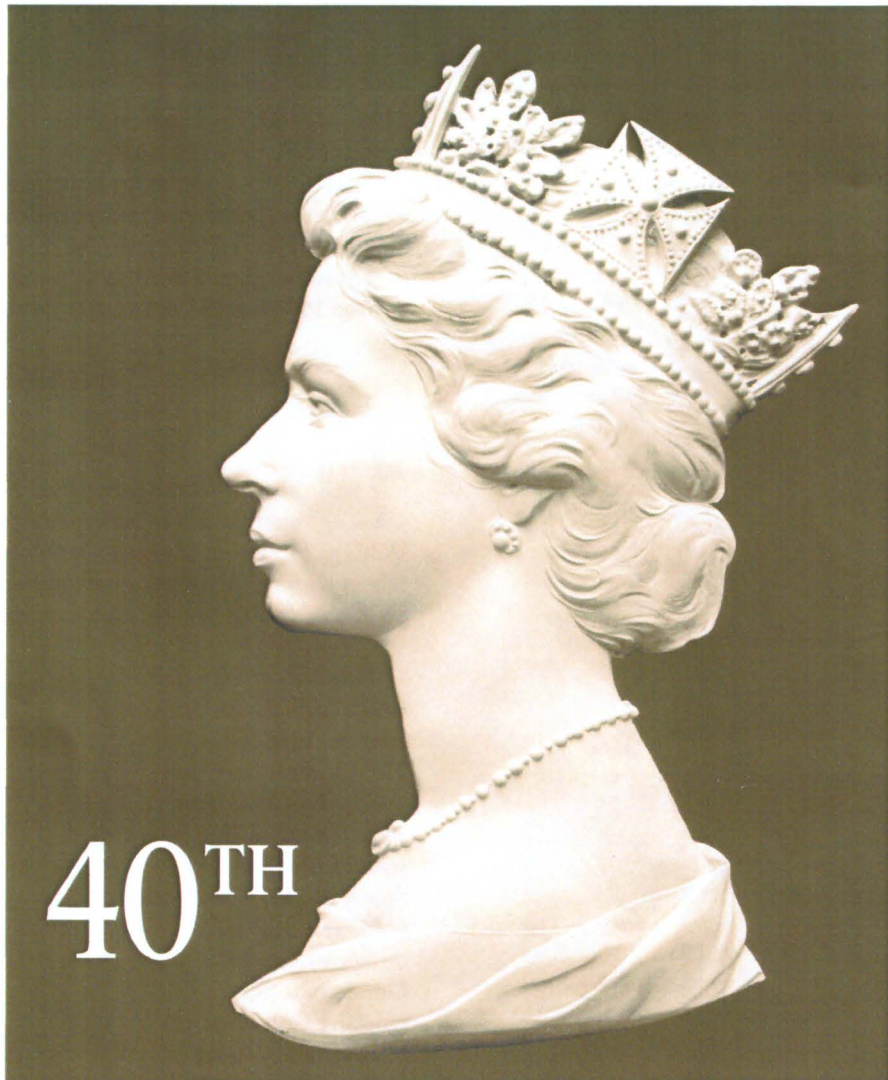


THE BRITISH  
POSTAL  
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# A Timeless Classic

The evolution of Machin's icon



**I**N 1967, the sculptor Arnold Machin produced a portrait of The Queen which was to become one of the most enduring and instantly recognisable designs of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The portrait has since been printed on over 200 billion British stamps. Marking its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary this exhibition explores the development of the design from its original inspiration in the Victorian Penny Black to the final portrait used today.

## 1. A Head for Coins

**A**RNOLD MACHIN was one of the sculptors chosen in 1962 to create a new effigy of The Queen in preparation for the new decimal coinage. Originally, he was part of a team from the Royal Academy (where he was Master of Sculpture), but later he was asked to progress work on his own. Photographs of The Queen were needed and Lord Snowdon took a large number specially for the project. All showed The Queen wearing a tiara.



*December 1962.  
Two of many  
photographs taken  
by Lord Snowdon  
for coins*



Machin based his drawings and first wax model on Snowdon's photographs. His first plaster casts showed The Queen both with and without a tiara but the former was preferred. Later models showed the necessary lettering added,



split around a large head. John Betjeman thought he had "made her look a bit sexy".

*1968 proof 10p decimal  
coin with Machin's final  
effigy.*

*Royal Mint*

Although the Royal Mint Advisory

Committee liked one version they thought it could be improved by personal sittings with The Queen. These were granted but the result was a disappointment. Work reverted to the version preferred before and detail was improved over a period of several months. The final effigy was a classical design rather than a portrait. It was approved by The Queen in June 1964 but did not appear on British coins until 1968.

## 2. A New Portrait for Stamps

**F**ROM 1952 the portrait of The Queen used on stamps was a three-quarter photograph by Dorothy Wilding. However, stamp designers found it difficult to fit this in with other images on larger commemorative stamps. So, a new profile portrait was required.

In November 1965 five artists were invited to submit "renderings" of The Queen's head and stamp designs. These were: Reginald Brill (a social realist painter); Stuart Devlin (Australian goldsmith and coin designer); David Gentleman (then working with Benn on revolutionary stamp designs); Arnold Machin (who had designed the decimal coinage effigy); and John Ward (a portrait painter).



*October 1966. Design by David  
Gentleman based on a  
Snowdon photograph*

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January 1966. Design by David Gentleman based on a wood engraving

In 1962 Lord Snowdon had taken photographs for the new decimal coinage. These were now used again as the basis for the new portrait. Gentleman produced several designs based directly on the Snowdon photographs.

Later he created a wood engraving of The Queen's head and many designs using it.

January 1966. Design by Reginald Brill.

