

Contemporary medal making in Jablonec nad Nisou

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Continuity with tradition

Jablonec nad Nisou as a town grew spontaneously at the crossroads of trade routes in the Jizera Mountains, which are known as a traditional region of Czech glassmaking. The town and its surroundings have become famous in the world for the production and trade in costume jewellery and haberdashery made of glass, metal and other materials since the 19th century. This industry that used specialised metalworking craftsmanship produced, for example, metal stampings of small medals, medallions, badges, sacraments and other items. The production of semi-finished jewellery required educated and creative craftsmen who could contribute their work and products to make Jablonec goods more competitive in the world. The first major names from the world of professional medal making can be mentioned in Jablonec nad Nisou only from the last decade of the 19th century. This significant qualitative rise in the artistic and craft aspects is related to

the establishment of the Vocational School of Art in 1880. A specialised department for metal engraving was opened here from the very beginning. Medal makers Arnold Hartig, Ludwig Hujer, Richard Placht and the creator of the first Czechoslovak coin, Otakar Španiel, belong to the first important graduates of this school at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and thus laid the foundation for our modern medal making as well as Austrian and German. In the following years, many high-quality and important medal makers graduated from the metal engraving department.

Freedom brings unexpected development

Jiří Dostál, a famous Czech painter, sculptor and medal maker, became the headmaster of the school in the new democratic republic and has intensively supported the development of the school since 1989 (fig. 1). In connection with the transformation of the structure of the costume jewellery industry in Jablonec nad Nisou, which was experiencing the rules of the capitalist market after decades of a centrally controlled socialist economy, the director Dostál had to fight for the existence of the school many times. Therefore, he also met with enthusiastic professionals who could help the school and its graduates to survive in the new, rapidly emerging system.

Slovakia was finally separated from the Czech Republic and thus the independent Czech Republic was created in 1992. The Central Bank started to print new banknotes and coins already in September. Apart from that, the Czech Republic did not have its own coin ‘factory’ after the division, so it needed a new mint for production of circulating coins. All Czechoslovak coins had been minted by the historic mint in Kremnica in Slovakia since 1922 until then. The decision had to come quickly, but the Czech National Bank could not entrust this production to just anyone. First of all, it had to be secured abroad. The Czech National Bank announced a tender for the production of the circulation coins, which was won by two suppliers. The Royal Canadian Mint in Winnipeg won the 1, 2 and 5 CZK nominal values. Deutsche Nickel, a German staple manufacturer from Hamburg won the



Fig 1. Jiří Harcuba, 2018, reverse
Jiří Dostál

Gold 999,9/1000, 22 mm, proof, struck in Czech Mint
Photo: Czech Mint



Fig 2. Ferdinand I, Czech king, 2009, obverse
Jan Lukáš
Brass, 50 mm, standard, struck in Czech Mint
Photo: Czech Mint

other coins – 10, 20 and 50 halers, 10, 20 and 50 CZK. It took a lot of effort to transport many tons of coins across the ocean, as well as to ensure maximum security during lorry transport.

Jan Vízek, the deputy of a large, specialized export company Jablonex for costume jewellery from Jablonec nad Nisou, was one of the experts who supported the unique Jablonec industry. His friendly talk with the school's director Jiří Dostál gave rise to the idea of establishing a new Czech mint in Jablonec nad Nisou, which boasts a rich history of the medal making industry, but also a good quality of craftsmanship and technical background with the possibility of expanding production to coinage in the local Bižuterie company with almost half a century of tradition. The examples of Jablonec mints and mintages, the number of metal engravers, toolmakers and pressmen decided in the negotiations about the new mint. The initial idea presented at the right time, in the right place and in front of the right people, was eventually realized. On 14 December 1992, the Czech National Bank confirmed its intention to start minting currency at Bižuterie in 1993. For this reason, it was necessary not only to acquire the appropriate technical equipment, but also to ensure the safety of the production according to strict criteria. The team of only 18 employees was ready to produce new Czech coins since 1 July 1993. The Czech Mint celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. It employs 150 people and owns 5 stores in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Education of new professionals

In connection with the establishment of the Czech Mint in Jablonec nad Nisou, a higher vocational school was established at the Secondary School of Arts and Crafts in 1995. The highly specialised studies focuses on the field of minted coins and medals. It educates new medal makers who enrich the Czech Mint's coinage with their artistic



Fig 3. Gold coin Old Town Square execution – Czech leaders, 2021, reverse
Petr Horák
Gold 999,9/1000, Ø 22 mm, proof, struck in Czech Mint
Photo: Czech Mint

and theoretical erudition. Medal makers Jiří Dostál and Jan Lukáš (fig. 2) belong to the founding teachers. These 'founding fathers' gradually handed over the knowledge to the next generation of teachers, who not only maintain their legacy, but continue to develop it. Society-wide development brings new challenges, which provide the school with new opportunities for development at the same time. The current head of the school, Martina Picko Baumannová, is systematically working on highlighting the importance of this educational institution not only in the Czech Republic but also internationally. The aimed cooperation of the school with companies, including the Czech Mint, provides the school with new possibilities for the pedagogical activities and the expansion of the influence of the Czech medal school globally.



