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## **The distinctive role of a mint museum**

Graham Dyer

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I have been curator of the British Royal Mint Museum for more than thirty years. It will not surprise you, therefore, that I regard a museum as a necessary adjunct to the work of a mint, as something that adds an extra and highly desirable dimension to the day-to-day activity that a mint has to undertake.

Beyond question, it seems to me, mints should attempt to maintain a complete record of what they produce. This can be achieved readily enough by setting aside, as we do at the British Royal Mint, specimens of every coin and medal that we strike; and to this basic requirement I would add trial, experimental and pattern coins, as well as artists' drawings, artists' plaster models, and punches and dies. Mints also have the opportunity, subject to the availability of sufficient space, to retain obsolete machinery such as coining presses or reducing machines in order to preserve a record of changes in the minting process so that future generations will understand better why our coins look the way they do. And finally, the whole history of a mint can be illuminated by collecting paintings, engravings, photographs, films and a veritable miscellany of artefacts.

A mint - because it is the source of manufacture and because many of these objects are an integral part of the minting process - is ideally placed to assemble such a collection of numismatic material. What surprises me is how slow we have been to realise the need to do this. In the case of the British Royal Mint, despite a history that stretches back more than 1,100 years, it was only in 1816 that a collection was started. And if I turn to my friend Albert Scheffers from the Dutch Mint Museum in Utrecht it was not until 1845, so he tells me, that his collection was formally established by royal decree. The Portuguese and Spanish Mint collections are rather older, but even so date back, I believe, only to the 1780s. This really is puzzling, not just because coins had been objects of study since at least the time of the Renaissance but also because of the practical need for mints to be able to recognise counterfeits of the coins in circulation, coins that could well be over 100 years old.

The explanation, if one exists, is a subject for another occasion. Let me return instead to my statement of general principle, namely that it is entirely proper and desirable that national mints should maintain numismatic collections. Such collections serve as the corporate memory of a mint - as the source of information about what it has done in the past, as the custodian of a mint's traditions, and as the means whereby a mint may enjoy a confident understanding of its role and purpose as an important national organisation. The benefit is significantly increased if the collection is managed by staff with the professional expertise to ensure that its resources are fully utilised. In ideal circumstances - and here I look

enviously at Madrid, where Rafael Feria's vast empire is all around us today, and at Paris, about which we heard yesterday - a mint museum can act almost like a national museum, displaying its treasures to the public, organising exhibitions and conferences, and publishing books and catalogues.

But a mint museum is very fortunate indeed, if it can operate in such congenial conditions, free from any threat to its continued existence. Today, and understandably so, some mints find it difficult to justify a museum in these scholarly terms and I can tell you that in recent years even my own mint, despite its proud history, has struggled to accept the need for a collection. Twice, I have had to face the prospect of the collection being transferred to another museum and, on the second occasion, part of the collection was already packed up in boxes before the Mint decided to keep it after all.

Thirty years ago, when I began at the Mint, life was more comfortable. What has changed is that the Royal Mint is now required by the British Government to see itself as a business organisation - lean, hard-headed, concerned with securing a financial return that will meet the targets laid down by Government, and whose performance will be judged by its success in meeting those targets. In these circumstances, the Royal Mint Museum has seemed to some of my colleagues as an unnecessary expense, as something that increases the cost of running the Mint and makes it less competitive in the international marketplace where it seeks to obtain much of its business.

It is a tough environment in which to operate and we no longer have a public display. I know, of course, that most of you in this room are no strangers to financial hardship or financial pressure, but perhaps where a mint museum may be in a more precarious position is that it can be closed and its assets transferred to a national museum collection. To a Treasury civil servant this may seem a perfectly logical rationalisation of resources, and a mint curator finds himself on the defensive, having to justify the survival of his collection on the difficult financial grounds dictated by his opponents.

I say 'difficult' because a mint museum is unlikely to be financially self-supporting, unless perhaps as part of an ambitious visitor centre which includes public access to the minting processes. It therefore has no option but to be first and foremost of service to its paymasters and accordingly, for less fortunate mint curators, this means that our primary purpose is to support - and be seen to support - the normal day-to-day activities of the mint. The more we do to support these activities the greater is the appreciation of our colleagues and the more secure is our existence. A mint museum such as mine cannot be a purely academic institution and, if my

own experience is typical, it has to be an integral part of mint business if it is to survive.

Let us look at how this is achieved. Inevitably, much of what I shall now say reflects the perspective of the British Royal Mint and I therefore ask you to bear in mind that I stand before you as the poor relation, as the curator of a museum that has no public display, that belongs to a mint with no academic commitment, and employs just 2 people as against the fifty or so here in Madrid.

