

Large print exhibition text



**Mary Gillick**  
**modelling**  
**The Queen's**  
**portrait**

This guide provides all the display text in large print.

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## Introduction

Seventy years ago, sculptor Mary Gillick (1881–1965) became instantly famous when she made the portrait for the first coins of Queen Elizabeth II, who had come to the throne in February 1952. Gillick's portrait combined the influence of the Italian Renaissance with modern design and built on her many years' experience as a maker of medals. Although new portraits of The Queen by other artists were introduced subsequently, coins bearing Gillick's portrait remained in circulation until the 1990s.

This display is part of the celebrations marking Queen Elizabeth's Platinum Jubilee.

### **1. Bronze penny with Mary Gillick's portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, 1953**

Gillick was one of seven artists invited to provide designs for the portrait for the new coinage. Her design was selected in July 1952 but the portrait and the identity of the artist were kept secret until November, when the first coins, bearing the date 1953, were ready. The newspapers were excited to discover that the artist was a woman. In contrast to the young Queen, then aged 26, Gillick was 71 years old.

1954,0406.8.

### **2–3. Plaster model and mould for the new coinage, 1952**

Mary Gillick

Gillick modelled The Queen's portrait in wax, then cast it in plaster. Around 60 successive castings allowed her to work on the portrait in both the positive and the negative. The Royal Mint then reduced it in size using a mechanical device. Mary Gillick proudly holds one of her plaster models in the press photograph.

2005,0806.5/9.

## Gillick's portrait medals

Mary Gillick made her first portrait medals in the 1910s. Like the medals of the Italian Renaissance that inspired her, these were cast. From the First World War (1914–1918), she responded to changing fashions by also making medals that were struck. Although these were manufactured using a different technique, Gillick remained true to the principles of Renaissance medal design while giving them a thoroughly modern appearance. This experience stood her in good stead later in life, when she came to make The Queen's portrait in 1952.

### Quote:

'I talked and the Queen talked, and I got her into my mind, and I was anxious if possible to get more than just that charming profile.'

Mary Gillick

### Picture caption

Mary Gillick carving the head of the merchant Sir John Crosby (died 1476) for Crosby Hall, Chelsea, 1926.

### Picture caption

Photograph of Mary Gillick reproduced from **The Evening News**, 28 November 1952.

**1–2. Drawing and cast medal showing  
Ian Pyott, 1917, Mary Gillick**

This cast medal, made when Gillick was 26, was one of three celebrated airmen who shot down enemy airships in the First World War (1914–18). Gillick made them for the Imperial Air Fleet Committee, a group of British patriots. The three medals had a portrait of the airman on the front and shared a common reverse. Ian Pyott, shown here, caused an airship to crash over north-east England in November 1916. On the back of the medal a lone plane flies above the London skyline, dominated by the silhouette of St Paul's Cathedral, a symbol of the nation, suggesting the protection these young pilots provided against this new threat from the air. Its atmospheric design was innovative for British medals at the time.

2005,0806.52/50.

**3–4. Drawing and cast medal showing Ida  
Wylie, 1918, Mary Gillick**  
**5. Cast medal showing Meredith Frampton,  
1924**

Mary Gillick

Gillick based both of these one-sided cast medals on drawings made during sittings and photographs. The medal of the writer Wylie was commissioned by her lover Rachel Barrett. The two had met in 1912, when Barrett was editor of *The Suffragette* newspaper and Wylie a contributor. After Gillick accepted the commission, Barrett joked, 'Ida is so excited to know that you think she has a profile that would bear modelling I am afraid there will be no living with her.' The painter Meredith Frampton was a family friend of Gillick.

2005,0806.54/57.

**6. Struck medal showing Tadeusz Kościuszko, 1917, Mary Gillick**

**7. Struck medal for the Royal Academy Schools, about 1938, Mary Gillick**

After the First World War (1914–18), Gillick made struck medals such as these for many organisations. The medal marking the centenary of the death of Polish national hero Kościuszko was commissioned in support of Polish independence. The medal showing King George III, the Royal Academy's first patron, was a prize for students. The influence of Italian Renaissance medals can be seen in the balance between the portraits and lettering, and in the combination of horizontal and edge inscriptions.

2005,0806.71/52.

