Kim Sajet. You may remember Kim from last season when she spoke with me about the previously undiscovered portrait of a young Harriet Tubman, and Harriet Tubman is back in this episode as the new face of the \$20 bill. But we'll also take a journey through bank notes of the past, which incorporated some ingenious anti-counterfeiting measures. Andy scantily clad George Washington. That episode of portraits is coming up right after the break, don't go away.

[MUSIC]

Speaker 2: Sweeping set of changes that they announced at the Treasury Department yesterday, Harriet Tubman becomes the first African American person to go on the face of U.S. currency.

Speaker 3: It goes without saying, but our money's not going to tell a much bigger part of our story.

Speaker 4: Do you support Harriet Tubman being on the \$20 bill?

Speaker 5: I've made no decision as it relates to that and that decision.

Speaker 6: Well, I don't like seeing it. Yes, I think it's pure political correctness.

Kim Sajet: Welcome to "Portraits." I'm Kim Sajet, Director of the National Portrait Gallery. This episode, the portraits on the money. Many of them are based on paintings we have right here in our collection, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, they're like tiny history lessons that we carry around in our pockets. But if you take a fresh look at the bills that you're buying your groceries with, you'll notice that they depict a history that's devoid of native Americans or any people of color, or for that matter, any women. I grew up in Australia and I have to tell you,

down under there is a woman on every bill, and I'm not just talking about the queen. Our money carries a message about who we are as a country, so what's it saying about us?

Rosie Rios: Of the modern developed nations. I mean, I'm going to exaggerate a little bit but it's pretty much us and Saudi Arabia who don't have women on the modern-day currency.

Kim Sajet: That's former U.S. Treasurer, Rosie Rios. She was the driving force behind the 2016 decision to put abolitionists Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill. You may remember that the redesign was put on hold by the Trump administration, but it's been taken up again under president Joe Biden. And we also invited Ellen Feingold on the show, she's the curator of the national numismatic collection.

Ellen Feingold: Many people don't realize because money has looked at the same throughout their lifetimes, that money used to look very different in this country.

Kim Sajet: Ellen says that US currency used to offer a much more vibrant picture of the nation, especially in the early and mid 1800s. The federal government didn't produce bank notes yet, instead, there were more than 8,000 private banks and businesses making their own bills and they could put whatever they wanted onto them. On one bill there's even a child snuggling with a bunch of bunnies. And before we kick things off, remember that we always put links to the images we're talking about in the show notes of each episode. Ellen, welcome, it's so nice to speak to a colleague from the Smithsonian.

Ellen Feingold: Thank you for having me.

Kim Sajet: So, you are in this really interesting job where you're always looking at the money, and we have this perception that the money is always about the faces of the dead white guys, right? They're the ones that are on the money. But I'm looking at a note from 1861 from the Sanford bank in Maine, and it's really sort of a genre scene, it does have kind of portraits, but it doesn't either, it's sort of activity. Can you describe what's happening on what I think is a \$2 bill?

Ellen Feingold: Yeah. This note represents the period in U.S. monetary history when we had the greatest diversity of imagery on our money. So, the bank note that you're looking at is just one example of many scenes of activity, scenes of industry, and in this one, scenes of women, women as part of society and women at work. So, these women on this note are working in a textile mill and they are actively participating in the growth of our economy and the growth of industry in the United States. And there's also a portrait in the lower right-hand corner, but it's of a young girl. And that's another theme that was very prevalent on these bank notes, what are called private bank notes, the inclusion of children, the inclusion of younger people and that image of youth both presented literally, and also presented in allegory to represent the young nation.

Kim Sajet: And do the portraits of the little children actually relate to a real child? I mean, is this sort of the child of, I don't know, the president of the bank, for example, or the governor of the state?

Ellen Feingold: Yes, it could be. We don't have the background on each of the notes, but what we do know is that there are some documented examples of bank owners and business owners depicting their own families, or even a beloved dog or beloved cow. They took inspiration from their own lives, their own communities, and that's what really adds to the vibrancy of the notes of this era.

Kim Sajet: Indeed, there's this bank of Whitfield \$5 note that has a dog in the bottom left-hand corner and his head is resting on a key, and on the other side opposite the dog is again, another young girl. I think this must be a real child that's from somewhere.

