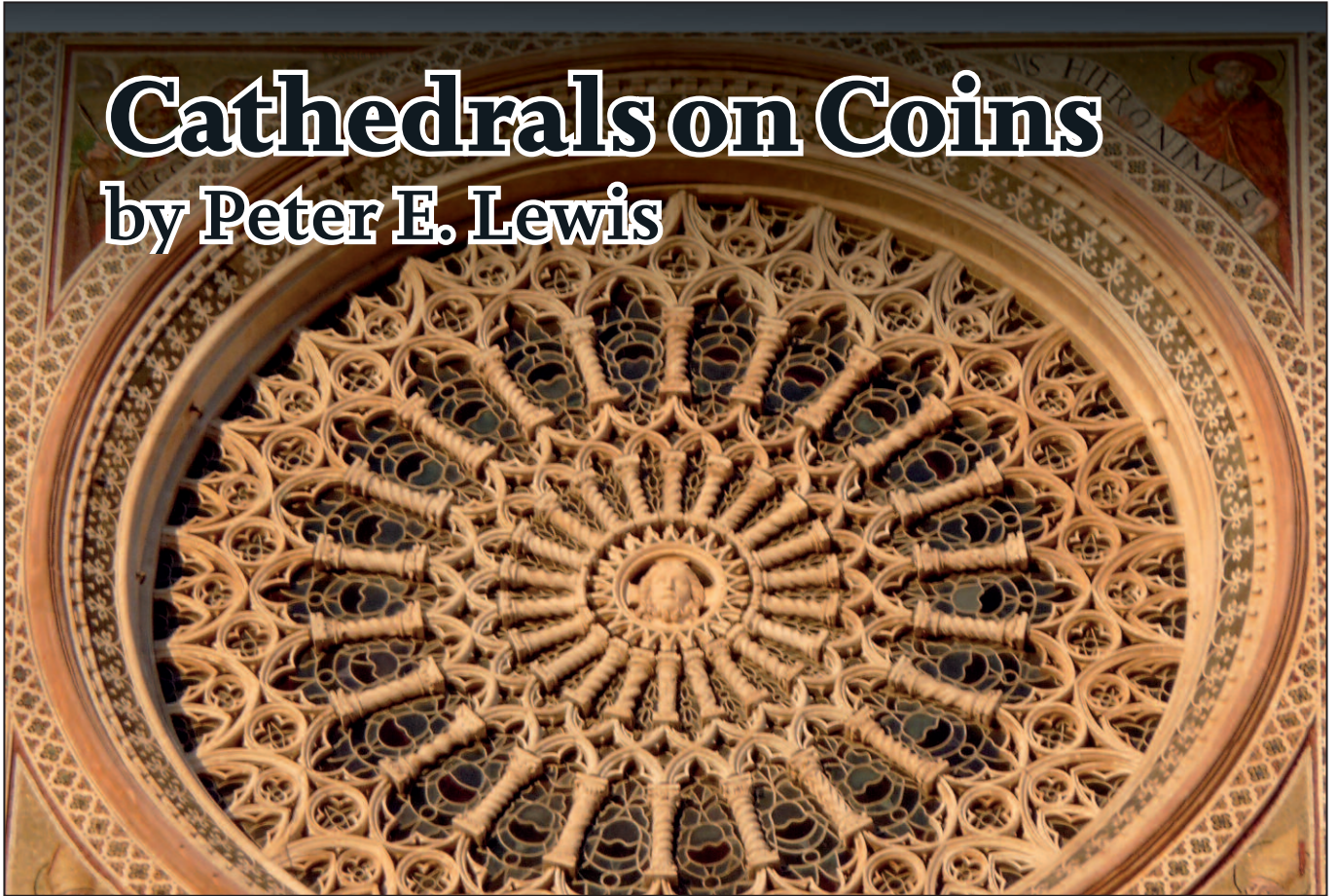


Cathedrals on Coins

by Peter E. Lewis



Window of Orvieto Cathedral. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Marcok.)



