

Special exhibit

Roman coin portraits

Gaius Julius Caesar was the first person to have his likeness stamped on Roman coins while he was still alive – for his contemporaries this was an outrageous thing to do, which they saw as a (further) sign of his ambitions to reintroduce the detested monarchy. After Julius Caesar's assassination on 15 March 44 BC, however, Marcus Junius Brutus, one of the main conspirators in the plot to kill Caesar and thereby save the republic, likewise had no compunction about having his own likeness depicted on coins!



Julius Caesar ...



... and his assassin Brutus

In the ensuing imperial period, the portrait of the ruler became a fixture on Roman coins. Depictions of the emperor and other members of the ruling dynasty were designed to represent their truest possible likeness without embellishment or even any kind of idealisation.



Augustus (27 BC-14)



Nero (54-68)



Galba (68-69)



Septimus Severus (193-211)

The quality of workmanship in the depiction of individual features deteriorated over time. This decline did not start abruptly, but stretched over a period of some three hundred years. There are many

different reasons for this. Besides a general downward slide in artistry leading to increasingly rigid and standardised forms, the third century AD, for example, also saw frequent changes of emperor and mass issues of coins, which meant that work on cutting the coin dies had to be done quickly and less carefully. Owing to the brevity of the reigns, which lasted no more than a few months in extreme cases, models or templates for the portrait were not always available. In the worst case, a likeness of the predecessor in office had to suffice, accompanied merely by the name of the new ruler.



Tacitus (275-276)



Florian (276; for 88 days)



Probus (276-282)

As early as from the beginning of the fourth century, some emperors can scarcely be recognised solely on the basis of their physiognomy. If the inscription on the obverse is no longer legible, their exact identification is impossible. From the middle of the fourth century, if not earlier, the bust of the emperor displays less and less an individual ruler and increasingly stands instead as a traditional symbol of imperial power *per se*.

It was not until the Renaissance (15th/16th century.) that the individual coin portrait underwent a revival.



Diocletian (284-305)



Maximian (285-310)



Constantius I (293-306)



Maxentius (306-312)



Theodosius I (379-395)



Arcadius (383-408)



Honorius (393-423)



Marcian (450-457)



Leo (457-474)



Zeno (474/75 and 476-491)

