

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 33 (2006)
Heft: 1

Artikel: Coins : Swissmint - or the fine art of coining
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906396>

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Swissmint – or the fine art of coining

Some four billion Swiss coins worth a total of CHF 2.5 billion are currently in circulation in Switzerland. And every year the Swissmint in Berne strikes 32 million new coins. A visit to the Swiss money factory. By Heinz Eckert

Despite the repeated claims by techno-enthusiasts that coinage is in decline since fewer and fewer transactions are paid for in cash, hard cash is part and parcel of everyday life and there is still a major need for coins. Plastic cards and electronic payment transactions notwithstanding, the Swissmint in Berne is not likely to go out of business in the near future.

Swissmint, which until 1998 was called the Federal Mint and is housed in a national heritage factory building in Berne's Kirchenfeld district, is a modern manufacturing outfit which operates as an autonomous unit within the Federal Finance Administration. With a workforce of 18, Swissmint is responsible for providing Switzerland with coinage (via the Swiss National Bank), in denominations from 1 cent to five francs.

While all Swissmint minting tools are crafted by highly skilled specialists, the planchets are provided by foreign suppliers.

Every year, 130 tons of new coins leave Swissmint, neatly packed and destined for the Swiss National Bank. Ultra-modern machines produce 600 coins a minute. The image and

value (heads and tails) are pressed into the coins at a force of 200 tons.

Naturally, Swissmint staff or visitors to the factory cannot simply help themselves to new coins from the pallets and are not permitted to take souvenirs away with them. Even surplus production is strictly monitored. All coins are electronically and mechanically checked and counted by a highly sophisticated system before leaving the pressing machines. A strict record is also kept of all visitors to the mint.

As well as coins for everyday cash transactions, Swissmint also produces commemorative coins that are much sought after by collectors. Every year since 1974 the Confederation has issued special coins commemorating historical events, places of interest, monuments, achievements or distinguished personalities. The commemorative coins are minted in silver, gold or bimetal and are designed by well-known Swiss artists and graphic designers.

Every commemorative coin originates with an artist's sketch. Based on this sketch, a plaster model with a diameter of twenty centimetres is made. From the silicon negative of this

plaster model, a resin model is then cast. The resin model is clamped in a reducing machine where a sensor registers the relief of the model and reduces it to a precise coin-sized metal version. This process takes up to 36 hours to reproduce all the minutiae of the model. An engraver applies the finishing touches by hand, meticulously perfecting the contours and fillet work. The reduction is then hardened and used as a template for the hardened, negative minting die.

The revenue from stamping and selling these special coins goes towards supporting cultural projects in Switzerland. But as Kurt Rohrer, managing director of Swissmint, explains, coin collectors are growing older. So in future, there are plans to launch targeted image campaigns to encourage an interest in coin collecting among the younger population. Rohrer is convinced that there is a huge potential for customers, particularly those abroad. After all, what better souvenir could you bring back from Switzerland than a perfectly minted coin in precious metal, featuring a well-known Swiss tourist attraction?

SPECIAL 2006 COINS

■ Commemorative coins, designed by well-known Swiss artists and minted every year, continue to enjoy great popularity. All commemorative coins have a legal denominational value and are produced as a limited edition. The government uses the proceeds from the sale of these

coins to finance cultural projects in Switzerland.

■ Three new special coins went on sale in January 2006:

To complete the "Swiss mountain" series, Graubünden graphic artist Stephan Bundi designed the 10 franc bimetal coin "Piz Bernina".

The 20 franc silver coin commemorating 100 years of the post bus was designed by Zurich graphic artist Raphael Schenker.

And Rudolf Mirer, a well-known Graubünden artist and former Swiss Guard, was asked to design the 50 franc gold coin commemorating the 500th anni-

versary of the Papal Swiss Guard in the Vatican.

The entire 2006 series, containing denominations from 1 cent to 5 francs as well as the special "Piz Bernina" coin, is available as a set.