Figure 1 – Reverse of a copper-nickel 5-mark coin of West Germany showing the façade of Cologne Cathedral. 29 mms diameter. It was issued in 1980 for the centenary of the cathedral's completion. There is an eagle on the obverse.

SOME coin collectors like to collect coins according to a theme. For example, they will collect coins with an elephant or some other animal on them. I like to collect coins with cathedrals on them. It is not only because I am religious but because they test the die-engraver's skill. He has to capture the imposing structure of the building with all its intricate details and put it on a small metal disc. I compare a photo of the cathedral with the image on the coin and assess how successful the die-engraver has been, especially whether the image conveys the spiritual nature of the building. The people who built a cathedral intended it to be a suitable place for the worship of God, and its building was an act of worship. Of course they understood that God could be worshiped anywhere, but they wanted to create a place where the faithful could congregate and be especially aware of God's presence with them.

Although cathedrals sometimes appear on coins (**Figures 1 and 2**) they are mostly on medals or medallions. These are generally produced to commemorate the building of the cathedral and to raise money. They can be of historical importance particularly if the building no longer exists or has been significantly changed since it was first built. In some cases the cathedral was never built at all.



Figure 2 – Façade of Cologne Cathedral. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Christoph Rüpert.)

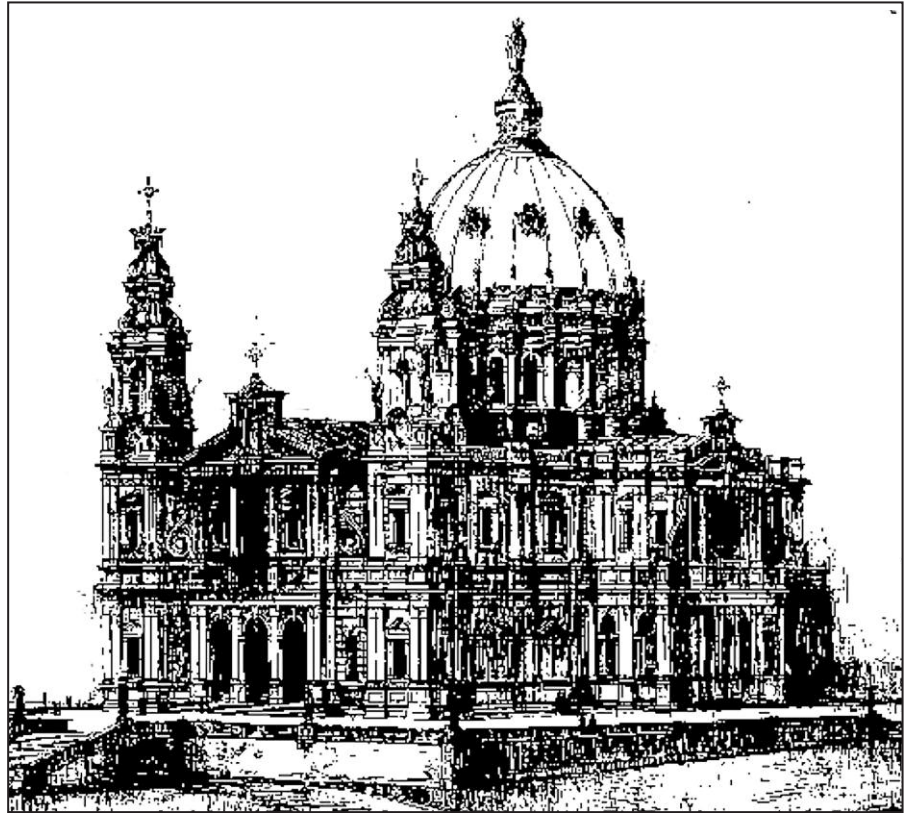


Figure 4 – Design for the Cathedral of the Holy Name. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 3 – Reverse of a silvered medal showing the Cathedral of the Holy Name. 31 mms diameter. There is a bust of Pope Pius XI (1922-39) on the obverse.