Ellen Feingold: I think that's very likely. The dog and the beautiful child really make you feel comfortable, and that was particularly important for notes of this era, because there was a great deal of counterfeiting, both in the colonial and post-colonial period. At one point, they thought that half of the notes and circulation might be counterfeit.

Kim Sajet: We actually have someone in our collection who pioneered some really ingenious ways to fight counterfeiting. It's a portrait by Joseph Duplessis, painted in France around 1785. I asked Alan to describe the setter.

Ellen Feingold: He looks stately, contemplative, maybe a little bit weary.

Kim Sajet: He's actually a little bit grumpy.

Ellen Feingold: Yeah, maybe a little grumpy.

Kim Sajet: Yeah, do you see that too?

Ellen Feingold: I think I do.

Kim Sajet: The painting is of a politician and founding father, Benjamin Franklin. He was also a scientist, he invented a ton of stuff including the lightning rod. And he had another job.

Ellen Feingold: Benjamin Franklin was a printer in Philadelphia, and believed in the importance of paper money in the colonial economy, and also felt very strongly that that money needed to be trusted. And the British actually used counterfeiting as a form of warfare against the colonists, they would produce fake notes and they would put them into circulation to challenge public trust in currency. So, the notes that he produced had designs that were really challenging for people to copy because they came from nature. So he came up with the idea of actually using leaves from Blackberry bushes, Willow leaves, Sage leaves, and making casts of them and using them to print designs on the money that were so intricate because the

veins of leaves are so intricate and varied, that it was very challenging for people to imitate them.

Kim Sajet: And at one point, is it true that Ben Franklin misspelt Pennsylvania for a reason, deliberately?

Ellen Feingold: Yes, so the misspelling of Pennsylvania was an intentional security feature, anti-counterfeiting technique. He believed, I think, correctly for a period that counterfeiters wouldn't have noticed that or wouldn't have repeated that, thinking that it would have made it more difficult for people to take the notes and accept them in transactions.

Kim Sajet: I'm just going to say that I think it's easier to counterfeit in Massachusetts, I find that so hard to spell.

Ellen Feingold: Massachusetts is hard to spell, but I can confirm that that was a technique he tried.

Kim Sajet: Yeah. Okay, great. All right, so there is almost never an episode of portraits that we can't talk about the Lansdowne portrait by Gilbert Stewart of George Washington, because it is our baby Pandora or our right flier, right? Every Smithsonian museum has its stars and ours is in fact, the George Washington portrait that was created in 1796, where he's standing up and he's gesturing out to the canvas and there's rainbows and flags and inkwells and swords, and it's all about America being the place of new hope, new beginnings. So, this all gets translated in very weird ways in the early money. So, here is a \$3 note from the national bank of New York. Can you describe what is happening here, Ellen? It's very strange.

Ellen Feingold: So, on this bank note, George Washington is dressed in a Toga.

Kim Sajet: I think we can all admit that it's a bit of a brave mood.

Ellen Feingold: Maybe I could back up a little bit on Washington.

Kim Sajet: Okay, great.

Ellen Feingold: So, after the revolution, there was a desire by some to put George Washington on American money, but he did not want to be depicted on American money. So, Washington is not part of how our money looks for a number of decades, but then with the emergence of these private bank notes, we see him appear. And sometimes he looks a lot like the George Washington that we're used to seeing today from the \$1 bill or from the portrait that you've just shown. But on this particular bank note from the national bank, he looks more like a mythological deity or perhaps an emperor, he's wearing a Toga, you can see his shoulders and his legs exposed. And he's posed in a way that that really makes him look almost God-like.

Kim Sajet: Yeah, it's really fascinating. And he's holding what we call the fascia, which is 13 arrows that represent the first 13 colonies that are bound together. These incidentally also turn up on the Lansdowne portrait, but you see it in the table leg where you also see the fascia of

these arrows bound together topped by an Eagle. So, a lot of the symbolism gets used over and over again. And this is going all the way back to the original idea of the United States of America being a new democracy coming out of Greece, and then of course, into Rome. Eventually in the 1860s, the federal government started making its own bank notes, in part to pay for the civil war. Federal bank notes were also varied and some were really beautiful. Ellen is especially fond of a \$1 silver certificate from 1896.

