

SCULPTURE HALL
ROMAN COINS

DENOMINATIONS OF ROMAN COINS

Although the earliest Roman coins used Greek denominations, such as the **didrachm** (two-drachm piece), the Romans had their own system in place by the late third century B.C. The base unit of Roman coinage was the **as**. The principal silver coin became the **denarius**, at first worth ten asses, subsequently revalued at sixteen. Coins were also minted in several denominations worth fractions of the denarius; from the time of Augustus, the most important of these was the **sestertius**, an orichalcum (brass) piece worth one-quarter of a denarius. Under the Empire, the standard gold coin, or **aureus**, was equivalent in value to twenty-five denarii.

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RIGHT CASE

ROMAN COINS

INTRODUCTION

The coins we use today are direct descendants of the coins created by the Greeks and the Romans. In antiquity, as today, coins were minted in a variety of metals—chiefly, gold, silver, and various alloys of copper—each with a particular material worth; gold was far more valuable than silver, which, in turn, greatly surpassed copper. A broad assortment of denominations could be achieved by creating coins from specific quantities of the different metals. Ordinarily, the monetary value of a given coin was guaranteed by whoever issued it, usually a city or a ruler, and that guarantee was signified by official markings on the coin itself. These markings could be as simple as a geometric punch or as complex as a portrait head, a statue of a deity, or an architectural tableau in raised relief. The efficacy of coins as information-bearing media was quickly recognized. Images provided a means of visual communication with largely illiterate audiences; for the literate, abbreviated texts, known as legends, often identified the issuing authority (ruler and/or mint), as well as the deity depicted or event commemorated.

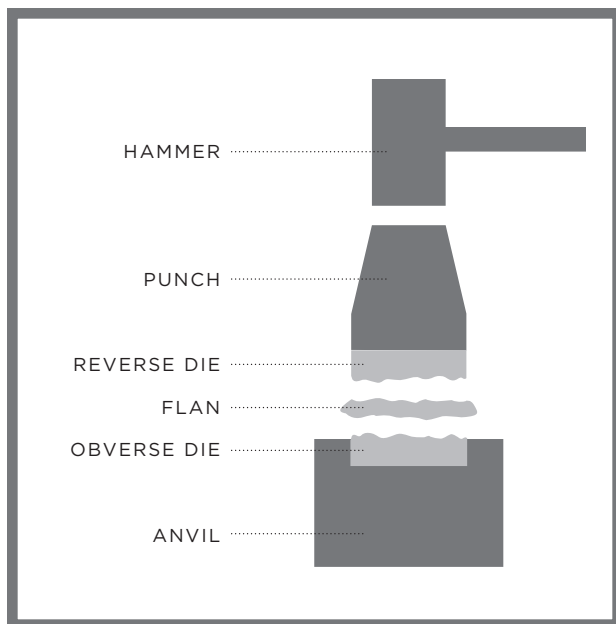


Obverse: head of Hercules



Reverse: she-wolf and twins

PRODUCTION



Most ancient coins were produced by striking blanks of metal between two incised dies. Each die left a relief copy of its engraved design on the face of the coin with which it had come into contact. This imprinted image, along with its accompanying legend, is known as a coin type. The dies were meant to be re-used, and the same type sometimes appears on thousands of coins. The mass production of coinage permitted rapid distribution of large sums of money for use in a variety of situations—as pay for government and military service, as cash for the purchase of goods, as taxes collected by cities and states, or as savings hoarded away.

Early Roman silver relied heavily on models provided by Alexander the Great and his successors. The obverse of a Roman didrachm ① of 269 B.C. depicts a head of Hercules (the Roman name for Herakles), who was also the centerpiece of Alexander's coinage (as on ② in the case of Greek coins to the left). Hercules is identifiable here by the club and lion's paw resting on his shoulder. The hero also bears a close resemblance to coin portraits of some of the kings who ruled over Alexander's divided empire and even wears a diadem (band). The reverse, on the other hand, features a quintessentially Roman image—the she-wolf suckling the twins Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome.

② Silver denarius of Rome

Rome, 211–208 B.C.

22 mm

2001.87.168



Obverse: head of Roma.

③ Silver denarius of Julius Caesar as Dictator perpetuo

Rome, 44 B.C.

18.5 mm

2001.87.577



Obverse: head of Caesar



Reverse: Dioscuri



Reverse: Venus

The financial strains caused by the Second Punic War with Carthage (218–201 B.C.) forced Roman mint officials to establish a lower weight standard for silver coins, and so the denarius came into being (at first worth ten asses, later revalued at sixteen). At the same time, military symbolism came to dominate the coinage. The female head wearing a winged helmet on the obverse of this coin ② is generally identified as Roma, the personified patron goddess of the city, especially as a military power; the reverse depicts the Dioscuri, patron deities of the Roman army, who are shown on horseback and wielding long spears.

In 44 B.C., Julius Caesar, having prevailed over his rivals in Rome's civil war, began his fifth term as consul and was named "dictator forever." In the same year, a coin type ③ was introduced with an obverse that not only declared this unprecedented distinction in the legend, but also featured his portrait, wearing a laurel wreath symbolizing victory. Julius Caesar thus became the first living person to be portrayed on a Roman coin in a manner customary for a king. The reverse bore an image of the goddess Venus, from whom Caesar claimed descent. Caesar was assassinated within a few weeks of the minting of this coin.

