What is claimed is:

1. A method of authenticating a coin, the method comprising:

capturing an image of the coin using a digital camera;

locating an acquisition area of the image using a landmark of the coin, the acquisition area comprising a surface feature of the coin, the surface feature comprising an imprint produced by at least one of a die, a punch, or a matrix used to manufacture the coin, wherein other coins produced by the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix also comprise the surface feature comprising the imprint; and

generating a digital representation of the acquisition area.

2. The method according to claim 1 further comprising:

storing the digital representation in a database in association with an identifier that identifies the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin.

3. The method according to claim 1 further comprising:

comparing the digital representation to other digital representations stored in a database in order to determine a match, thereby identifying the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin, wherein the match is determined when the digital representation and one of the other digital representations stored in the database are similar beyond a threshold.

4. The method according to claim 1, wherein an identity of the landmark or acquisition area is undetectable by visual inspection of the coin.

5. The method according to claim 1, wherein the surface feature comprises a first component and a second component different from the first component, the first component being a random component unique to the coin, the second component

comprising the imprint produced by the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin.

6. The method according to claim 5 further comprising:

storing the digital representation in a database in association with an identifier that identifies the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin, and further identifies the coin uniquely.

7. The method according to claim 5 further comprising:

comparing the digital representation to other digital representations stored in a memory in order to determine a match, thereby identifying the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin, and further identifying the coin uniquely.

8. The method according to claim 5, wherein the acquisition area comprises a first sub-area and a second sub-area different from the first sub-area, wherein the first sub-area contains the first component and the second sub-area contains the second component.

9. The method according to claim 1, wherein the acquisition area comprises a plurality of sub-areas, wherein each sub-area contains a component of the surface feature corresponding to a different one of the die, the punch, and the matrix.

10. The method according to claim 1, wherein the imprint comprises characteristics produced by engraving details on the die, the punch, or the matrix.

11. The method according to claim 1, wherein the imprint comprises characteristics produced by natural manufacturing marks on the die, the punch, or the matrix caused by scratches, imperfections, engraving touch-ups, or mechanical handling damage.

12. The method according to claim 2, wherein the digital representation is a first digital representation, the method further comprising, following wear or damage to the surface feature of the coin:

capturing a second image of the coin using the digital camera;

locating the acquisition area of the second image using the landmark of the coin;

generating a second digital representation of the acquisition area; and

storing the second digital representation in the database in association with the identifier that identifies the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin, wherein the second digital representation replaces the first digital representation in the database.

~~13. The method according to claim 12, wherein storing the second digital representation in the database comprises replacing the first digital representation in the database in association with the identifier that identifies the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin.~~

~~14~~13. The method according to claim 12, further comprising:

capturing a third image of the coin using the digital camera;

locating the acquisition area of the third image using the landmark of the coin;

generating a third digital representation of the acquisition area; and

comparing the third digital representation to other digital representations stored in the database in order to determine a match, wherein the other digital representations comprise ~~the first digital representation and~~ the second digital representation, wherein a match is determined when the third digital representation is similar beyond a threshold to ~~either the first digital representation or~~ the second digital representation, thereby identifying the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin.

~~15~~14. The method according to claim 1, wherein a location of the surface feature of the coin is selected in order to avoid wear points on the coin.

~~16~~15. An apparatus for authenticating a coin, the apparatus comprising:

a light source;

a digital camera for capturing an image of the coin;

a positioning device for maintaining a position of the coin during the capturing of the image of the coin; and

a processor configured:

to control the digital camera to capture the image of the coin;

to locate an acquisition area of the image using a landmark of the coin, the acquisition area comprising a surface feature of the coin, the surface feature comprising an imprint produced by at least one of a die, a punch, or a matrix used to manufacture the coin, wherein other coins produced by the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix also comprise the surface feature comprising the imprint; and

to generate a digital representation of the acquisition area.

~~17~~16. The apparatus according to claim ~~16~~15, wherein the processor is further configured:

to store the digital representation in a database in association with an identifier that identifies the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin.

~~18~~17. The apparatus according to claim ~~16~~15, wherein the processor is further configured:

to compare the digital representation to other digital representations stored in a database in order to determine a match, thereby identifying the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin, wherein the match is

determined when the digital representation and one of the other digital representations stored in the database are similar beyond a threshold.

~~19~~18. The apparatus according to claim ~~17~~16, wherein the digital representation is a first digital representation, and wherein the processor is further configured, following wear or damage to the surface feature of the coin:

to capture a second image of the coin using the digital camera;

to locate the acquisition area of the second image using the landmark of the coin;

to generate a second digital representation of the acquisition area; and

to store the second digital representation in the database in association with the identifier that identifies the at least one of the die, the punch, or the matrix used to manufacture the coin, wherein the second digital representation replaces the first digital representation in the database.

19. The apparatus according to claim 15, wherein a location of the surface feature of the coin is selected in order to avoid wear points on the coin.

20. A computer-readable medium comprising instructions executable by a processor for implementing the method according to claim 1.