

Portraits on Coins

By Karin Althaus, © MoneyMuseum

The Renaissance loved portraits – and transformed the nature of portraits. Both in paintings and coins, out went symbolic, typical faces, and in came individualised portraits. And portraits meant profiles.

This development is influenced by Classical Greek and Roman coins. And it is far-reaching: in contrast to the appealing, even captivating, frontal portrait, a pure profile seems austere. It creates a sense of detachment, since the gaze of the person depicted cannot meet that of the viewer. Here are some examples of this art form: coin portraits of stunning beauty, numismatic masterpieces of miniature art.

Ercole I of Este, duke of Ferrara (1431-1505), on the testone from about 1492



Looking at this portrait of Ercole I of Este, one would hardly think that at the same time, Italian portraiture was in full bloom. The engraver seems only reluctantly to have followed his instructions to accommodate the head of the duke on the small coin flan. He used a lot of space for the inscription that surrounds the head, giving it very little room. But although the drawing is angular and rather coarse, the facial features are individually differentiated, especially the dark eyebrows with their pronounced browridges, and the hooked nose reaching almost down to the lips. The typical simple, 15th-century hairstyle looks somewhat unkempt in comparison with other contemporary portraits. There is no indication of movement, no garments or other attributes. Only what is required for an individual coin portrait is shown; neither the portrait area nor the profile head is really carefully designed.

**Charles V, Holy Roman emperor (1519-1556), on the half ducaton
from about 1552**



This imposing portrait shows the Holy Roman emperor Charles V in contemporary dress, as a heroic victor in amour and crowned with a laurel wreath. His body rests on the edge of the coin, which gives it weight. The three-quarter turn of the bust breaks the rule of strict profile portraits usual on coins, introduces a sense of movement and gives the figure a majestic presence. The inscription with its beading forms a crown of sunbeams around the head, and the fact that the body is overlapping the legend deepens the perspective. The curly hairstyle and the flowing beard reveal an artistic conception that concentrates on small details and decoration, whose ornamental character accords with the virtuoso mannerism of that period. Even on this small coin, the famous facial characteristics of the Hapsburgs are shown in detail – the hooked nose and the projecting lower lip, the "Hapsburg jaw," accentuated by the unruly beard.

Adolf Friedrich I, duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (1592-1658), on the double taler from 1613



Only two inches across, but what a portrait! The inscription provides a veritable frame for the portrait, transforming it into a proper picture. As usual in baroque portraits, the bust of Duke Adolf Friedrich I is bordered by curtains. The arrangement of the drapery accentuates the pose: with courtly elegance, leaning slightly backwards, the duke wears a chain mail that appears elegant rather than warlike, refined by the stiff lace collar which supports the head and gives it a majestic air. The sash accentuates the diagonal and gives the duke movement, as if in a dancing pose. The little pointed beard, the moustache, and the hair combed back from the face, complete the effect of jauntiness and foppishness. The "jeunesse dorée" of the courtly society of those days certainly knew how to present itself. And the Gadebusch mint seems to have mastered the art of presenting the nobility. Soon afterwards, this art was perfected in England by Sir Anthony van Dyck.

Louis XIII, king of France (1610-1643), on the half louis d'or from 1641

Everything about this coin portrait of Louis XIII reflects the refined culture of the French court in the Baroque Age. The laurel wreath sits on the ornamentally curly hair more like decoration than a token of military victory. This portrait is in the classical bust form that can easily do without any representation of clothing. The effect of elegance normally provided by textiles is here produced by curls falling over the shoulder and the neat, curving moustache. This presentation of culture is counteracted by the realism of the portrait, which does not seek to conceal the bags under the king's eyes. Both head and inscription float within the field without touching or overlapping. This gives the figure enough surrounding space, which accentuates its cultivated lightness and at the same time makes it appear free and sovereign.

Pope Innocent XII (1691-1700) on the scudo from 1692

As if the portraitist had had masses of space at his disposal, not a mere 4.4 centimetres in diameter, he shows us the whole bust of Pope Innocent XII complete with clothing and fully-worked features. An elderly face in rich robes that can be examined in detail thanks to the fineness of the design. The cool silver even allows us to feel the warm velvet and brocade of the papal cap and the embroidered cloak. The fine detailing of the material and the skin gives the surface of the coin the movement of a deep relief and the textural quality of a sculpture. The figure gains an additional statuesque quality from the fact that it extends to the very edge of the coin: it is anchored at three points to the rim, interrupting the inscription. The pope's shoulder has a straight edge to make room for the signature of the proud engraver: Giovanni Hamerani of Rome.

