Portraits on Coins

When coins were invented in Asia Minor, sometime around the mid-7th century BC, nobody thought of embossing them with his image. In the beginning symbols were depicted as well as goddesses and gods or other attributes that united the coining community. Only about 150 years later, when men began to think of themselves as architects of their own fortune, did human faces appear on coins. However, it was still a long way to coin portraits. What was depicted were humanized deities, not with individual traits but with qualities associated with kings.

The first human being who dared to have his individual features presented on coins was Tissaphernes (c. 445-395 BC), a Persian nobleman and satrap of Lydia. Other Persian sovereigns soon followed his example; but in the western world, it would take some more time until the portrait appeared on coins. This will be the subject below.

Kingdom of Egypt, Ptolemy I Soter as Administrator (323-318 BC), Tetradrachm, c. 320 BC, Alexandria

Denomination:	**Tetradrachm**
Mint Authority:	**Satrap Ptolemy I Soter**
Mint:	**Alexandria**
Year of Issue:	**-320**
Weight (g):	**17.7**
Diameter (mm):	**29.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	

This tetradrachm was issued under Ptolemy I after the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC). It depicts one of the most beautiful, actually realistic portraits of Alexander, and thus marks an important turning point, in coinage as well as the history of art and in politics: until then, a real portrait with individual traits had been unthinkable in the Western world. Only gods, or kings with the attributes of deities – like Alexander in the guise of Heracles –, had hitherto been possible as motifs on coins. Here, however, we see Alexander drawn from live as conqueror of India – the symbol for that the elephant scalp with tusks and a craning trunk on his head. The reverse bears Zeus, the father of the gods, with his eagle.

Kingdom of Macedon, Demetrius I Poliorcetes (294-288 BC), Tetradrachm, c. 290-288 BC, Chalcis

Denomination:	**Tetradrachm**
Mint Authority:	**King Demetrius I Poliorcetes of Macedon**
Mint:	**Chalcis**
Year of Issue:	**-290**
Weight (g):	**17.28**
Diameter (mm):	**27.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

This tetradrachm was minted in the Kingdom of Macedon by Demetrius I of the Antigonid dynasty: the first of the Diadochi, the successors of Alexander the Great, to take on the title of king and declare himself independent from Alexander's empire (in 306 BC).

Like the other Diadochi, Demetrius at first issued coins with Alexander's types. Soon, however, he replaced Alexander's name with his own and added the title of basileus (king) that both he and his father had assumed in 306. Moreover, Demetrius was the first ruler ever to blatantly put his own portrait on a coin. Not even the great Alexander had dared to do so.

Hence, this coin is the first in history to bear a portrait that can doubtlessly be assigned to a certain person. That it shows Demetrius and not his father Antigonus is made clear by the diadem with the little bull horns that was characteristical of the young king.

Roman Republic, Imperatorial Issue, Gaius Julius Caesar (*100, † 44 BC) and P. Sepulius Macer, Denarius, 44 BC

Denomination:	**Denarius**
Mint Authority:	**Imperator C. Julius Caesar and Moneyer P. Sepulius Macer**
Mint:	**Undefined (Traveling Military Mint)**
Year of Issue:	**-44**
Weight (g):	**3.74**
Diameter (mm):	**19.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

This denarius was minted only a few days before Gaius Julius Caesar was murdered. The obverse portrays the great commander, and the inscription points out CAESAR DICT PERPETVO (Caesar, dictator for life). The reverse depicts Venus with a scepter and a little Victory on her hand.

Caesar was the first living Roman to have himself portrayed on a coin. With this he broke a religious taboo that had already prevented the Greeks to perpetuate the images of mortals on coins. Caesar's portrait revealed his intention of becoming king, and was probably one of the reasons for his assassination. The goddess on the reverse alludes to Caesars origin, because the gens Julia claimed descent from Venus (the Greek Aphrodite).

