

A prestigious cityscape

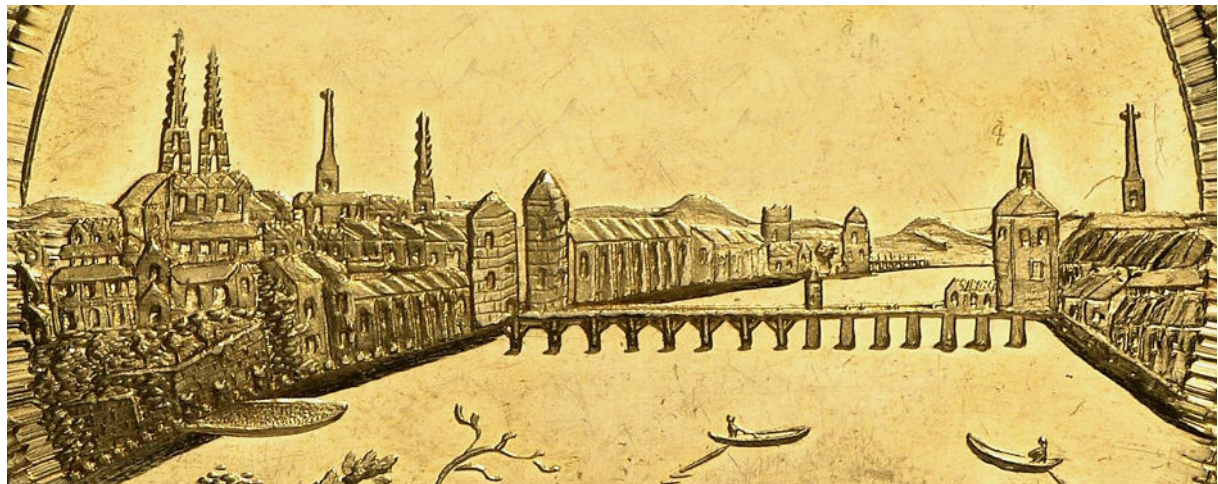
Numismatica Genevensis will auction off a 20 ducat piece of the city of Basel with a gorgeous cityscape on November 25, 2014. The estimate amounting to 500,000 Swiss francs is likewise remarkable. There is a good chance that this coin becomes the world's most expensive Swiss coin.



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Anyone who would defy the traffic on the Wettstein Bridge and, as a pedestrian, stop in the middle for a couple of minutes, would have a very similar view as Johann Jakob Handmann I, gold smith and inhabitant of Basel who was responsible for some magnificent thaler dies featuring the cityscape of Basel. From one of the dies a showpiece was made, in the weight of 20 ducats, which probably was given as a present to a merited citizen, a diplomat or even a foreign monarch.



With a slight turn to the left-hand side, the twin towers of the Basel Minster would come into sight of our promenader standing on the Wettstein Bridge. Starting from the riverside – just as it is depicted on the thaler die – the Minster ferry might head for Kleinbasel (Lesser Basel) where the Clara Church, whose tower is easily discernible on the coin, today accommodates the Catholics in the reformed city. Directly opposite, he would see the Middle Bridge and the Käppeli on it, a chapel commemorating the unification of Großbasel (Greater Basel) and Kleinbasel and an additional weight to secure the static of the medieval bridge.

Admittedly, the Middle Bridge would not be the one Johann Jakob Handmann used to see. In 1903, it was deconstructed and replaced by a new, larger bridge that today carries the Basel Tram safely on its ride across the Rhine River. The city gates on the sides of both Großbasel and Kleinbasel had been demolished far earlier where not only bridge toll had been collected but the entry into the city had been controlled, too. At the place where salt storehouses had been located during the first half of the 18th century, the five-star hotel Trois Rois is situated today. He who loves Basel will be invited by this splendidly preserved 20 ducat piece to go on an imaginary stroll through the city. And, due to the beauty of the coin, he might not even ask himself why cityscapes had become fashionable for Swiss city coins after the 30 Years' War. Nevertheless, this is the story to be told here.

Everything began with the Reformation in 1529. *Sola scriptura*, only the scripts of the Old and the New Testament, this message was a far cry from the warm, comforting mother that used to be worshipped in the Basel Minster as "Unsre liebe Frau" ("Our Dear Lady") and served as symbol for the city of Basel on coins. Of course it gave the council a serious headache, theologically speaking, but it couldn't eliminate the long-standing symbol of kingdom, Mother of God, that quickly.

While the council continued to seal with a signet depicting the coronation of Mary, there were the coins graced by the Madonna circulating amongst the people. As a matter of fact, Mother of God continued to be a popular subject on coins even after the Reformation, because the privilege for the minting of gold gulden, that Maximilian I had granted the city of Basel in 1516, explicitly demanded that one side ought to have been decorated by the Madonna of the aureola.

The legend is the only element that makes a concession to the New Testament: Sancta Maria, Ora pro nobis (Holy Mary, pray for us) turned into the Biblical Ave Maria Gratia Plena (Hail Mary, full of grace) in 1529. The inscription "Ora pro nobis" could also be read on coins produced after the Reformation, in such cases where the mint master made good use of old coining dies for a new emission.

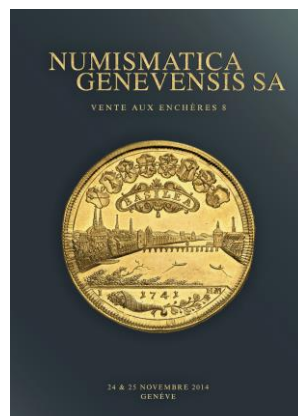
Around 1585, however, Calvinism became prevalent in the city. Many cult images and devotional pictures were destroyed, glass windows broken and in much the same way the depictions of Mary gradually became extinct in the coin imagery. After some individual attempts of depicting the mythical city founder Munatius Plancus, the Basel coat of arms, the Baselstab (bishop's crozier), became the predominant symbol on the Basel coins. It was often combined with the Imperial eagle. In 1648, however, that created a new problem. The Peace of Westphalia had set Basel and the other confederate towns free from the Holy Roman Empire which rendered the imperial eagle inappropriate.

A solution was found in the return to antiquity and the orientation on Dutch jurists propagating sovereign republics. The coin inscription mirrors this in that Basel is not anymore referred to as *urbs* (= city) but as *res publica* (= republic). And of course new images were needed in order to fill these terms with life. This is the backdrop of the first cityscapes appearing in Basel around 1670, which was later than in Zurich where a magnificent city view had been created with the *vögelitaler* as early as 1651.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Basel not just developed into an important industrial city where the luxury goods of those days were produced. Many foreign rulers tried to take out a loan there, to finance their luxurious lifestyle and, of course, their wars. The river port did one last thing to make Basel become the most important hub on the Upper Rhine. This was where the bigwigs mixed and the diplomats gathered. As was customary back then, some of them

were presented a coin like this one as honorary present of the city. Such pieces were rare and, at official occasions, served to express the close relationship to the recipient. As part of the possession of the recipient these gold coinage became the family's nest egg that was easily melted down and hence liquidated in a financial crisis. The Prussian Soldier King, to name but one example, had all gold showpieces in the family's collection melted down in order to clear his father's debts.

Hence, it is rarely encountered that a 20 ducat piece, like the one Numismatica Genevensis offers for sale, has actually survived until the present day. There is only one other specimen known to exist, albeit in a poorer condition, which – and this comes as no surprise – has been in the possession of the Swiss National Museum in Zurich since 1964.



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