④ Silver denarius of Octavian

Pergamum, 28–27 B.C.

20 mm

2001.87.885

⑤ Silver denarius of Augustus

Rome, 19 B.C.

19 mm

2001.87.991



Obverse: head of Octavian



Obverse: Honos



Reverse: crocodile



Reverse: kneeling Parthian

Octavian, Caesar's grand-nephew and adopted son, was forced to contend with a number of other prominent Romans, each believing himself to be Caesar's rightful successor. One of them, Marc Antony, a Roman statesman and general, allied himself with Cleopatra VII of Egypt. Octavian defeated their combined forces in a naval battle at Actium in 31 B.C., after which he took control of Egypt. A coin type minted in 28–27 B.C. ④ celebrates this triumph, with Octavian's portrait on the obverse and a crocodile straddled by the legend "Egypt captured" on the reverse. After receiving the honorific title of Augustus in 27 B.C., he turned his



attention to stabilizing the provinces through both force and negotiation. His greatest diplomatic success, commemorated on the reverse of a coin type issued in 19 B.C. ⑤, was the peaceful return of Roman military standards—flags carried by the Roman army into battle—that had been lost to the Parthians in past conflicts. Although Augustus is not explicitly portrayed on the obverse of this coin, the facial features of Honos, the personification of Honor, are similar to those of the emperor. The reverse depicts a kneeling Parthian holding out a Roman standard.

6 Orichalcum sestertius of Galba

Rome, A.D. 69

38 mm

2001.87.579

7 Orichalcum sestertius of Trajan

Rome, A.D. 116-117

33 mm

2002.83.1



Obverse: head of Galba



Obverse: head of Trajan



Reverse: Libertas



Reverse: client kings and emperor

The relatively large format of the sestertius, an orichalcum (brass) coin worth four asses, provided engravers with ample space to fashion highly intricate designs. Many sestertii feature imperial portraits hardly less impressive for their quality of workmanship than representations sculpted on a much larger scale. In fact, because the emperors are identified in accompanying legends, coin portraits can provide crucial evidence in the identification of likenesses of imperial figures in other media. Galba, who occupied the throne briefly in A.D. 69, after the death »

of Nero, minted coins 6 celebrating the restoration of the "Freedom of the people," with Libertas, the personification of freedom, featured on the reverse. The emperor Trajan, whose reign lasted from A.D. 98-117, enlarged the Roman Empire to its greatest extent. The theme of subjugation is alluded to on the reverse of a Trajanic coin 7, showing three client kings paying homage to the emperor, who sits on a portable stool, indicating the setting as a Roman army camp.

8 Gold aureus of Lucius Verus

Rome, A.D. 163

18.5 mm

2001.87.1004

9 Gold aureus of Diva Faustina I

Rome, after A.D. 141

18.5 mm

2001.87.1005



Obverse: head of Lucius Verus



Obverse: head of Faustina I



Reverse: victory inscribing a shield



Reverse: Ceres

Engravers of the greatest skill performed their best work in the most costly of all materials, namely gold. Gold coins were minted in smaller numbers than were silver and bronze. Many Romans would probably never have occasion to handle even a single gold coin due to its great value, which might have been worth more than a month's salary; gold was likely used primarily for imperial gifts and payments of large sums. Given the close association of the emperor with the gold coins minted in his name, the extremely fine quality of the imperial portraits they bear on their obverses comes as no surprise. On a gold coin, or aureus, of Lucius



Verus ⑧, co-emperor with Marcus Aurelius from A.D. 161–169, scrupulous attention was paid to the definition of individual curls of the emperor's hair and beard. The elaborately interwoven and texturally differentiated hairstyle worn by the empress Faustina the Elder, wife of Antoninus Pius, on an aureus ⑨ minted sometime after her death in A.D. 141, would have required meticulous work by an expert engraver. The reverses of both coins were also crafted with great skill; on the coin of Lucius Verus ⑧, Victory is shown inscribing a shield, while Ceres, the goddess of grain, graces the reverse of the coin of Faustina ⑨.

10 Gold solidus of Constantine I

Nicomedia, A.D. 335

22 mm

2001.87.578



Obverse: head of Constantine



Reverse: Victory inscribing a shield

The solidus was a lighter gold coin that replaced the aureus in the early fourth century A.D. The bust of Constantine I on the obverse of this solidus ^⑩ continues the tradition of portraiture observable on earlier gold coins (e.g., ^⑧ and ^⑨); the emphasis of the engraver, however, has shifted away from the individualized likeness of the emperor, achieved through plastic treatment of the face and hair, towards details of costume and ornament, indicated by lines and geometric shapes. The image on the reverse, of a seated Victory inscribing a small shield, also borrows a time-honored motif (cf. the reverse of ^⑧).

- ① Lent by the James and Mary Ottaway Collection
- ② Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001, purchased 1962
- ③ Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001, Gift of Prof. Tracy Peck, 1895
- ④ Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001, purchased 1961
- ⑤ Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001
- ⑥ Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001, Gift of Gilbert Steinberg, 1984
- ⑦ Ruth Elizabeth White Fund
- ⑧ Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001, purchased 1937
- ⑨ Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001, purchased 1938
- ⑩ Numismatic Collection Transfer, 2001, purchased 1950