Roman Empire, Hadrian (117-138), Sesterce, c. 122, Rome

Denomination:	**Sesterce**
Mint Authority:	**Emperor Hadrian**
Mint:	**Rome**
Year of Issue:	**122**
Weight (g):	**27.8**
Diameter (mm):	**35.0**
Material:	**Bronze**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

Hadrian was one of Rome's great emperors. He conducted important reform programs and personified the ideal of the optimus princeps. This sesterce shows a very fine portrait of Hadrian.

Hadrian was the first emperor to be depicted with a full beard – and in doing so set a trend, that was maintained until the time of the Severan dynasty (193-235). On his coins, he was depicted with a noble profile, for which his fondness for everything Greek might have been decisive, for his portrait complied with the idealized style of classical Greek art.

Roman Empire, Honorius (393-423), Tremissis (1/3 Solidus), after 402, Ravenna

Denomination:	**Tremissis (1/3 Solidus)**
Mint Authority:	**Emperor Honorius**
Mint:	**Ravenna**
Year of Issue:	**402**
Weight (g):	**1.5**
Diameter (mm):	**13.0**
Material:	**Gold**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

Honorius was only ten years old when he ascended to the Roman throne. He was considered mentally deficient. He was unreliable and liked attacking people from behind. These characteristics made the young emperor highly unpopular among his contemporaries. Since no statues or busts of Honorius exist, we do not know what he looked like. At his time, the portraits of emperors on coins had become more and more stylized. This coin thus shows nothing but a lifeless picture of Honorius.

Byzantine Empire, Phocas (602-610), Solidus, c. 607-610

Denomination:	**Solidus**
Mint Authority:	**Emperor Phocas**
Mint:	**Constantinople**
Year of Issue:	**607**
Weight (g):	**4.46**
Diameter (mm):	**21.0**
Material:	**Gold**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

The portrait on this solidus doubtless depicts the emperor himself. Phocas was anxious to be portrayed as characteristically as possible on his coins, which expressed his claim for autarchy. Like the earlier Roman emperors, he was well aware of the propagandistic effect of his money. Through his naturalistic portraits, Phocas evidently distinguished himself from his predecessors and successors, whose coins generally bore highly stylized representations.

With his goatee, Phocas apparently revived the fashion of beards. Since the beginning of the 4th century, all emperors had been clean-shaven according to fine Roman tradition (with the exception of Julian the Apostate, who had worn a philosopher's beard). Subsequent to Phocas, however, the Byzantine emperors were bearded again. Incidentally, Phocas nurtured his facial hair growth to hide an ugly scar – something that had already been said about Emperor Hadrian, who had been the first bearded Roman emperor ever.

Kingdom of the Lombards, Perctarit (672-688), Tremissis

Denomination:	**Tremissis (1/3 Solidus)**
Mint Authority:	**King Perctarit of the Lombards**
Mint:	**Pavia oder Lucca?**
Year of Issue:	**650**
Weight (g):	**1.4**
Diameter (mm):	**17.0**
Material:	**Gold**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

The coins of the Germanic kings were geared to the coins of Rome – hence to the money of the very same empire that they had overthrown in the course of the Migration Period. On the other hand, there were considerable differences between Roman and Germanic coins: while the Roman gold coins had depicted realistic portraits of the respective emperors on their obverses, Germanic monies illustrated impersonal, strongly schematic busts of the rulers.

Today this circumstance is often termed as barbarization, as brutalization thus. Yet this depreciatory term does not justify the Germanic depictions. As far as the Germanic kings were concerned, coin motifs regarded politics and a claim to power rather than the representation of recognizable individuals. They wanted to represent the function and the legitimacy of their political functions, because the Germanic kings saw themselves as legitimate heirs to the Roman emperors. Moreover, the entire Christian coinage digressed from naturalistic portraits at that time – likewise in the powerful Byzantine Empire.

Byzantine Empire, Constantine IX Monomachos (1042-1055), Histamenon

Denomination:	**Histamenon**
Mint Authority:	**Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos**
Mint:	**Constantinople**
Year of Issue:	**1042**
Weight (g):	**4.41**
Diameter (mm):	**30.0**
Material:	**Gold**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

This coin from the mid-11th century shows a fine portrait of Christ on its obverse and a stylized image of Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos on the reverse. This emperor was the third husband of Empress Zoë, who had been ruling the Byzantine Empire since the death of her father Constantine VIII in 1028 together with her sister Theodora. After his marriage with Zoë in 1042, Constantine IX assumed the Byzantine throne. Zoë became co-empress, and Theodora was sent to a convent.