Fig 4. Gold 5000 CZK coin, 2015 (Žďárkovský arched bridge), reverse
Luboš Charvát
Gold 999,9/1000, 28 mm, standard, struck in Czech Mint
Photo: Czech Mint



Fig 5. Silver five-ounce medal Jan Saudek – Life, 2022, reverse
Vojtěch Dostál
Silver 999/1000, 65 mm, proof, struck in Czech Mint
Photo: Czech Mint

Thanks to a well-thought-out strategy, the teaching staff is currently composed of leading Czech medal makers, most of whom graduated from this school. Most of them are working on new commemorative coins and medals in cooperation with the Czech Mint. They are Petr Horák (fig. 3), Luboš Charvát (died 2022) (fig. 4), Vojtěch Dostál (fig. 5), Miroslav Schovanec and Josef Oplištil (fig. 6), who is the current head of the field.

Dozens of medals, plaques, tokens and other mintages have been created at the school since 1995. This has succeeded in reviving interest among talented young people in this specific and, unfortunately, politically infamous field in our country after forty years of Communist Party rule. Young artists are thus reviving medal making not only with their



Fig 6. Silver 200 CZK coin Otto Wichterle, 2013, reverse
Josef Oplištil
Silver 925/1000, 31 mm, proof, struck in Czech Mint
Photo: Czech Mint



Fig 7. Anthropoid Operation – 80th anniversary medal and box, 2022
Karolína Kučerová
Tombac, plastic, 40 mm, struck in Vocational School of Art, Jablonec n. N.
Photo: David Matura

mintages within the school, but also in commissions for the Czech Mint or in the realisation of competition designs for the Czech National Bank. However, the final works – embossments in metal – are just a fraction. Countless numbers of plaster models for minting coins and medals, dozens of preparatory sketches, drawings and reliefs have been acquired during three decades of the existence of the Medal School in Jablonec nad Nisou. All this is necessary for the creation of quality medal works, which the local students learn not only to design and realize, but also to think about them from the very beginning. The list to such a long and remarkable history of the school is full of names of students and graduates, each of whom has become a unique piece of the mosaic of this institution.

The work of Czech medal makers in general has changed in the way of modelling, the representation of writing or heraldic figures in the last thirty years. Also, at the Medal School in Jablonec nad Nisou, not only the creative style of the students but also the way of teaching has changed during this period. The solid foundation that was built on craft tradition and artistic quality can be seen in the honest approach to teaching, work and creation. Moreover, it was possible to organize specialised workshops and open an art studio in the early years of the school's existence. Medals began to be created here, experimenting with holes in the die, changes to traditionally established formats, the maximum height of embossing, trialling different coloured patinas, the use of two or more types of metal on one work, the use of enamel or the combination of metal with other materials.

These significant achievements showed that new expressions can be found in this traditional sculptural art. Many medals thus broke the established format and traditional form. Some have become art objects that adhere to the laws of minting, but experimentation with other materials – stone, glass or plastic – has become



Fig 8. Yin and Yang medal and box, 2017
Ludmila Kodytková
Alpaca, magnet, wood, 40 mm, struck in Vocational School
of Art, Jablonec n. N.
Photo: David Matura



Fig 9. Motorcycle Jawa 250 'Kývačka' and box, 2022
Matěj Funk
Tombac, steel, aluminium, 40 mm, struck in Vocational School
of Art, Jablonec n. N.
Photo: David Matura

common in student work. Over the last ten years, student realisations have included not only medals, but also embossments on small art objects. These can be placed not only in a showcase, but undoubtedly aspire to be exceptional artistic accessories for interiors or popular visual and haptic objects. Since 2014, in addition to designing the medals, students have also been given the task of creating a medal cover as an integral part of the medal as a pleasing artifact that not only protects it against damage, but also supports its design and motif in an original authorial way. Students use a variety of materials for medal cases: paper, foam, plastic (fig. 7), wood (fig. 8), metal (fig. 9), glass (figs. 10-11), stone or concrete.

In addition to thematic mintages, which impose strict criteria on students in the creation of an artistic design to the client's specifications, free themes have also begun to appear in the range of subjects. Students learn to process medals using both the technique of free modelling and its reduction from a plaster model, as well as plastic engraving directly into a steel stamp. They participate in anonymous competitions of the Czech National Bank for new commemorative coins and medals or work on commissions directly for the Czech Mint. Their successes not only bring interesting mintages, but also intensify interest in this field of study.