Brill worked in plasticine and Devlin created a plaster cast. Both then produced artwork from that. Machin drew a large number of rather



elaborate sketches based on the Penny Black, his work for coins and his drawings from life. About 70 were created in all.

Ward's drawings were not developed very far.

January 1966. Design by Stuart Devlin based on a plaster cast



At the same time Andrew Restall, as Fellow of Minuscule Design, quite separately produced a number of stamp designs which were also essayed.

January 1966. Sketch by John Ward.



## Arnold Machin (Picture to Post)

Before I was asked to design the new definitive issue I had not been very interested in stamps, but now I began to look at them rather more critically.

I think it is generally accepted, at least by connoisseurs, that the Penny Black is probably the finest stamp ever designed and I decided to create the same kind of effect – that is with a light image on a dark background.

The belief that a diminutive design, such as a stamp, does not require detail I think is very much mistaken. In fact, I would say that the reverse is true.



January 1966. Sketches by Arnold Machin based on the Penny Black and Wedgwood cameos

If one thinks of miniatures the finest are very detailed indeed and I think more interesting and more beautiful because of it.



I decided to create a new design from a relief portrait. I already had many studies which I had made when I designed the

new decimal coinage. When I first began to design for the stamp I tended to use rather elaborate frames surrounding the portrait but gradually, by eliminating and eliminating, reached very much simpler statements.

Because I am a sculptor it was simple for me to work on the basis of a cameo rather like the early Wedgwoods. The model was first made in clay. Then it was moulded in plaster and this process makes it possible to refine the details by engraving into the mould before the final cast is taken. I do a lot of work both ways, both on the mould and the cast and if I am not satisfied I can remould and start the whole process again. It is interesting that my first heads were based on designs I had done for the coinage and the Penny Black was based on an engraving done in 1837 from the Wyon medal.



February/March 1966. Progression from coin mould photograph to the 'Coinage Head' plaster cast for stamps.

### 3. From Coin to Stamp

ARNOLD MACHIN'S approach to the portrait was preferred by the Stamp Advisory Committee. In February 1966 he began work on the design using photographs of a (rejected) plaster mould created for coins. From this he developed an image of The Queen wearing a tiara, but adapted the design so it was facing left (on coins she faced right). Created originally in clay, a mould was taken from this adapted design from which a relief cast was made.



April 1966.  
Regional essays

This was then photographed and is now termed Machin's 'Coinage Head'. The photograph was then used by the printers in a variety of frames showing regional symbols, possibly based on a sketch by Machin. They produced a range of stamp essays in April and May 1966, but the head was generally regarded as unrecognisable as The Queen.

Between May and August 1966 Machin simplified his 'Coinage Head' and the surrounding design until it consisted of the head and value alone on a solid colour background. The value was fashioned in another plaster cast.



August/September 1966.  
Machin's simplified 'Coinage Head'  
and essay

Essays of the simplified design, still showing The Queen wearing a tiara, were produced in October and compared with others based on a photograph by John Hedgecoe where The Queen wore the diadem.

### 4. Timeless & Classic

JOHN HEDGECOE took photographs of The Queen at the request of the Stamp Advisory Committee. These showed The Queen wearing the diadem, as in the Wilding photograph. Essays were prepared from one of these and David Gentleman produced some artwork.



August 1966. John Hedgecoe photograph

When the Committee saw the essays of Machin's simplified 'Coinage Head' and those of the Hedgecoe photographs they preferred the simple style of the former but suggested that the diadem replace the tiara.



Above: December 1966. Essay from David Gentleman artwork.

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October 1966. Machin's 'Diadem Head' plaster cast and essay.



Machin created a new plaster cast incorporating the diadem – the 'Diadem Head' – in October 1966. It is now recognisably similar to the final icon. This was photographed under different lighting conditions and trial stamps were printed.

Immediately the 'Diadem Head' essays were produced they were described as a vast improvement. However, Machin wanted to "retouch" the model to eliminate the sharp cut at the shoulder.

Working on photographs he added a corsage, or clothing, and produced another plaster cast called the 'Dressed Head'.

December 1966. Worked photograph adding a corsage



This was then essayed with two other variants in a large number of different colours. There were two plaster casts of the 'Dressed Head' which showed slight variations. Both appeared on the essays and the issued stamps.

When a selection of essays was shown to The Queen she preferred the 'Dressed Head' with corsage and chose a particular colour (olive brown sepia) for the inland letter rate stamp (4d), deliberately harking back to the Penny Black. She commented that she found the design "admirable".

March 1967. The 4d stamp in the colour expressly preferred by The Queen.



The first stamps in the new design were issued on 5 June 1967 to universal acclaim. High values in a larger format followed two years later.

Douglas N. Muir  
Curator, Philately  
May 2007

## Arnold Machin (Picture to Post)

*We had endless discussions about colour. The guiding principle was to find colours that wouldn't minimise the relief effect and blur the details. Colour without form, which seems to intrigue many people these days, in itself has no meaning for me. Patches of colours, areas of colour – all this I find extremely boring and elementary. Colours can be rich and give a sense of brightness without being garish.*

*For the definitive issue the first trials were made without lettering or frames and it looked so marvellous – just the head with the background – that the GPO agreed to leave out the words Postage and Revenue.*

*I wonder what Rowland Hill, the founder of the Penny Post, would have to say about stamp design today.*



Left: December 1966. One of the accepted photographs of the final 'Dressed Head'.

Right: Essay without value



*Above: Machin taking an impression from the mould*

*Arnold Machin OBE  
1911 - 1999*



*Below: Arnold Machin at the printing works*



This free exhibition runs from 4 May 2007 until Spring 2008 at The Royal Mail Archive, London.

The exhibition can be seen during all archive opening hours:

Monday to Friday  
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