Constantine IX was a weak military leader: rebellions and invasions of Normans and Turks weakened the empire during his reign. In addition the quality of coins deteriorated at that time. Constantine had four categories of histamena minted to carry out a progressive devaluation. Within every stage of minting he changed the depiction on the reverse and debased his coins.

Holy Roman Empire, Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194-1250), Pfennig (Bracteate), Imperial Mint Ulm

Denomination:	**Pfennig (Bracteate)**
Mint Authority:	**Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen**
Mint:	**Ulm**
Year of Issue:	**1215**
Weight (g):	**0.4**
Diameter (mm):	**33.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

It was a central belief of the Early and High Middle Ages that the human being is nothing. Only in the context of a function, of predecessors and successors or of social groups did individuals gain importance. As a result during that time, kings and bishops, counts and abbots all looked alike on their coins. Not a particular person was depicted but the representative of an estate.

Frederick II, however, stood on the threshold of two worlds and two times. On this pfennig, he is depicted in medieval German style: as a representative of kingship, flanked by a small tower and a spray. But in Sicily, Fredericks home, antiquity was much more present than in the rest of Europe. Thus the omnipotence of the Roman emperors became a role model for him. On many of his coins, Frederick II is depicted in ancient style – wearing the draped coat of a military commander and a laurel wreath.

Holy Roman Empire, Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1220-1250), 1/2 Augustalis, c. 1231, Brindisi

Denomination:	**1/2 Augustalis**
Mint Authority:	**Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen**
Mint:	**Brindisi**
Year of Issue:	**1231**
Weight (g):	**2.62**
Diameter (mm):	**16.0**
Material:	**Gold**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

This gold coin, one of the finest of the Middle Ages, documents Frederick's sense of mission: clad in antique robe and wearing a laurel wreath, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire was depicted in the tradition of the ancient Roman emperors, of whom he regarded himself as successor. His will for imperial power was not only expressed by his portrait, but also by the eagle on the reverse of this coin, as the eagle was a symbol of power and authority since ancient times. Although Frederick's augustalis does not show an authentic portrait yet, it points ahead to the rebirth of the Roman antiquity in the time of the Renaissance.

Duchy of Milan, Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1466-1476), Testone, since 1474

Denomination:	**Testone (Lira)**
Mint Authority:	**Duke Gian Galeazzo Sforza**
Mint:	**Milan**
Year of Issue:	**1474**
Weight (g):	**9.57**
Diameter (mm):	**29.39999618530273**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Schweizerisches Landesmuseum Dep. ZB**

This silver coin portrays Galeazzo Maria Sforza, the duke of Milan, who played a decisive role in Europe's coinage. Galeazzo was still under age when he became duke of Milan after his father's sudden death in 1460. His father, Francesco Sforza, had given a substantial impulse to coinage already, as he had been the first modern human being to have himself portrayed on his coins.

While Galeazzo's father had his portrait put on gold coins only, the son was depicted on high-denomination silver coins as well. In 1474 he enforced a comprehensive monetary reform, during which he introduced the silver lira. As this lira showed Galeazzo's portrait, it was simply called testone by his contemporaries – a name deriving from the Italian word "testa," which means "head."

Galeazzo Maria Sforza's testoni became the archetypes of many European coins: the teston in France, the tostão in Portugal, the testoon in England and Scotland and the dicken in Switzerland and Southern Germany. Before long, every ruler, whether secular or clerical, wanted to see his face on his coins: as a result, coin images soon became the epitome of power.