Ellen Feingold: Some people would say this is the most beautiful note ever produced in the United States.

Kim Sajet: It features an allegorical scene with a beautiful woman with her arm around a young boy, pointing to the US Capitol across the Potomac river. It symbolizes a young nation looking to its future.

Ellen Feingold: What might surprise you though is that if you flip the note over, you will see a bright green back with both Martha Washington and George Washington together with a beautiful, vibrant, bright green design, it's very intricate. And what's really significant about this note and this note's immediate predecessor is that this is the only example of a woman depicted with a portrait on federal money. The \$1 silver certificate of 1886 features a portrait of Martha Washington and she is on her own, and this is kind of the key example of a woman on money, on US federal money on her own like we see presidents and founding father figures today. And the 1896 \$1 silver certificate is the same denomination, but 10 years later, and she's no longer alone. She has a companion or spouse and are together, they're equal in size, they appear on either side of the denomination, which was a one. And then a number of years later, not that many years later, Washington is on his own on the silver certificate and that is the last time we see Martha. And we have not had any other examples of historic female figures depicted on American federal bank notes since.

Kim Sajet: So, let me understand this, I think it'll be news for a lot of people that we have had a female leader on the money. All this conversation about Harriet Tubman on the money, but we had Martha, and Martha was there by herself.

Ellen Feingold: Yes. Martha is on her own and 1886, and then with George Washington in 1896.

Kim Sajet: And we haven't seen Martha on the money since 1896?

Ellen Feingold: No.

Kim Sajet: Okay.

Ellen Feingold: That's correct. There is one example of another historic woman appearing on national bank notes in the 19th century, and that is sort of a partial depiction of

Pocahontas. She's depicted kneeling during her force baptism, but it's a very different way of depicting a person, depicting a woman, than the way we see Martha on the silver certificate. Kim Sajet: And that's where things stood for more than a hundred years until Rosie Rios walked into the treasury department on the first day of a new job and started asking a question that no one seemed to have the answer for.

Rosie Rios: If this is the way that we institutionalize our history, why are we missing half the population?

Kim Sajet: Stay with us.

[MUSIC]

Speaker 3: This is an extraordinary period for America's economy.

Speaker 4: The housing market has all but collapsed.

Kim Sajet: We skipped forward now to 2008. It was the height of the financial crisis, and Rosie Rios was in demand. She'd been tapped by the incoming Obama administration to serve on the financial transition team.

Speaker 5: Major financial institutions have teetered on the edge of collapse and some have failed.

Speaker 6: We are in the most serious financial crisis in generations.

Kim Sajet: In the middle of all of this, Rosie found a quiet place where she could escape a little, the historical resource center at the bureau of engraving and printing.

Rosie Rios: I took my break and I would literally race over there, it was kind of a respite, a way to recalibrate.

Kim Sajet: The historical resource center has all kinds of amazing artwork from early financial products, such as currency and military payment certificates, and even postage stamps. But what struck Rosie was what she didn't find there, she didn't see any women from history.

Rosie Rios: I wanted the public to know that there's a whole part of our history that was overlooked, and I call it buried treasure.

Kim Sajet: The following year, Obama nominated her as U.S. Treasurer. She was confirmed by the Senate unanimously, that put her in the perfect position to do something about the images on our dollar bills. And Rosie had this other job that I was also really curious about. Rosie Rios, welcome to, "Portraits," the podcast.

Rosie Rios: Thank you, Kim, I'm thrilled to be here.

Kim Sajet: When you were in Washington, you were the 43rd treasurer of the United States from 2009 to 2016. For those of you at home who don't realize this, the treasurer of the United States gets to sign the money, so when you look at your paper money, their signature is on the money. I mean, what was that like that you actually had to sort of... Did you practice doing your signature on the money?

Rosie Rios: I did. So, when I was nominated by the president in May of 2009, my daughter who was eight at the time, she's really kind of offended by my penmanship. So, she literally made me... That lined paper that you get when you're starting to learn how to write, and she had me practice, I'm not kidding, she had me practice. So, on day one, literally someone was waiting for me when I arrived on my first day of official work, and said, "Take your time, do what you need to do and pick what you want to pick." And so, it took me about seven pages to pick the one that I was happy with. And sure enough, my daughter to this day still says that the second T in my middle name is crooked.

