

MICHAEL ALEXANDER

## Design with a difference

**S**INCE the adoption of the Euro in Ireland in 2002, collector coins from the Central Bank of Ireland have become some of the most widely collected within the Euro-zone and further afield. One man has been chiefly responsible for many of the eye-catching designs. MICHAEL ALEXANDER of the London Banknote and Monetary Research Centre speaks to designer MICHAEL GUILFOYLE as his latest coin issued for the 25th anniversary of the Gaisce Award is unveiled at Farmleigh, Phoenix Park in Dublin.



The word "Gaisce" (pronounced Gaish-ké) is an Irish Gaelic word meaning valour. The award was created in 1985 by Presidential Order during the International Youth Year and this year it celebrates its 25th anniversary. With over 300,000 participants in the 25 years since the award began, it has achieved tremendous popularity, with more than 17,000 participants in the past year alone. The award seeks to highlight the achievements of young adults between the ages of 15 and 25 in Ireland, ranging from community involvement, personal skills and physical recreation as well as an adventure journey. The patron of the award scheme is the country's president, currently Mrs Mary McAleese.

Graphic artist and Royal Mint-trained engraver Michael Guilfoyle had been sent a brief about this coin project at the end of 2009 and was given the task of creating a memorable coin design for this auspicious anniversary. During the launch of the coin in the spectacular setting of Farmleigh, the Irish State's official guest house for dignitaries and guests of the President, I had the opportunity to catch up with him and find out how he began his distinguished career. We spoke of how he came to design coins, his inspirations and what is in store for the future from one of the country's most prolific and well known coin designers. If you collect coins from the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands or Ireland, chances are you may have examples of his work in your collection.

**Congratulations on the winning design for the 10 and 20 Euro silver and gold collector's coin for the 25th anniversary of the Gaisce Award (illustrated right). A significant part of the design includes a view of Áras an Uachtaráin, the Presidential Residence—why did this building become a feature of the coin's design?**

Interestingly this coin, as well as marking the 25th anniversary of the Gaisce Award, is also part of the EUROPA coin programme which has a different theme every year. This year it is European Architecture, so in creating this coin's design it just made sense to include an image of the Presidential Residence while at the same time, celebrating the President's Award. With this design I tried to give equal importance to both events by combining them in an innovative way. The young people shown below the building are portrayed as working towards, or achieving, their goals. I wanted to give a sense of movement or procession towards these goals. And, of course, occasionally the Presidential Residence is used for the awards ceremony.

**Let's go back a bit further with your career in coin design. How did you get started and what was the first coin or medal you either designed or worked on?**

My first job after leaving school was as an apprentice at the Royal Mint. I was about 18 at the time. I spent five years studying under Hubert Elsässer and Marcel Canioni learning



the technical and traditional skills of the engraving and plaster modelling process. It was fantastic training—very thorough.

Interestingly, during that five year period I was not allowed to actually design any of the coins. My role was to learn the skills, though I did work on many of the designs with regard to lettering and arrangements. One of the coins I worked on which comes to mind was Ireland's 20 pence coin. This involved taking the original horse design (from the old half crown) and coming up with a different arrangement for the coin's denomination. The design was from Percy Metcalfe's original 1928 series.

I wasn't given a coin's design outright, only the qualified engravers did this kind of work. I just added little bits of design, or the finishing touches you might say. At the end of my five year apprenticeship, which was during the last recession, there wasn't enough work in the engraving department so I was transferred to the marketing department for a time, with the intention of returning to the engraving side in due course. Eventually I decided to leave and study for a Graphic Design degree because this is what I had wanted to do all along, to have a more creative role.

**You mentioned Percy Metcalfe's original 1928 series for Ireland. Are there any current or former coin designers/artisans whose work you admire and if so, who were they?**

Going back to my days at the Royal Mint, I was fortunate that in the Chief Engraver's office were the original dies of Benedetto Pistrucci's Waterloo Medal, which I would see every day. If anyone ever gets the opportunity to see these dies up close they really should. They were carved by hand into steel with basic engraving tools. They are absolutely magnificent and the finest examples of engraving I have ever seen! Also when you look at the classic sovereign design, it is absolutely beautiful. With my training and background I am drawn to traditional artisans like William Wyon but I also think that Percy Metcalfe's Irish animal designs are really fantastic. In more recent times, I think Philip Nathan's "Britannia" designs are very elegant, beautifully modeled, with a lot of movement and inspiring designs.

**How many coins have you designed to date? Do you have any favourites or is there one item which really brought you to prominence?**

Probably in the region of about 100, and this includes medals, if you take into account the coins which were part of a series. I am quite surprised myself by that number! The very first significant coins I designed were in 2004 for Guernsey's 60th anniversary of D-Day. They were part of a series of three coins representing the land, sea and air forces and the Normandy landings. Those initial coins really awakened my love of designing coins and I was pleased to be able to use those traditional techniques that I had been taught at the Royal Mint. Since then I have concentrated on the design of coins.