Stanislaw II August Poniatowski, king of Poland (1764-1795), on a pattern taler from 1765



Head held high, chin jutting, with full-bottomed periwig, breastplate and the chain of an order of chivalry – the king of Poland shows his sense of entitlement to his office. The portrait of Stanislaw August Poniatowski has been given plenty of space; the smooth metal is like a bright sky in front of which the head appears as if backlit. Towards the bottom the body becomes so broad that it looks as if the edge has merely cut off a picture that should by rights continue – one can easily imagine it continuing as a portrait mounted on a horse. The king sits on a tall charger, floating high over the common people, who watch him from below as he rides before a brilliant sky. It is astonishing that it was a Swiss medal engraver, Johann Kaspar Mörikofer, who adapted the formulae of the baroque ruler portrait so expertly.

**Maria Theresa, queen of Hungary and Bohemia (1740-1780) and
"Roman empress", on the taler from 1780**



The ageing empress appears magnificently dressed in late-baroque robes. Her well-supported bust is framed by the draped ermine cloak, her head is crowned with a diadem that holds her widow's veil from under which a few curls escape. The nose projects prominently from the face, and clearly defined contour lines give profile to head and body. The massive figure fills the confined, circular picture area with typical baroque tension. Baroque art, however, enjoys not only magnificent displays, but also the portrayal of decay: the face is anything but young, the flesh and skin are beginning to hang and gather to a double chin. A "memento mori" indeed: Maria Theresa died in the year this coin was made. She was buried in the most beautiful of the baroque tombs in the Capuchin vault in Vienna. In contrast to this coin, the tomb was made at the beginning of her reign and paradoxically shows her and her husband Franz I in the flower of youth.

George III, king of England (1760-1820), on the sovereign from 1817

The king's head is portrayed in a classicising fashion, though not after the model of classical Greek art, which was the ideal of beauty around 1800, but following the realism of Roman portrait sculpture. As in the case of classical busts, the head is not part of the body, but has a portrait-like existence of its own. The short hair with its laurel wreath is reminiscent of the hairstyles of Roman republican leaders or emperors. The face is also Roman in its realism, which did not hesitate to show ugly features. The king has a wonderfully straight nose that is too small for a proper Greek profile, however. The face has pudgy cheeks, a double chin, large ears and prominent eyes with bags under them. But as in Roman art, this collection of characteristic features does not expose the king to ridicule. The realism of the details positively increases the effect of the fine, small facial features in the powerful head, which is wonderfully modelled and full of dignity.

Victoria, queen of Great Britain (1837-1901), on the crown from 1844

Where normally the massive head of a male ruler would be represented, this coin shows a young girl. It is not an allegory or personification, but Queen Victoria, the head of state of the British Empire. Although very young when ascending to the throne, the British Empire was to reach its greatest political power and greatest extent under Victoria's rule. The engraver has made no attempt to idealise the young woman by employing any attributes or formulae of sovereignty. On the contrary; the style of representation emphasises her youth – she wears a ponytail, admittedly "à la grecque," yet this does not make her appear classicistic. The irregular, rhythmic outline of the head makes an almost cheeky impression. It is a pretty face; characteristic features such as the slightly curved nose are clearly portrayed, and not improved to correspond to any kind of ideal.

Helvetia as personification of the Swiss Confederation on the 20-franc coin from 1883



Republican Switzerland had no ruler to put on its coins. From the foundation of the Swiss Confederation in 1848, it used personifications of the state as representations on its coins – ideal heads, not portraits. To portray Helvetia, classical antiquity provided the model, where goddesses were often representatives of states or cities. Classically austere and heroic, Helvetia appears to be raised above the present and its everyday concerns. The hair, styled close to the head, is surrounded by a laurel wreath with Alpine roses, crowned with a diadem bearing the inscription "LIBERTAS." The face, with its straight nose and high forehead, seems somewhat hard; the outline of the head is almost square. The imperious head is modelled more after the warlike Athena than after the beauty of Aphrodite. Such artists as Böcklin or Feuerbach, known within the historicising art movement as "German Romans," found similarly massive female figures in Italy and celebrated them in many pictures.

Vreneli, the new ideal for the Swiss Confederation, on the 20-franc coin from 1897



Around 1900, instead of the heroic goddess Helvetia, a girl in national costume was often chosen as embodiment of Switzerland. This design by Fritz Landry had a real person as a model: Françoise Egli. She was supposed to embody an ideal, however, and to be representative of the young woman rooted in Swiss tradition. The nickname the Swiss gave her, "Vreneli," shows how successful she was. The soft, youthful features, her long hair worn in plaits, and her dress embroidered with edelweiss proclaim her to be a native child of Switzerland. Before the panorama of the mountains in the background, the young woman stands with her gaze directed heavenwards, her hair blowing in the wind. Ever since the 18th century, since Albrecht von Haller's instructive poem about the Alps, the reputation of Switzerland and its tourist industry has lived from this idealisation of freedom and the naturalness of the mountain people, an idealisation represented by the "Vreneli."