A good example of a medal showing a cathedral that was never built is in **Figure 3**. The Holy Name Cathedral in Brisbane was intended to be the largest church building in the Southern Hemisphere with seating for four thousand. It was the dream of James Duhig, the Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane, and building began in 1927 on a site in Fortitude Valley. The cathedral was designed by the Sydney firm of Hennessey, Hennessey & Co., and a picture of the original design still exists. (**Figure 4**) Services were held in a crypt chapel built on the site in 1934. Unfortunately because of the Great Depression fund-raising was slow and when Archbishop Duhig died in 1965 the project lapsed. In 1985 the site was sold to property developers and the stone remaining on the site was sold to the Anglican Church to continue building St John's Cathedral, which was not completed until 2008. St John's is the last Gothic-style, stone cathedral to be built in the world, and it is unlikely that another will be built anywhere else because they require a concerted effort and an enormous amount of money. Most of the great Gothic cathedrals of the world were built in Europe in the late Middle Ages, and even then they required an extreme effort by the whole community. In Brisbane the Catholic cathedral is St Stephen's Cathedral, while in Sydney the Catholic cathedral is the imposing St Mary's Cathedral. (**Figure 5**) It is wonderfully shown on a medal issued for the 29th Eucharistic Congress held in Sydney in 1928. (**Figure 6**)



Figure 5 – St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 6 – St Mary's Cathedral appears on the reverse of a silver medal issued for the 29th International Eucharistic Congress in Sydney in 1928. 40 mms diameter. There is a bust of Pope Pius XI on the obverse.

An example of a cathedral that no longer exists is in **Figure 7**. It was the Church of St Isaac in St Petersburg, and the medal was issued to commemorate the commencement of building in 1768. St Isaac of Dalmatia was the patron saint of the Romanov family and Catherine the Great wanted the church to be a huge marble structure, but after she died in 1796 it was hastily completed in 1802. It was different from the original design and was neither beautiful nor well-built. When rotting plaster fell from the ceiling during the Easter service in 1816 Tsar Alexander I decided to rebuild the church on a grand scale to a different design. Its exterior was completed in 1842. (**Figure 8**)

The size of cathedral medals varies greatly. One showing the Church of the Holy Cross at Coimbra in Portugal has a diameter of 88 mms and is in high relief. (**Figure 9**)

(**Figure 9**) A medal showing Cologne Cathedral on one side and the three kings bearing gifts for the baby Jesus on the other side has a diameter of only 16 mms. (**Figure 10**) The three kings or magi appear on this medal because inside the cathedral there is a golden casket containing their bones, or so it was believed in the 12th century when the casket was brought from the east. A medal showing the Basilica of Saint Anne de Beaupré in Canada is only 13 mms in diameter. (**Figure 11**) Obviously it is a challenge for a die engraver to put the image of a great cathedral on such a tiny medal.

An impressive medal showing the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New



Figure 7 – Reverse of a bronze medal showing the Church of St Isaac. 64 mms diameter. There is a bust of Catherine II (1762-96) on the obverse.

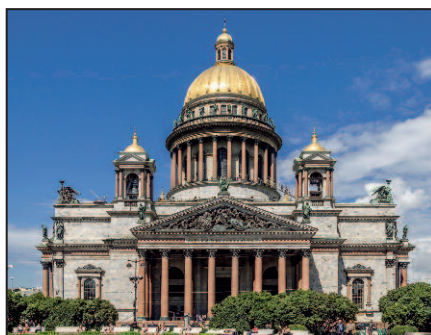


Figure 8 – Cathedral of St Isaac in St Petersburg. Can you see any resemblance to the 1768 design? (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Florstein.)



Figure 9 – Large bronze medal showing the Church of the Holy Cross at Coimbra in Portugal.

