

Florence was a city of merchants before becoming an artistic and architectural gem through the foresight of those very merchants. Its gold florin, first minted in 1252, made it the most important commercial center in Europe. It became the standard coin for international transactions for its stable commercial value: 24 karat gold with FLORENTIA and the Florentine lily on one side; JOHN THE BAPTIST, Florence's patron saint, on the other. It was so trustworthy that payments in florins were done in sealed leather purses! St. John's presence was a warranty that it was pure gold "San Giovanni non vuole inganni" (St. John will not have deceits)

The Florentine fourteenth century chronicler/historian Giovanni Villani regarded the gold florin as the standard coin in all Christendom. In 1316, as Mintmaster for the Cambio Guild, he started the *Fiorinaio* (Floriner) compiling the coins minted in Florence every six months. The florin was the most widely imitated coin of the period and has fascinated numismatic experts throughout the centuries. In 1760 Ignazio Orsini inserted part of the *Fiorinaio* in his *History of the Coins of the Florentine Republic* (1). King Victor Emmanuel III had the largest collection of coins minted in Italy. His *Corpus Nummorum Italicorum* remained unfinished at the twentieth volume in 1943. The twelfth volume is dedicated to Florentine coinage.



Mario Bernocchi started his collection of coins issued by the Florentine Mint while studying medieval economic history at the University of Florence around 1947. Every time he bought a coin he brought it to life with documents of medieval mintage, purchasing eighteenth century and contemporary volumes on the subject.

Bernocchi became an expert on Florentine mintage and coinage after twenty years. He referred to his growing collection as a job, like running his dyer-works company in Prato. Part of his collection appeared for the first time at the 1963 *Thirteenth National Numismatics Exhibit* in Riccione. He presented two panels with 480 coins covering seven centuries of Florentine history. He was awarded the gold medal “Ars et Nummus” as outstanding collector of the year. La Nazione referred to Bernocchi’s entry as the largest “numismatic collection in Italy”, surpassing the king’s (2). Bernocchi classified each exhibited coin with its symbol and the semester when it was struck.

Two *Mintmasters* supervised the mintage of the first coins struck by the Florentine Republic from 1182 to 1531. Their names were drawn by lot every six months: one from the *Arte del Cambio*,

money-changers guild; one from the *Arte di Calimala*, the foreign cloth guild. The coinage year was not incised, only the names of Mintmasters and Officers with their symbols or crests. In 1316 Giovanni Villani was Mintmaster for the Cambio Guild with Gherardo di Gentile for the Calimala Guild. Famous family names (Peruzzi, Medici, Strozzi, Guicciardini, Rucellai) were recognized either by their symbols or their crests. Coins with unknown Mintmasters impressed and intrigued the Judging Commission(3). The second panel had coins struck from 1531 to 1861. Alessandro de' Medici became Duke of Florence in 1531. The Florentine Mint closed in 1861 when the Grand Duchy of Tuscany joined the Kingdom of Italy. The rare 1530 silver *half scudo* was struck one semester for the last Florentine Republic using church silver as the troops of Charles V laid siege to Florence. Alessandro de' Medici became Duke of Florence in 1531. The 1834 *half Francescone* of Leopold II was second rarest. The 1834 one had never been photographed, only designed by Antonio Pagani. Both are "R 4", the rarest of coins, with less than 100 examples in the whole world(4).

Bernocchi got the city's cup at the 1964 *Fano Numismatics Exhibit* for his expertise on Prato's medieval merchants, specially Francesco Datini, pioneer of modern businessmen. The 216 coins exhibited were coupled to the merchants who used them for commerce and small needs. The first panel abounded in gold florins, standard coin for business transactions. The second panel displayed silver florins for small transactions, struck after Datini's death (1410-1431).

The rarest coins started with the 1345 first semester silver florin, unknown until then, thinking that only one second semester silver florin had been struck that year. Other "R4" silver florins were: a 1340 one, not mentioned in the king's *Corpus Nummorum Italicorum*, and a second semester 1316 one, with Giovanni Villani's symbol! The 1256 gold florin shown was struck outside the city walls, on a pine trunk, for the Sant' Jacopo a Serchio victory against Pisa. (Roberto Papi, *La Nazione*, July 31, 1964). Bernocchi exhibited 131 coins struck in Dante's time, many of them unpublished, for the *Florence at the Times of Dante* 1965 exhibit in the Certosa del Galluzzo, Florence. He left them at the exhibit's disposal for a year.

After the 1966 flood, Bernocchi dried thousands of volumes from the Florence State Archive, Notarial Archive, and University of Florence's Business Library. The company's personnel and wool drying machinery worked twenty-four hours a day for almost two months, free of charge. He saved thousands of manuscripts and parchments that his vehicles transported to the Monastery of Monte Oliveto for restoration.

Mario Bernocchi's five volume work, *The Coins of the Florentine Republic*, reconstructs the activity of the Florentine Mint, from its origins to the fall of the Republic. His accurate archive research on

period documents, the examination of Florentine coins in major public and private collections allowed him to eliminate gaps and mistakes in the *Fiorinaio*. He had an expert miniaturist draw each coin and incision from the original manuscript, kept in Florence's State Archive!

A future Florin and Coin Museum in the Zecca Vecchia (Old Mint) Tower was announced by Eugenio Giani, Chairman of Florence's government council (6) The three vaulted stories, connected by a transparent exterior elevator, will house reproductions of the machines and mallets employed by the Mint. It would be fitting if Bernocchi's coin collection were housed on the top story as the museum's crowning jewel!

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. G. Toderi, *Mario Bernocchi, Maestro di Numismatica in Numismatica*, Italia'98, p. 17.
2. F. Apollonio, *Visita alla più grande collezione numismatica d'Italia*, *La Nazione* August 9, 1963
3. *Notizie Nostre, Alumni of the National Institute of Chemistry Dyeing and Weaving T. Buzzi of Prato*, X year, no. 33, July-September, 1963
4. *Ibidem*.
5. Roberto Papi, *La Nazione*, July 31, 1964.
6. *La Nazione*, October 29, 2008.