

Zurich on its Talers

Like many other Protestant republics, the city of Zurich was now and again met with the problem of what to depict on its coins. As a republic, it had neither a ruler nor city saints. Most of the Zurich coins therefore show the city's crest, often held by one or two lions. Between 1651 and 1790, the rich trading town on the Limmat River oftentimes portrayed itself by the so-called city view talers.

Zurich issued the first city view talers inspired by Matthäus Merians' illustration of Zurich, published in 1642 in the "Topographia Helvetiae." The prominent buildings are easy to distinguish, on the first talers as well as on later ones. Hence the city view talers illustrate significant architectural changes that have taken place in Zurich in the 140 years these talers were issued – like the construction of the new city wall, which was completed in 1678. Or the renovation of the bell tower of the Grossmünster, which had been destroyed by lightning in 1763; on the city view talers issued in 1790, the new bell towers are prominently displayed.

Republic of Zurich, Taler (Entrenchment Taler) undated (after 1707)



Denomination:	Taler
Mint Authority:	Republic of Zurich
Mint:	Zurich
Year of Issue:	1707
Weight (g):	28.04
Diameter (mm):	43.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Hans Jakob Gessner I took office as mint master of Zurich in 1706. He had learned the trade of a goldsmith from his father and soon developed great craftsmanship. Under Gessner's influence, the tradition of the art of minting coins and medals altered from baroque exuberance to restrained classicism in northern Switzerland. His son Hans Jakob Gessner II and later his grandson Hans Jakob Gessner III succeeded him as mint masters of Zurich.

The Zurich Schanzentalers (fortification talers), evidently named after their motif, are among Gessner's most famous works – the piece shown here being an early example. Across the river the Grossmünster Church with its two towers and the somewhat smaller Predigerkirche are easily recognizable. On the nearby side, the churches of Fraumünster (at that time still with two small towers) and of St. Peter dominate the town. The rest of the towers are either family towers, old castles once inhabited by noble people, or fortification towers of the old city wall.

The new city walls, very prominently in the foreground, were built from 1642 to 1678. They command respect for the feat of the builders: with instruments that seem downright primitive today, thousands of cubic meters of earth were dug out and heaped up, until a ring of bastions surrounded the town. The access from the lake, to be seen on the right of our coin, was blocked; and besides there were war ships waiting, always ready for action.

Republic of Zurich, 10 Ducats 1724



Denomination:	10 Ducats
Mint Authority:	Republic of Zurich
Mint:	Zurich
Year of Issue:	1724
Weight (g):	34.79
Diameter (mm):	38.900001525878906
Material:	Gold
Owner:	Schweizerisches Landesmuseum

In the 18th century, Zurich carried on its coinage more intensive than ever before. No other Swiss city minted as many – nor as magnificent - coins as the republic on the Limmat River. Zurich issued gold ducats, for instance, using very representative taler dies. These gold coins were mainly for ostentation, of course, and used as presents and bribes.

The city view talers were Zurich's pride. Those coins demonstrated the wealth, power and splendor of the little town perfectly. Where other towns had to show their respective rulers, the sovereign town of Zurich portrayed itself. Moreover in a time, where aerial pictures were unknown, the view at the city from aloft must have been especially impressive for contemporaries.

Republic of Zurich, Taler 1729



Denomination:	Taler
Mint Authority:	Republic of Zurich
Mint:	Zurich
Year of Issue:	1729
Weight (g):	27.6
Diameter (mm):	38.70000076293945
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Schweizerisches Landesmuseum

In the 18th century, Zurich was thus still a medieval town. The city fortifications that had been built about a century earlier, constricted the city's increase. But when the entrenchment was knocked down in 1833, new possibilities for urban development opened. Nevertheless, diverse changes in townscape can already be seen on the city view talers, which were issued between 1651 and 1790.

In the years from 1728 to 1732, for instance, the Fraumünster Church on the left side of the river was renovated – its two small towers were replaced by a big single one. Right next to Fraumünster, the tower of St. Peter's Church rises up to the sky. St. Peter is the oldest church of Zurich; the city's fire watchman had his lookout in the tower until 1911.