I want to begin with the role of a mint museum in supporting the marketing of collector coins, and for the obvious reason that, as you all know, the sale of collector coins has become an increasingly important part of the modern mint, both in terms of output and of profit. So, how does the museum help? First, we assist with promotional literature: by checking the accuracy of information, by providing illustrations, by suggesting story-lines and relevant information, and even by commissioning numismatic articles. This amounts to a valuable contribution, because history and tradition – the areas of our strength – have proved to be good selling points when we are trying to persuade collectors to buy our coins.

At a different level, because of our knowledge of the past and of the nation's numismatic heritage we assist in the generation of ideas and themes for new commemorative coins, such as the £2 coin celebrating the tercentenary of the Bank of England whose starting point was a telephone conversation between myself and John Keyworth, the Curator at the Bank. Ideas are not necessarily restricted to coins and medals, but spill over into more extraneous but very successful items such as silver pots and dishes. What is more, our presence guarantees a welcome numismatic input to the decision-making process and we can provide a form of numismatic quality control to stop the wilder suggestions of the marketing department. Before I leave the subject of collector coins, let me also make the point that we are able to help by direct face-to-face contact with the collectors who are the mint's customers. They are able to visit the Royal Mint Museum and, in a way, a visit to our museum is all the more effective because there is no public display and visitors have to be personally guided.

But, the practical case for a mint museum can be argued in much broader terms of good public relations. Look, for instance, at the ways in which we make use of the objects in our care: by loan to other museums (such as the HSBC Gallery that Joe Cribb talked about yesterday), by mounting temporary exhibitions in different parts of the country, by examining and authenticating coins for the police and for the numismatic trade, and by entertaining very important visitors or potential customers on behalf of the mint.

There is, too, the use of the collection for the provision of information, beginning with simple enquiries from members of the public and ranging upwards to the abstruse questions raised by scholars. Interviews with journalists also fall into this category and just last week, for instance, I gave three interviews to local radio stations. Lectures are delivered to numismatic societies and the chairman was kind enough to mention that I have been President of the British Numismatic Society. When time permits there is also the writing of books and articles for publication, including in my own case an illustrated history of the Royal Mint that has proved a useful gift to hundreds of visitors and customers.

By now you should all be entirely convinced that possession of even a small museum enables a mint to contribute positively to the numismatic world, enables it to be seen as an organisation which values and appreciates coin collectors, and in short enables it to present an acceptable numismatic face.

Yet, I still have to mention what has proved a particularly useful and increasingly demanding role for the Royal Mint Museum. I refer to the question of design, where it has become the task of the museum to organise design competitions for new coins and medals, to deal directly with artists, and to prepare competition entries for the judging Committee. This has come about because the museum possesses the necessary background knowledge, and partly because we have wanted to do it. As numismatists we care about good design and I like to think that artists perceive this and respond to it. Indeed the capacity of the collection to inspire and foster good design explains both its origin in 1816 and the fact that it was at first placed in the custody of one of the Mint engravers. Other mint museums may not be so directly involved in the design process but the connection is evident here in Madrid, where Rafael Feria is responsible for the engraving school, and also in Paris, where I am sure that Evelyne Cohen sees part of her responsibility as the celebration of numismatic and medallic art.

In all of these ways, even a small mint museum has the ability to make a real contribution to the activities of its parent mint. By its presence, as I have said, it provides an extra dimension to the work of a mint, something that is appreciated by collectors, by the general public and, I hope, by mint colleagues. The mint curator has to recognise, however, that he is primarily a mint official and that scholarly numismatic research is a luxury. It sometimes seems a high price to pay but certainly, as in my own situation, unless we can demonstrate our usefulness to the mint we will not survive.

Let me not end, however, on a negative note. As a numismatist I benefit by close contact with mint engravers and mint engineers and I have no doubt at all that I have a better understanding of certain aspects of

numismatics from being part of the daily operations of a mint and being steeped in its ancient traditions and current attitudes. And as a curator I am much more likely, by being physically present in the mint, to make my colleagues aware of the needs of posterity and to secure material for the collection.

Something is therefore lost if a mint collection is transferred to a national museum. But, I hasten to add that I am not anti-national museum if transfer is the only way in which a mint collection will be properly cared for. It does, however, seem to me preferable if national collections and mint collections can co-operate, collaborate and co-exist without compromising their distinctive roles. That is what I hope the British Royal Mint and the British Museum have managed to achieve to their mutual benefit and long may such a happy symbiosis be allowed to continue.