

## **MWA Home & Overseas Paper - October 2017**

### **Mary Gillick - "her art in your pocket" - an exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds until 28 January 2018 - by Naomi Hancock**

Have you ever looked at the Queen's head on the coins in your purse?

Mary Gillick (1881-1965) lived for 50 years at Moravian Close in Chelsea, London. She was a sculptor who won a competition in 1952 that would see her art in everyone's pockets: her portrait of Queen Elizabeth II appeared on British and Commonwealth coinage until decimalisation in 1971.

Mary Gillick was born in Nottingham and studied at Nottingham School of Art (1898-1902) before completing her training at the Royal College of Art (1902-04). She met fellow sculptor Ernest George Gillick while at Nottingham and they married in 1905, forming what was described in her obituary as 'an ideal working partnership' based at their studio and home at Moravian Close in Chelsea from 1914.

Gillick was a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy of Arts from 1911, and was well-known during her lifetime for her medallic relief work and for the production of memorial portrait plaques for public buildings, but she is most widely remembered for her portrait of Queen Elizabeth II designed for the obverse of British and Commonwealth coinage. Gillick won the commission from a field of seventeen when she was seventy-one years old, recently bereaved and in poor health.

The commission had to strike a delicate balance between traditional coin design and the optimistic post-war spirit of the 'New Elizabethans' shown by the 1951 Festival of Britain.

First struck in 1953, her depiction was unconventional because the new monarch was shown uncrowned and cut off at the shoulder in a design that drew on early Victorian pennies and sixteenth-century lettering. Gillick worked on the portrait between March and October 1952, with one sitting and close supervision by the Duke of Edinburgh. The portrait was first modelled in wax and then cast in plaster, when Gillick began to experiment with the inscription around the edge. With each variation another mould and cast were made until she had refined the design sixty-three times.

The same Queen's head design is still used today on the Queen's Maundy money, which she distributes to pensioners on Maundy Thursday every year. It is also used on the Royal Mail's commemorative stamps.



*Effigy of Queen Elizabeth II by Mary Gillick,*

*Mary Gillick in her Studio at Moravian Close  
and below, her design on the old "threepenny bit" coin.*