**There is often a great deal of discussion generated where commemorative or circulation coin design is concerned. Have any of your designs ever been the focus of adverse comment or controversy?**

Every project is different and has to be approached uniquely. I try to research the subject matter thoroughly—which is the foundation to a good and solid design. When you really understand the subject matter then you can introduce new levels of interpretation. The brief for any commission is most important: if it is too vague or open, it then becomes difficult to interpret what the client wants—as with all kinds of design and subject, you have to be mindful of what the client is expecting. As for causing controversy, I am not aware of any of my designs which have attracted anything like that. I haven't deliberately set out to be controversial. I have had more positive comments than anything else made about my work, particularly at the launches I have attended. There have been a number of collectors at the four launches I have been to in Ireland, and they are usually the ones who are complimentary of my work. As a designer I find this very satisfying and far more important to me than courting controversy.

**As with traditional art, there are many styles of design and I've often heard it said that a coin is a miniature work of art. How would you describe your work? Would you categorise your style?**

First of all, I agree with the statement that a coin is a miniature work of art and I use that statement in my own company's promotional literature. If you look at some of the coins I have designed, particularly for Ireland, I tend to approach them in a similar way. Because of my traditional training I generally want to put plenty of detail into the designs, however my graphic design background often makes me look at it in a completely different way.

**I think you've incorporated both your traditional training and graphic experience in this coin's design very well.**

I like my designs to have a little bit more depth than perhaps is immediately apparent, so when you study some of my work you'll find hidden detail. I think that's true with the other three competitions I've won with Ireland. There is always a little more to the design if you look hard enough. My style, I suppose, is that I really focus a lot on composition and balance—my designs must be balanced or I'm not happy. Whether there is a lot of detail or not, I always like to ensure that there is a good solid composition.

**Are there any current coins or even banknotes that you have seen recently and either absolutely love or hate and why so?**

I think there are some magnificent coins out there. You only have to visit the annual Berlin coin fair to see evidence of this! I was at the Berlin show a couple of years ago, and the Chinese Olympic coins really stood out for me. I thought they were superb, particularly the gold series. I loved the way they used the pictograms and representations of the modern and traditional sports, really beautiful to look at! Many of the recent coins from the Polish Mint are fantastic Countries you wouldn't immediately associate with a coin history, such as Kazakhstan, have also issued some beautiful coins. As a designer I know all of the work involved in creating a great design. I can appreciate *all* the designs but sometimes you just have to look at a design and know when it's right, it just grabs you. I think collectors and your readers will know exactly what I mean!

**Has there been a project you would have liked to work on and if so, what was it?**

No, if I'm really honest, there is no special coin that I wanted to design although, looking ahead, I would love to design a four-year series of one pound coins for the UK. I have designed a lot of commemorative and collector coins but something like that would be a dream. It would be the satisfaction you would get by coming across something you've designed in your everyday change, especially in the country you live in. That would be special...

**Do you have a specific subject you would like to see on UK one pound coins? You never know, the Royal Mint may be reading this interview...**

That's a good question. I haven't given that aspect too much thought, but the difficulty you do have with this kind of series is finding something relevant to all four parts of the United Kingdom. Some of the past series have done this brilliantly. I particularly like the "Bridge" series. I thought Leslie Durbin's original floral series was fantastic, very simple but there again you have balance. From a design perspective the coins work individually and as a series. For me, whatever subject I'd choose, each design would also have to "work" on their own *and* as a series. Who knows, perhaps one day I'll have an opportunity to do this.

**With that said, I'm hoping that you can let our readers know a bit of what you're currently working on. What projects are on the horizon?**

The very nature of many of these projects are that they're for Government Mints, so there's not too much I can share until they are launched. However, I can mention one series of coins from the Channel Islands I am working on. It is about Britain at war and is a very interesting series with very pictorial designs.



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There is one specific design featuring Dunkerque and I have already visualised how it will look. I can’t wait to see it as a finished coin. The real challenge with designing a coin is to understand what can be transferred to such a small surface and know how much of the detail can be retained during the minting process.

**One might assume that if you design coins and medals, that you are a collector yourself. Would that be accurate in your case?**

It’s probably true to say that I *am* a collector of coins, in the sense that I’ve built up quite a collection that I’ve personally designed! This collection is for the purpose of showing my children what I did during my working life. Going back to when I was much younger, about six, I received a decimal coin set when decimalisation was introduced, as I think all children did at that



time. I think that was the first time I was exposed to or became aware of coin design. It was some time later, when I went abroad for the first time, that I became really aware of coins being different. However, I wouldn’t categorise myself as a traditional coin collector, although there is of course that great level of appreciation for coins. I can go to a three-day coin show and thoroughly enjoy looking at them.

**You must have some affinity for coins to spend three days looking at small metal discs with appealing designs on them ... !**

Absolutely, and not just look at them. I can get quite excited about them as well!

**Michael Guilfoyle, director of Guilfoyle Design thank you for your time today.**

Thank you, it’s been a pleasure!

I would like to thank Ms Mary Kennedy at the Central Bank and Financial Services Authority of Ireland for her kind assistance with this article. Interested collectors who would like more information on the Gaisce 25th anniversary coin can visit the website of the Central Bank of Ireland collector’s coins page at: <http://www.centralbank.ie>



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