

Special exhibit

Coins and medals during the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715)

The long reign of Louis XIV saw France rise to become the leading political and cultural power in Europe. A number of wars resulted in a marked expansion of the territory ruled by the King of France. At the same time, the Sun King's style of government and, above all, the manners, arts and fashions of his court came to be a much-imitated model of aristocratic culture. At the end of his reign, however, it became obvious that Louis XIV had overstretched France's resources as a political power. The hegemony in Europe to which he aspired was something that could not be established on a lasting basis against his many enemies joined in alliance. Constant warfare was also bleeding the state's coffers dry.

Medals and coins often vary in size and design. The main difference, however, is that medals are not legal tender but are instead commemorative. Medals are relatively new as a category of objects, although they do have precursors in antiquity. It was really only during the Renaissance that they first saw the light of day. Their name is derived from the Latin *metallum* and entered the English language from the Middle French *médaille*, which itself came from the Italian *medaglia*. The occasions for minting medals are manifold. In actual fact, there has hardly ever been a major event or prominent person not to have been immortalised on a medal. Medals have been minted, either officially or privately, to commemorate persons, pilgrimages, anniversaries, and historical events, presented as political and satirical awards, as well as to honour special, often sporting achievements in gold, silver and bronze.

In the Baroque era, medals were important instruments for the visual representation of princely power. Our example, a bronze medal of the Prince of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen, was produced at

the behest of Anton Günther II in 1709 upon his elevation to the rank of Imperial Prince.

Principality of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen
Anton Günther II. (1666–1716)
Bronze medal, 1709
Medallist: J C Koch
Upon the elevation of the House of
Schwarzburg to imperial princely rank



One side bears his Baroque portrait with the name and title “ANTHONIUS GVNTHERVS *Dei Gratia Princeps SCHWARTZburgensis*” and the other a triumphal arch with a town view in the background. The legend refers to the complex history of the elevation in rank: “DEO AVTORE . LEOPOLDO DATORE . IOSEPHO STATORE., *in exergue*.: PRINCIPALIS DIGNITAS COLLATA Anno MDCXCVII PVBLICE DECLARata Anno MDCCIX” (Under God as the initiator, Leopold as the bestower, and Joseph as the certifier, the rank of prince was conferred in 1697 and publicly proclaimed in 1709). In actual fact, Anton Günther II had already been elevated to the rank of Imperial Prince by Emperor Leopold I in 1697, but was not allowed to use the title until 1709.

In contrast to the medals, 17th and 18th century coins tell us very little, especially about what was happening at the time. The dominant images on coins minted under Louis XIV and his contemporaries are portraits of rulers and heraldic motifs. The sole exception were the few states which had a system of government in the form of a republic, such as the Republic of the United Netherlands.

Louis XIV’s long reign produced a richly varied coinage, motivated by the massive costs of maintaining his court and waging war. Gold, silver and copper coins were minted in various denominations. The monetary system was reformed several times, but, in most cases, the money was debased owing to the oppressively high costs of war.



Kingdom of France
Louis XIV (reigned 1643–1715)
Louis d'or, 1655, Paris



Kingdom of France
Louis XIV (reigned 1643–1715)
Écu du Parlement, 1682, Rennes



Kingdom of Spain
Philip V (reigned 1700–1746)
8 escudos, 1713, Seville



Republic of the United Netherlands
Province of Holland
Ducaton, 1671

Further reading:

E. E. Clain-Stefanelli – V. Clain-Stefanelli, *Münzen der Neuzeit, Die Welt der Münzen 5* (München 1978).

J. Duplessy, *Les monnaies françaises royales de Hugues Capet à Louis XVI*. (Paris² 1999).

H. Ziegler, *Der Sonnenkönig und seine Feinde. Die Bildpropaganda Ludwigs XIV. in der Kritik, Studien zur internationalen Architektur- und Kunstgeschichte 79* (Petersberg 2010).