**8. Struck medal showing Charles Chree (reverse), about 1940, Mary Gillick**

**9. Struck medal showing Baron Cadman (reverse), about 1943, Mary Gillick**

These are the backs of medals commissioned by the Physical Society of London and the Institute of Petroleum in honour of Charles Chree, a physicist, and Baron Cadman, an engineer. On the Chree medal, Gillick has succeeded in making terrestrial magnetism visually appealing. On the Cadman medal, a single female figure dominates a composition formed of horizontals and verticals. In a witty touch, the light she holds encroaches on the word LVMEN (light).

2005,0806.64/62.

## Gillick's later work

Mary Gillick's 1952 portrait of Queen Elizabeth II was used not only on UK coinage but on that of various Commonwealth countries, and Gillick was required to adapt the surrounding inscription for these uses. She also worked on various official medals and created a new portrait of Prince Philip. Gillick's success with her royal portraits led to an increase in demand for her work. Fewer organisations were now commissioning medals. Instead, she concentrated on larger memorials for figures such as the singer Kathleen Ferrier (died 1953) and the organiser of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral, Margaret Babington (died 1958).

### Quote:

'At first I made the neck rather straight in the proud manner of a queen ... the Duke of Edinburgh came in and suggested that it should be inclined more gently.'

Mary Gillick

### Picture caption

Mary Gillick's memorial to Margaret Babington (died 1958), 1959–60, Canterbury Cathedral, England.

### Picture caption

Photograph of The Queen reproduced from **The Daily Graphic**, 26 November 1952.

**1–2. Inspired by the past**

Gillick's high-relief version of her coin portrait of The Queen was to be used on medals issued subsequently by official bodies. A sitting at Buckingham Palace helped her achieve The Queen's likeness but the format of the design was influenced by the past. Gillick learned about the Renaissance portrait medals of Pisanello and his followers when she was a student at the Royal College of Art (1902–4). The medal displayed here shows how much Gillick learned from Pisanello. One contemporary commentator wrote that Gillick's coin design 'breathes the air of the early Renaissance.' However, her work is also unmistakably modern.

1. Royal Society royal medal, 1952, Mary Gillick, 2005,0806.66
2. Medal of Leonello d'Este, about 1442, Antonio Pisano known as Pisanello, 1923,0526.1

**3–5. Gillick's other official commissions**

Gillick designed a medal bearing Prince Philip's portrait for use by organisations of which the Prince was patron or president. As well as sittings, she used photographs of the Prince, one of which she cut round to establish the profile. Gillick's plaster model was reduced mechanically to make the medals. She also designed and modelled both sides of the medal distributed during Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip's 1953–4 Commonwealth tour.

3. Photographs of Prince Philip
4. Plaster model for Prince Philip medals, 1953, Mary Gillick, 2005,0806.27
5. Royal Tour medal, 1953, Mary Gillick, 2005,0806.68/69

## 6. Korea War medal, 1953

The higher-relief version of Gillick's portrait of Queen Elizabeth was also used on service medals. The first of these was the Korea War medal, issued to members of the British and Commonwealth armed forces who had taken part in the Korea War (1950–3). The back of the medal is by another artist.

2022,4020.1

## Mary Gillick's legacy

Gillick died in 1965, aged 83. Her coin portrait of Queen Elizabeth remains her most famous work, but over a career that spanned more than fifty years she also produced many medals and larger memorials that can be found in cathedrals, churches and secular settings.

Following the death of Gillick's niece in 2004, the family generously gave medals, plaster models and accompanying documentation to the British Museum, and a substantial amount of archival material to the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds. It is these donations that have made this display possible.

### **Caption**

The banner incorporates headlines taken from newspapers and magazines published in November 1952.

Find out more

## **Related galleries**

To see more of the Museum's collection of coins and medals visit Room 46: Europe 1400–1800 and Room 68: Money

## **Events**

Explore the themes of this display – and the Platinum Jubilee – through related events. For the full programme, visit [britishmuseum.org](http://britishmuseum.org)

## **Publication**

**Mary Gillick: sculptor and medallist**, by Philip Attwood, published by Spink Books in collaboration with the British Museum. Available from the British Museum shops and online at [britishmuseum.org/shop](http://britishmuseum.org/shop)

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