

Christmas coins



Whether hanging on the tree or the last treasure to be unearthed from the toe of your stocking chocolate coins are an integral part of Christmas.

St Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, the original model for Father Christmas, secretly gifted three dower-less sisters three bags of gold coins. The coins allowed them to marry, and provided a model for secret gift giving, firstly on 6th December, his feast day, and then at Christmas. A gold coin (or chocolate replacement) is therefore the most traditional of Christmas presents.



Here the bishop gifts three gold balls rather than coins, the origin of the three balls found outside pawnbrokers. Gentile da Fabriano, *The dowry for the three virgins*, c. 1425, [Pinacoteca Vaticana](#), Rome

For the coin lover in your life not just any chocolate coin will do; it has to be the best. And who better to judge the best chocolate coin than the members of the oldest numismatic society in the world?ⁱ Attendees at the Royal Numismatic Society Christmas party judged chocolate coins on numismatic accuracy, design as a group, individual design, manufacture, and, of course, taste.

We only looked at coins sold in groups, so all those fancy one-off or extra large coins from various museums, mints and shops were sadly excluded, as were the home-made coins I hear the British Museum staff sampled. Below we give the best in each category - as your nephews might be more willing to sacrifice a bit of numismatic accuracy for taste - as well the best overall.

Numismatic Accuracy

The Society were harsh critics here. It was notable how few coins had clear obverses and reverses. Those that echoed British coin designs left off the 'head', placing two reverses back to back as brockages. While this might be a way to avoid copying the state coinage it was uncomfortable for the numismatist. There also seemed to be little relationship between the varying size of coins in sets and the sizes of the real coins depicted and the less said about die rotations the better. In some ways people therefore preferred those novel designs which didn't even try to echo an existing coin. If you feel it has to look like a current coin, then the Co-op (£1 for 70g) was judged the best of what was available, but there is definitely room for some better coin reproductions. Perhaps it's time to bring back some lucky sixpences or golden guineas, if people worry about using the current King's head.

Design as a group

People liked groups which mixed coins of different sizes, but felt the inconsistency of relative sizes was irritating, as mentioned. There was a lot of praise for multi coloured groups: bags of gold and bronze were produced by Divine (available from Oxfam, £3.20 for 65g) and Morrisons had individual gold and silver bags which could be mixed (£1 for 70g). The rather unconventional red and green dark chocolate coins from Divine had mixed reviews but look Christmassy. The standout winner here though was Lidl (£1.99 for 150g) with gold coins, silver coins and, a novelty, rectangular notes.

Individual design

Those that echoed real coin designs were of course nice, and the touch of re-doing the legend to 'TEN PENCE CHOCOLATE' by ASDA (70p for 65g) was appreciated. Sainsbury's (£1.25 for 70g) was judged to have a good 'gold' shade. As mentioned, though, the way they were all brockages let them down. While Marks & Spencer's designs (£2.45 for 80g) were praised it was felt to be too much like two reverses. Cadbury (£1.99 for 70g) with a Father Christmas 'head' matched with Cadbury's logo on the reverse or a Dairy Milk 'denomination', was felt to have the basis of a successful design but needed more work. The curved hands on Divine's obverse worked very well, but the reverse was too busy. Flying Tiger (£2 for 72g) had printed colour designs, some of which, such as a Rudolph head, were good, but they mixed obverses and reverses indiscriminately.

Manufacture

People looked for a thick foil, well fitted on the edge and of course a nice, clear, strike. Marks & Spencer (which was scoring well) was badly let down by worn dies and off-centre strikes. Those at the cheaper end of the market, particularly Morrisons and Lidl, were poor, with the 'gold' even

rubbing of some 'contemporary copies'. There was disappointment to find Flying Tiger's designs were not echoed on the chocolate itself, meaning you unwrapped a simple disc with only the outer ring of pellets.

Finally, and most importantly, taste

There were only a few dark and white chocolate options, from Morrisons and Divine. The dark was a particular favourite amongst the judges, who mostly did not like white chocolate, but they recognised tastes vary; my ten-year old *was* a fan. Of the milk chocolate options, Marks & Spencer and Divine scored highly. Co-op and ASDA were in the middle and Lidl and Morrisons lowest. The general feeling with Cadbury was you knew what you were getting and, if you liked it (as my younger judges did), you liked it best.

Overall winners (and losers)

The best average score for numismatists was for Divine, pulled up by taste and a good obverse - and one would hope so as they were the most expensive. There is definitely some space at this upper end of the market though.

Marks & Spencer, though great tasting, was let down by design and manufacture. They produce good giant coins, though, so hopefully the design skill is there to improve the smaller ones.

At the cheaper end, Lidl and Co-op scored well on design aspects but were let down by the taste. For those who like the traditional slight burn of Cadbury chocolate then this was a great pick, design, taste and price wise at £1.99 for 70g, and was the overall winner for the younger judges. The best scored of the cheapest, if you plan to look more than taste, was Lidl, for its innovative mixed designs.



Cadbury marketing shot showing their coins in a rather snazzy (but I bet prone to off-gassing) purple coins tray.

Thank you to all the RNS members, and family, who took part, and shared their votes and comments. As the Royal Numismatic Society is dedicated to studying coins of all regions and periods, chocolate coins from other countries are most welcome next year!

ⁱ Obviously the BNS would be better but the meeting was unfortunately in November.