York was issued in 1992 to commemorate the centenary of the commencement of its building. (**Figures 12 and 13**) It is the cathedral of the Episcopal Church, which is the equivalent of the Anglican Church of Australia, and it is one of the largest cathedrals in the world. The die-engraver has reproduced all the intricate details of the stonework in the façade.

Medals or tokens to be bought by pilgrims when they reach their destination have been popular since the Middle Ages. An amazing little medal was made for pilgrims to Rome during the pontificate of Pope John-Paul II. On the obverse he holds up a crucifix. On the reverse there are images of the four major basilicas in Rome with a Latin inscription meaning "travelling to Rome". (**Figure 14**) At the top is the dome of St Peter's Basilica. This



Figure 10 – Small bronze medal showing Cologne Cathedral on one side and the three magi on the other. Above the magi is the Star of Bethlehem.



Figure 11 – Reverse of a tiny medal showing the Basilica of St Anne de Beaupré in Canada. On the obverse Mary holds the Christ child.

dome had been designed by Michelangelo in the sixteenth century. On the left is the Arch-basilica of St John Lateran, which is the cathedral church of the bishop of Rome. It was built on the site of the palace of the Lateran family, hence its name. In the first century when Nero was the Roman emperor, Plautius Lateranus



Figure 12 – White-metal medallion showing the façade of the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York. 38 mms diam.



Figure 13 – Façade of the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 14 – Reverse of a bronze medal showing churches in Rome. 27 mms diameter.

conspired against him. Nero had him executed and seized the palace, but eventually it passed to Constantine the Great who gave it to the Church. On the right is the Basilica of St Mary Major. It was originally built by Pope Sixtus III (432-440) to celebrate the decree of the Council of Ephesus in 431 that Mary, the mother of Jesus, should have the title, “Theotokos”, which means “Bearer of God.” At the bottom is the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls. It was built by Constantine the Great outside the walls of Rome at the site where according to tradition St Paul had been buried. In a recent television series in which David Suchet (a.k.a. Inspector Poirot) retraced the steps of St Paul he was allowed to go below the altar to see the sarcophagus believed to contain the saint’s bones.

St Paul’s Cathedral in London appears on a medal to commemorate the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer in 1981. (Figures 15 and 16) Previous royal weddings had occurred in

Westminster Abbey and it was a break in tradition to have it in St Paul’s. Although the die-engraver has captured the imposing façade of this great cathedral the wedding couple do not look happy. The medal was an omen of the marriage problems ahead and the sad demise of the princess.

Milan Cathedral appears on a large bronze medal made in 1818. (Figure 17) The Cathedral is dedicated to St Mary of the Nativity. It is the second largest church in Italy after St Peter’s Basilica in Rome and it took nearly six hundred years to complete. The die-engraver has shown the cathedral in perspective, and today a person can stand in the square and see the cathedral in the same perspective. (Figure 18) It is indeed an awe-inspiring building.

Cathedrals and churches sometimes appear on Communion tokens. They were used mostly in Scotland in the 18th and 19th centuries and were given to members of the church community whom the



Figure 15 – Silver medal showing Charles and Diana on the obverse and St Paul’s Cathedral on the reverse. 38 mms diameter. Diana is reported as saying that her wedding was the worst day of her life.



Figure 16 – West façade of St Paul’s Cathedral. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Zeistere.)

minister examined and considered worthy of joining in the Lord's Supper. It is ironic that a verse from the New Testament that commonly appears on these tokens is *Let a man examine himself and so let him eat*. This verse appears on the reverse of a token that has a picture of Dundee Parish Church (St Mary's) on the obverse. (Figures 19 and 20) The church has an interesting history that goes back to the 12th century when the Earl of Huntingdon was returning from the Third Crusade. A terrible storm engulfed his ship and he prayed for deliverance. He vowed to build a church in gratitude for his safe home-coming and in honour of the Virgin Mary. He landed on the north bank of the Firth of Tay in Scotland and named the place *Donum Dei*, which is Latin for "Gift of God". The name eventually became "Dundee". In 1303 the English king Edward I attacked the city and burnt the church, but over the centuries it was rebuilt several times.

