

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Creative currency

Money Talks: Art, Society & Power

10 August to 5 January 2025

Money is so familiar that we probably rarely consider how the imagery on our coins and banknotes has its origins as art, or how that relationship has changed with the increase in digital transactions. The rich intertwining of art and money in all its forms is the subject of a new exhibition later this summer at the Ashmolean Museum, where more than 100 historical objects and works of art will spotlight the diverse ways that artists around the world have engaged with this evolving medium of exchange, from coinage to cryptocurrency. *David Trigg* speaks to the exhibition's curator, *Shailendra Bhandare*.

David Trigg: What key ideas have informed the structure of the exhibition?

Shailendra Bhandare: There are three main sections. The first looks at the intersection of art and money in terms of design – the way that art has informed the design of money and the artistic techniques involved in physically making it. The second section looks at how art and money come together in delivering a social, economic and political impact, particularly to address contemporary issues such as decolonisation. And the third section is about exploring how artists have

used money itself as a medium for political, social and cultural commentary.

DT: In what ways have artists responded to money over the centuries?

SB: Money is reflected quite differently in Western and Eastern art traditions. In Western art, it is usually the negative aspects of our relationship with money that get depicted – it's all about greed, deceit and cheating. Whereas in Eastern art, it's always the fun side of money: the plenitude, prosperity, celebration and fortune. There is a lot more moralising in European art, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, when money professionals become quite popular subjects in artistic expressions and you start to see stereotypes getting formed. Because money is 'the root of all evil', those who work with it are depicted as crooked and grotesque. This leads to some quite contentious and uncomfortable territory.

DT: What are some of the significant objects on display that visitors should look out for?

SB: We are showing facsimile banknotes designed by Gustav Klimt, which were rejected by the Imperial Austrian bank for being too avant-garde. We also have original designs by two other Vienna Secession artists, Franz Matsch and Koloman Moser.



Right: Susan Stockwell, *Money Dress*, 2010 (detail); left: bowl set with coins, Switzerland/Germany, 1500-1600



Then there's the coinage of Edward VIII, which, due to his abdication in 1936, was never issued. It only exists as what we call 'pattern coins' and is being displayed for the first time as a full set. Around 1626, Rubens painted 12 portraits of Roman emperors. His inspiration came partly from coins and he made several studies of coin portraits, which we're borrowing from the British Museum and showing alongside Roman coinage in our own collection. There will also be works by artists including Banksy, Grayson Perry, Susan Stockwell and Andy Warhol.

DT: What kind of things do we learn about money from the displays?

SB: That money is not neutral. We have French African banknotes designed by Maurice Sébastien Laurent in the 1930s with illustrations that objectify the colonised population of French West Africa. The women, for example, are exoticised; they are depicted with fully exposed breasts, wearing decorative coiffures, and head and neck ornaments. In many instances Laurent presents his subjects in familial groups or doing their chores – bucolic, tranquil, industrious and co-operative. His designs epitomise the 'Noble Savage' stereotype. Here, money is a form of propaganda and also a mirror of the attitudes of those devising the designs.

DT: Does the exhibition also consider the future of money?

SB: Yes, we're ending the exhibition with an NFT and a look at the technology of digital money, which has really changed our basic understanding of what money is and how it can be used. But the aim is to emphasise artistic engagement with that medium, and we have artworks that comment on the sustainability aspects of it as well as its revolutionary nature.

DT: What do you hope visitors will take away from the exhibition?

SB: I'd like people to see how these familiar objects can be linked to creative expressions, as well as social and political histories that elicit an artistic response. The exhibition features many well-known artists, but we are recontextualising and unpacking their work in a fresh way to reveal a host of engaging and surprising stories about the interplay between art and money.

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