Papal States, Innocent XII (1691-1700), Scudo 1692

Denomination:	**Scudo**
Mint Authority:	**Pope Innocent XII**
Mint:	**Rome**
Year of Issue:	**1692**
Weight (g):	**32.07**
Diameter (mm):	**44.29999923706055**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Schweizerisches Landesmuseum Dep. ZB**

This scudo is a splendid specimen of a portrait coin. It depicts Pope Innocent XII, or Antonio Pignatelli, as was this pope's civil name, drawn from live. Nothing is euphemized in this illustration, nothing concealed. The artist's signature can be read below the papal shoulder: HAMERANVS stands for Giovanni Hamerani, the renowned son from a dynasty of die-sinkers who worked for several popes. Giovanni's daughter Beatrice created some outstanding coins for Innocent XII as well. On the reverse of this coin the Archangel Michael is victorious over Satan.

Kingdom of France, Louis XVI (1774-1793), 1/5 Ecu 1788, La Rochelle

Denomination:	**1/5 Ecu**
Mint Authority:	**King Louis XVI of France**
Mint:	**La Rochelle**
Year of Issue:	**1788**
Weight (g):	**5.85**
Diameter (mm):	**27.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

This coin was minted in 1788, just before the outbreak of the French Revolution. The royal engraver Benjamin Duvivier succeeded in portraying King Louis XVI of France very naturalistically. Louis was not depicted in the traditional antique style any more, but elegantly, in the spirit of rococo. A new era had begun indeed – in every respect.

In June 1791, Louis decided to leave France together with his family. A carriage was to bring them out off the French capital. Initially nobody noticed the royal escape, but in Varennes, near the border of Luxemburg, the coachman declared that the horses were tired and would have to be exchanged. The postmaster approached, glanced into the carriage and did not believe his eyes: the man in the carriage looked exactly like the king on his coins ... The rest of the drama is quickly told. Louis was sent back to Paris, accused of treachery and executed in January 1793.

Kingdom of Spain, Alfons XIII (1886-1931), 5 Pesetas 1888, Madrid

Denomination:	**5 Pesetas**
Mint Authority:	**King Alfonso XIII of Spain**
Mint:	**Madrid**
Year of Issue:	**1888**
Weight (g):	**24.9**
Diameter (mm):	**37.0**
Material:	**Silver**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

King Alfonso XIII was one of the youngest kings ever to be depicted on coins. After the early death of his father Alfonso XII, Alfonso Junior was proclaimed king of Spain at the early age of only six months. In 1888, the first coins with his portrait were issued – on the 5-peseta coin shown here, the little boy is just about three years old.

The reverse of the coin depicts the Pillars of Heracles that belong to the Spanish coat of arms. According to the antique legend, Hercules erected a pillar on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar after the completion of his tasks. These pillars were meant to mark the end of the world – "non plus ultra" said people at that time: nothing further beyond. Charles V, in whose realm "the sun never set," changed this slogan into "plus ultra" (further beyond).

On the coins of little Alfonso, however, this motto seemed sheer mockery: under his rule, Cuba, the last remaining Spanish colony, was lost.

Swiss Confederation, 20 Francs (Vreneli) 1904

Denomination:	**20 Franken (Vreneli)**
Mint Authority:	**Swiss Confederation**
Mint:	**Berne**
Year of Issue:	**1904**
Weight (g):	**6.45**
Diameter (mm):	**21.0**
Material:	**Gold**
Owner:	**Sunflower Foundation**

For a long time, Swiss money bore the lansquenet who had fought for liberty at Morgarten, Sempach or Murten. However, towards the end of the 19th century, the martial element on coins was more and more displaced. Consequently a new coin image had to be found. After some seesaw – the jury judged the preliminary design as either "too frivol," "too youthful," "too immature" or "too less motherly" – the Helvetia of the artist Fritz Landry from Neuchâtel was accepted as a new motif for Swiss coins.

Initially, the question about the identity of Helvetia's model did not arise. But after the Second World War (1939-1945) two sons claimed this honor for their late mothers. Accordingly the model either ought to have been Françoise Kramer-Egli from Neuchâtel or Rosa Tännler from Gadmen in Oberhasli. It was most likely Rosa Tännler who acted as a model, for Fritz Landry had written in a letter to the Bundesrat (the Federal Council of Switzerland), that he had studied «un type de femme très pure du Hasli» (a woman very pure from Hasli) for his sketch.