Kim Sajet: This is why you have children, right? To tell you the unvarnished truth that you don't particularly want to know. There's one exception to this idea that women have more or less been ignored on our paper money, and Rosie brought it up during a Ted talk that she gave a few years ago. She was referring back to those trips to the historical resource center.

Rosie Rios: And what I found very quickly was that every image that I came across of a woman was an allegorical woman, it wasn't a real woman. It were these types of images, kind of Lady Liberty's, women in togas, and sometimes no togas. But every image that I came across of a man was a real man, a founding father, a cabinet member, a president.

Kim Sajet: I have in front of me, it's an aquatint from the collection, so it is a woman and she was Americana. Interestingly, the early allegorical symbols of America that you pointed out that you saw in the historic resource center, started out as a native American woman. And she changes dramatically over time, you really do find a whitewashing of Americana as well. And she has this sort of elaborate headdress on, and on this very strange funeral pillar that's made out of marble of the portraits of real men that existed. So, we have King Louis the 16th of France, and then under that, of course, Ben Franklin and George Washington. But to your point, even back then, and this picture was created in 1786, the woman is an allegorical woman, but the men are fully themselves and identifiable. How do you change, and you've been trying to do this, you've been trying to get Harriet Tubman on the money, who makes that decision and how did you land on Harriet?

Rosie Rios: So ready for this, by law, it is Congress who gets to redesign coins. By law, it is the secretary of the treasury, not the president and not Congress, who makes the final decision on redesigning paper currency. I realized all I had to just get to one person at that time that was secretary Geithner. The other piece of this that people also wouldn't realize is that every generation of currency has a theme. For this next generation of notes, the theme that I recommended is democracy, who knew it'd be so relevant even in 2021? And then something

else dawned on me, our timing was such that we were anticipating unveiling the first note in 2020. Low and behold, 2020 is the suffrage Centennial, granting women the right to vote. So, what better way to represent democracy than giving half your population the ability to participate in the governance process? So that's how this became about a woman, it wasn't a woman for the sake of a woman, it was this theme of democracy and again, using your voice to participate.

Kim Sajet: You can see how Harriet Tubman would be such a great choice. She was not only a conductor on the underground railroad, and an abolitionist, and a scout for the union army, she also fought for women's suffrage. We've actually done a whole episode on Harriet Tubman and the discovery of a new portrait of her as a young woman, you can find that in our podcast queue. So, Rosie was campaigning to get a woman on the money, a real woman. And during this process, she spent 10 months on the road gathering feedback, but it didn't always go so smoothly.

Rosie Rios: I probably aged at least 10 years in those 10 months that I was out there, and I learned a lot. One was, there was a lot of frustration out there, a lot of frustration, and perhaps a lot of hate.

Kim Sajet: Why did people not want this project to happen?

Rosie Rios: I think there's a lot of traditionalists out there, preservationists, whatever you want to call them. I just think people are scared about change, and I think people weren't prepared or ready to even think about what our currency would look like with, God forbid, a woman. So, the second thing I learned was how little people knew about our American history, and the third was how much less than you about American women in our history. It was a little sad, it was, it was eye-opening.

Kim Sajet: Rosie prevailed, and the Obama administration announced it would be unveiling the Tubman \$20 bill in 2020. She would be replacing Andrew Jackson who had enslaved people and pursued efforts to drive native Americans off their lands.

Speaker 3: Jackson will move to the back, along with a photo or a picture of the white house.

Kim Sajet: Then in 2019, treasury secretary, Steve Mnuchin, said he was postponing the redesign as he focused on anti-counterfeiting measures.

Steve Mnuchin: The imagery feature will not be an issue that comes up until most likely 2026.

Kim Sajet: The anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment came and went. Then the Biden administration revived the plan, his white house spokesperson, Jen Sakhi.

Jen Sakhi: It's important that our money reflects the history and diversity of our country, and Harriet Tubman's image gracing the new \$20 note would certainly reflect that.

Ellen Feingold: So, the idea that we would change the design of one of our bank notes is not radical.