Cooperation of the Medal School with the Czech Mint

Important graduates in the last decade include Asamat Baltaev, who has been the exclusive designer of the Czech Lion bullion coins since 2018 (fig. 12). Teachers and graduates of the Medal School in Jablonec nad Nisou have collaborated on some other mintages. The Mint also mints commemorative and bullion coins and medals for the anniversaries of many important personalities. For example, one-ounce and half-ounce medals in pure gold and one-ounce medals in pure silver were created for the 50th anniversary of the Golden Nightingale award and the 75th birthday of the popular Czech singer Karel Gott in 2013. Their authors are excellent medal makers Jaroslav Bejvl and Petr Horák, a professional teacher at the Medal School in Jablonec nad Nisou. The mint organized a ceremonial minting for the singer's jubilee, which the singer personally attended. The authors of the designs of the three medals were the teacher Petr Horák and two graduates of the school, Mária Filová (fig. 13) and Asamat Baltaev. The work of graduates and teachers from the Medal School and the Czech Mint are richly represented in the exhibition of the specialized Museum of Glass and Jewellery in Jablonec nad Nisou.

Exceptional mintages

The Czech Mint has been awarded several times for its mintages, which are designed by Czech medal makers. The world's most beautiful circulating coin of 1993



Fig 10. IKEM, Prague – The first heart transplant in Czech Republic, 2014
Marie Slanařová
Steel, glass, organic glass, 50 mm, struck in Vocational School
of Art, Jablonec n. N.
Photo: David Matura



Fig 11. Preciosa Foundation prize medal and box, 2022
Adéla Tövišová
Tombac, glass, 50 mm, struck in Vocational School of Art, Jablonec n. N.
Photo: David Matura



Fig 12. Gold 1/25oz bullion coin Czech Lion, 2023
Asamat Baltaev
Gold 999/1000, 13 mm, standard, struck in Czech Mint
Photo: Czech Mint



Fig 13. Gold medal Karel Gott (painter), 2019
Mária Filová
Gold 999/1000, 28 mm, standard, struck in Czech Mint
Photo: Czech Mint

was the bi-metallic fifty-crown with the motif of Prague by sculptor Ladislav Kozák. A commemorative coin from the Charles IV set that is part of a series of coins commemorating the 650th anniversary of Karlštejn in 1999, with a nominal value of 10,000 CZK, issued by the Czech National Bank, was awarded the international prize entitled 'The most beautiful gold coin of 1999' in the USA. The Czech Mint purchased a special press for the minting of large diameters in 2020. The mint holds two entries in the Czech Republic's Guinness Book of Records for the largest mass-produced coins, which means the five-kilo and ten-kilo gold coins. These were the Czech Lion coins with a hologram. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Czech-Slovak crown, the Czech Mint created a 130-kilogram pure gold coin for the Czech National Bank. It is the largest in Europe and is completely unique in the way it is produced. The author of the design is sculptor Vladimír Oppl. Three countries participated in the preparation and production – the Swiss foundry Metalor, the Austrian Mint Münze Österreich, together with the Czech Mint. The coin was produced by milling/engraving and the realization of the final work was entrusted to the expert engravers, most of them graduates of the Medal School in Jablonec nad Nisou.

Combining traditional craftsmanship and youthful inventiveness

Silver medals and coins decorated with cut glass stones attract deserved attention, because Czech glass became famous mainly abroad. The company Preciosa from Jablonec is also behind this success, with which the Česká mincovna has established cooperation. Each crystal coin has its own theme: Birth of a Child, Guardian Angel, Tree of life, Year of the Rabbit (fig. 14) or Key to Happiness. They are issued in a limited edition and they are designed by Petra Brodská, a graduate of the Medal School in Jablonec nad Nisou.

The Mint in cooperation with the students also produces a larger comprehensive series of medals, including mandalas with crystal. Their author is a young medal maker Kristýna Šánová. The obverse side of the medal has a coloured ornament based on a kaleidoscope view with a glass centre, while the reverse side is common to the whole mandala series (fig. 15). An interesting outcome of the cooperation between the Mint and the school is also the realization of mid-year works. The young medal maker Lukáš Preissler created a very witty relief on a gold ducat and a silver *Gaudeamus igitur* medal from the 'Latin Quotations' series.

The list of the most outstanding graduate works of the past ten years of the Medal school in Jablonec nad



Fig 14. Silver coin Crystal Coin – Year of the Rabbit, 2023
Petra Brodská
Silver 999/1000, glass, 50 mm, proof, struck in Czech Mint
Photo: Czech Mint



Fig 15. Silver medal Mandala – Health, 2020
 Kristýna Šánová
 Silver 999/1000, colour, glass, 50 mm, proof, struck in Czech Mint
 Photo: Czech Mint

Nisou shows that its current teachers lead students to a holistic grasp of the theme and its expression through logical formal and content links. New teaching trends of a unique field of study contribute to the attractiveness of the field for the young generation. For this reason, this classical sculpture specialisation is heading towards a clear progression, which is already evident in the issues of the Czech National Bank, the Czech Mint and some other companies.

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