The tower (St Mary's Tower) is the oldest surviving building in Dundee. Unfortunately because they are all over a hundred years old and made of cheap metal, Communion tokens are usually corroded to some extent, which makes the details of the buildings unclear. But the images are valuable because they show what the churches were like in those centuries and many of them no longer exist.

As well as cathedrals on coins there are coins in cathedrals. In St John's Cathedral in Brisbane (Figures 21 and 22)

there is a permanent display of coins relating to the history of Christianity. Cathedrals have long had an educational function: visitors could 'read' the Bible in the stained glass windows and in the stone reliefs. In keeping with this tradition the coins on display in St John's Cathedral cover the whole history of Christianity. The cathedral is open every day and visitors are welcome. They can contemplate coins that might have been held by Christians at various times over the last two thousand years. A booklet listing and explaining the coins can be purchased from the Cathedral Bookshop.

Note: The coins and medals shown in this article are from the author's collection.



Figure 17 – Reverse of a bronze medal showing Milan Cathedral. 44 mms diameter. A bust of the archbishop of Milan is on the obverse.



Figure 19 – Base-metal Communion token showing Dundee Parish Church. On the other side there is a verse from the New Testament (1 Corinthians 11:28). The token was made in about 1840. 25 x 30 mms.



Figure 20 – Dundee Parish Church. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Bill Nicholls.)

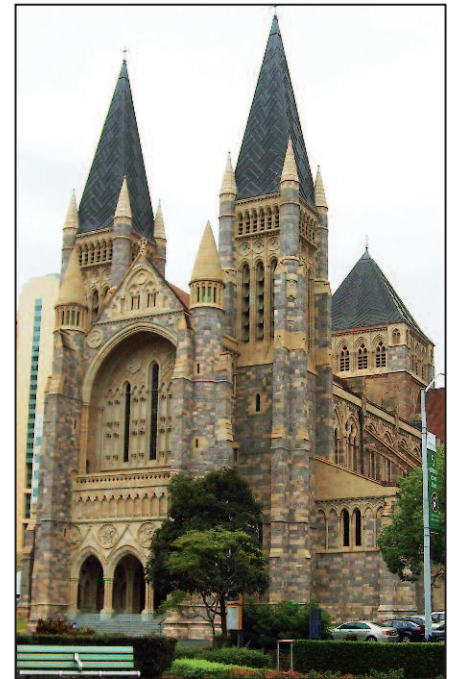


Figure 21 – St John's Cathedral, 373 Ann Street, Brisbane.



Figure 18 – Milan Cathedral. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Mujaddara.)

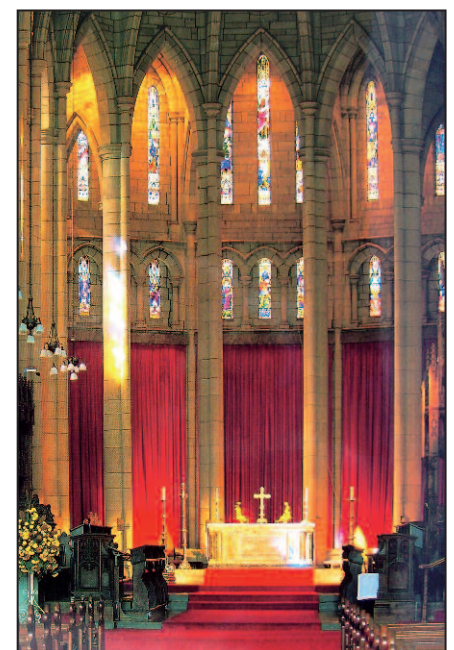


Figure 22 – Interior of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane.

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