Kim Sajet: That's Ellen Feingold again, the Smithsonian's money expert.

Ellen Feingold: It's not something that would be breaking an American tradition, we had a tradition of changing our notes all the time, an older tradition in fact.

Kim Sajet: Ellen says the standardized designs that we have on our bills today, with just a handful of political figures, began in the 1920s. And it's not really clear why these particular men were chosen, but they've remained on our money for nearly a century.

Ellen Feingold: So, while a change to the 20 or indeed any denomination, would certainly feel like a departure or a break from our national tradition in the 19th century, there was a great variety of design and great diversity of individuals depicted on federal bank notes. And a denomination like the 20, for example, featured a variety of historic figures before it featured Andrew Jackson. But what would be actually quite a big change in terms of how our money has looked for the last century, would be to see a historic female figure on American money, and to see an African-American on American money. There are no examples of African-Americans on US federal currency at all, and the only examples that we have of African-Americans on bank notes produced in the US for the US are depictions of African-Americans working on plantations as enslaved people. And they're really painful, awful images. So, this design plan, redesign plan to feature the hero and abolitionist Harriet Tubman would be a big step forward in terms of improving the way in which our currency actually captures and reflects our national history, and includes a greater variety of people that have contributed to helping the U.S. reach our founding ideals and goals.

Rosie Rios: I didn't want it to be just about one woman, I want it to be about 10 women, I want about the hundreds of women who've been overlooked in our history.

Kim Sajet: So, Rosie, who would be other women that you might like to see on the money here? Here's three that I immediately thought of. One is Lucretia Mott, who was of course at Seneca Falls and passed the sentiments of women, an amazing suffragist. I like her too, because the Quakers, I feel don't get enough credit for activism, both as abolitionists and of course, then as suffragists. Ida B. Wells is also a favorite of mine, the anti-lynching crusader and journalists. And then Zitkála-Šá, native American activist. Do you have a list of women that, if you could have your moment, you'd put them on the money?

Rosie Rios: Absolutely. Well, I mean, where do I begin? I came across someone I didn't even know existed. So, the story of Grace Hopper is a fabulous one, right? So, she was one of the original programmers, she was a Lieutenant in the US Navy, she developed the foundation of what is now modern-day COBOL. To think of the work that she did at the time period that she did, if women have it hard today, can you imagine what it was like?

Ellen Feingold: I struggle with the question of who belongs on money. In part because it often feels like it ends up being a zero-sum debate. This person's better than that person, this person should be quote unquote, kicked off.

Kim Sajet: Yeah, it's like the Hunger Games of currency.

Ellen Feingold: Yes. So, I feel very strongly that bank notes are not statues or monuments, putting someone on is an honor, but taking someone off doesn't have to be seen as a dishonor. So, I would really advocate for a broader, long term rethinking. I'd like to see us think about the everyday heroes who are helping us survive this pandemic, people like teachers and healthcare workers. I'd like to see us think about the environment. And I think I would also like to note that the way that we design our money, who we depict, what we depict, it's a pretty powerful message that we send around the world.

Rosie Rios: If we don't change it, there are consequences to this, right? There are literally consequences to having someone's confidence held back. If it's not addressed, it just gets worse.

Kim Sajet: Exactly. If you don't see it, you can imagine being it, representation totally matters.

Rosie Rios: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Kim Sajet: Rosie Rios continues to fight the fight for women's representation on statues and in the classroom. She's especially proud of an initiative to put prominent American women on quarters starting in 2022. And they will include voting rights activists and abolitionists.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to an episode of, "Portraits," brought to you by Sidedoor. If you liked this show, you can hear more, subscribe to, "Portraits" wherever you get your podcasts. We'll also include a link to the show in our newsletter, and if you haven't signed up for our newsletter, you can do that at si.edu/sidedoor.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: "Portraits" is produced by the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. Their podcast team includes Ruth Morris, Deborah Sisum, Rebecca Kasemeyer and Rebecca Ortiz Hernandez. The theme music is by Joe Chi. The show is hosted by Kim Sajet.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The Sidedoor team is Justin O'Neill, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jen Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support

comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tareq Fouda. Our theme song and episode music is by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening