



Gold Melting House, The Royal Mint, Tower Hill

The Double-Sovereign Struck to Circulating Standard

Historically, the Double-Sovereign has primarily been struck as part of Proof sets for collectors. On four occasions, in 1823, 1887, 1893 and 1902, the coin was struck to circulating standard, although it appears as if only very limited numbers actively circulated as part of Britain's coinage, meaning the majority likely became collectable pieces. Due to their high denomination, the demand for the coins in general circulation was minimal, resulting in the Bank of England returning a large portion of the 1902-dated Double-Sovereigns to The Royal Mint in 1903 for melting down.

Dating back to the Tudor dynasty and the reign of Henry VII, The Sovereign has a storied past that is intimately tied to the British monarchy. Spanning almost 80 years, the four coins in this set feature the portraits of three monarchs, with Queen Victoria featuring on two of the coins and George IV and Edward VII adorning the others.

The First Circulating Double-Sovereign

The first design to feature on The Sovereign during the reign of George IV was authorised by Order in Council on 5 May 1821. Benedetto Pistrucci, the esteemed Italian engraver, was tasked with modelling and engraving both the obverse and reverse of the coin. In 1823, the British sculptor Francis Leggatt Chantrey was asked to prepare a new bust of the king, as the monarch wanted a new image. The king commanded that Chantrey's portrait was 'to serve as a model for the effigy to be impressed on the obverse of the Double-Sovereigns which have been ordered to be coined at the Mint'. Pistrucci refused to copy the work of another artist, and so Assistant Engraver Jean Baptiste Merlen went on to engrave the die for the obverse. The 1823 Double-Sovereign also holds the honour of being the very first circulating Double-Sovereign in history.





The 'Jubilee Head' Portrait

The year 1887 marked the 50th anniversary of Queen Victoria's accession and heralded a change of coinage portrait. In February 1879, the monarch's private secretary sent a letter to Sir Charles Fremantle, Deputy Master of The Royal Mint, informing him that the Vienna-born sculptor Joseph Edgar Boehm had been asked to create a portrait of Queen Victoria. Intended to serve as a model for future dies, there was no specific reason given for the change of effigy. However, the request was unsurprising given that the 'Young Head' portrait, created by William Wyon RA, had featured on the nation's coinage for more than 40 years. Modelled from a live sitting, the portrait received the monarch's approval. Issued in a jubilee year, it became known as the 'Jubilee Head'.

The 'Old Head' Portrait

Sculptor Thomas Brock RA created the final portrait of Queen Victoria to feature on British coins. In February 1891, the Chancellor of the Exchequer set up a committee to discuss and review the designs of the nation's coinage. The committee invited several sculptors and painters to submit designs and, following the committee's recommendations, the queen formally selected an effigy created by Brock. The portrait was used for the obverse of the nation's gold, silver and bronze coins, including the Double-Sovereign that was struck in 1893. The crowned bust of Queen Victoria faces to the left, veiled and draped, wearing the ribbon and star of the Garter. Often referred to as the 'Old Head' or the 'Veiled Head', Brock's initials feature below the bust.

The 'Bare Head' Portrait

Edward VII's reign began in 1901 upon the passing of his mother, Queen Victoria, with the new coinage introduced in 1902.

George William de Saulles, who had been called to The Royal Mint by the Deputy Master, Sir Charles Fremantle, succeeded Leonard Wyon following his death in 1891. Tasked with creating the new portrait of the king for coinage, de Saulles produced what is known as the 'Bare Head' effigy, which appears on the Double-Sovereign struck in 1902; the obverse of the coin also features the engraver's initials below the truncation.





United in Design

Whilst the coins in this set each feature a different portrait designed by a different engraver, Benedetto Pistrucci's iconic rendition of St George slaying the dragon appears on the reverse of all four coins. Introduced in 1817, this beautiful piece of engraving skill was produced by one of the finest engravers to have ever worked at The Royal Mint. However, the working relationship broke down somewhat towards the latter part of his career, largely due to his well-documented, fiery temperament.