On the right side of the river, the Church of Grossmünster – then still with two pointed towers –, the Wasserkirche and the city hall can be seen. In the middle of the river stands the Wellenberg Tower. Originally part of an older fortification, the tower was used as prison since the 14th century. It was pulled down in 1837 because it slowed down the shipping traffic.

Republic of Zurich, Taler 1736



Denomination:	Taler
Mint Authority:	Republic of Zurich
Mint:	Zurich
Year of Issue:	1736
Weight (g):	27.29
Diameter (mm):	40.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

This taler demonstrates: Travelers coming from the lake to Zurich – as did many, before the invention of the automobile and the construction of the railroad –, would see the Bauschänzli as first point of the city. That is a bastion built into the lake during the 17th century, as part of a fortification against attacks which fortunately never took place.

Between the Bauschänzli and the Fraumünster Church lay the Chratz, the neighborhood for the less privileged: here the air was clammy and full of mosquitoes, since the district lay between the shores of the lake, the river and a moat. Within the Chratz stood the town house with its gables and bays (on the square in front of it, the weekly market was held), some medieval houses and a large inn, the Baugarten; directly on the lake stood a watchtower.

In 1877, the Chratz was knocked down in order to make room for the construction of new office buildings and the first stock market of Zurich. The demolition took place only after long quarrels, however, because the Baugarten Inn was the meeting place of the exclusive Baugarten Society. Those were people of distinction and influence, and they did not like their favorite inn to be torn down. But discussions did not help: in the end, the Chratz was knocked down.

Republic of Zurich, 1/2 Taler 1739



Denomination:	1/2 Taler
Mint Authority:	Republic of Zurich
Mint:	Zurich
Year of Issue:	1739
Weight (g):	13.74
Diameter (mm):	33.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Whoever knows Zurich will soon detect significant differences between the modern cityscape and the city view on the coin shown here. The city is seen from the lake, which was cut off from the Limmat River by palisades until the 19th century; the only way in was through Grendel Gate. In the Limmat stood the prison, the Wellenberg Tower, which was knocked down in 1837. At that time, only two bridges across the river existed: the Rathausbrücke – the oldest connection over the Limmat – and the Münsterbrücke.

On the right side of the river, the Wasserkerche still stood in the water at the time this coin was minted. The Limmatquai, the hithe between the Wasserkerche and Grendel Gate, was built in 1839 to facilitate the embarkation of goods. On the left shore of the river the Bahnhofstrasse, so significant for Zurich today, was built from 1864; for that reason the old Chratz quarter had to be knocked down – including the Chratz Tower, a watchtower of 24 meters (c. 79 feet) height that had been built from erratic blocks.

The die for this coin was cut by Hans Jakob Gessner I, who held the office of a mint master of Zurich for 30 years. When this half taler was struck in 1739, Gessner had been dead for two years, however. His son and successor, Hans Jakob Gessner II, continued to use his father's dies by simply adapting the date.

Republic of Zurich, Taler 1790



Denomination:	Taler
Mint Authority:	Republic of Zurich
Mint:	Zurich
Year of Issue:	1790
Weight (g):	25.29
Diameter (mm):	39.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Zurich issued its last city view talers in 1790. Then a tradition ended, that had begun almost 140 years earlier. On the first city view talers from 1651, the city itself had taken only little space; the lake and the sky had been equally important to the artist. But now, towards the end of the 18th century, the city was depicted in full detail.

The tradition of the city view talers fell victim to political changes: in 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte forced the independent Swiss realms into the Helvetic Republic. With this the rule of the cities over their hinterlands ended, and urban coinage came to an end as well. In 1803 the newly founded Swiss cantons started to mint their own monies, and from 1850, the Swiss Confederation assumed the task of supplying the population with coins.

In Zurich, the emancipation of the town and its hinterland led to the demolition of the city fortification, which had provided safety to the townspeople, but at the same time had always been a symbol of exclusion to the people in the countryside. After the restricting ring wall had been knocked down, the town started to grow very slowly beyond its former borders. In the 1860s, however, Zurich's big building boom started. In the decades that followed, most of the representative buildings were erected that characterize Zurich up to this day.