Gold shines like the sun. It is found in nature, can be easily worked and does not corrode. Its beauty, weight and rarity have since time immemorial made this precious metal the symbol of divine and eternal values.

When mankind began to use gold for earthly purposes and discovered its economic dynamic it revealed its drawback: deception, theft and murder were the names given to the devilish temptations that were the starting point of the greed for gold. Even today it remains an ethical question as to how mankind should deal with gold. Here light is thrown on some of its mythical and metaphoric aspects.
Gold is divine

The golden funerary mask of Pharaoh Psusennes I (c. 1040 - c. 994 BC), Egyptian Museum, Cairo

Because of its beauty and indestructibility gold is worldwide and in almost all civilisations a symbol of the sun, of divine enlightenment, of purity, immortality and wisdom.

The kings in ancient Egypt, the pharaohs, regarded themselves as the descendents of the sun god Re, from which they received the office of sovereignty over the earth. In ancient Egypt gold meant the visible presence of the gods in matter. It was only used for the royal household, for example, for jewellery and chariots, and the religious sphere. Golden grave furnishings were meant to help the pharaohs – like mummification – to attain eternal existence.

Gold had no economic significance for the ancient Egyptians, as they conducted their commerce by barter.
The "Midas touch" or the curse of gold


Dionysus, the god of wine, granted the legendary king Midas of Phrygia a wish for the release of Silenus. Midas wanted everything he touched to turn to gold.

He did not take into account that now his food and drink would also turn into gold. But not only was he threatened to death by starvation and thirst. In the same way he was doomed to isolation. Touching changed people he loved, such as his daughter, into gold and thus into a precious but lifeless object.

The expression "Midas touch" means to turn one's activities to financial advantage. An enviable ability as long as one takes into account that wealth accumulated for purely egoistical purposes can turn into a curse.
How the river came to gold

The river bed at the foot of the Tmolos Mountains, from which the River Pactolus had its source in ancient Lydia

The people in antiquity had a mythological explanation for the presence of gold sand in the river. According to this Dionysus told King Midas, "Go to the source of the River Pactolus and dip your head three times into the holy water." Midas, who was threatened by starvation, as everything he touched turned to gold, followed the advice of the compassionate god. He washed his head with his hair that had turned stiff with gold in the Lydian mountain river and was freed of the magic. According to legend, that was the reason why grains of gold are found in the sand of the Pactolus mountain river.

By the way, after his release Midas is said to have renounced wealth and a life of luxury and to have listened to Pan's flute playing.
Money turns into gold

Croesus series, staters in gold and silver in various denominations from the 6th century BC

The first known coins in the world were minted in Lydia (present-day western Turkey) in about the 7th century BC. They were made of electrum, a natural alloy of silver and gold, which was found in the River Pactolus. As the proportions of the silver and gold in the metal electrum varied it was not possible to assign a fixed value to these coins.

No doubt for this reason the last Lydian king, the legendary rich Croesus (around 560–546 BC), created the first bimetallic currency system. His gold and silver staters were uniform in size and weight. In both metals they exist in denominations up to 1/24. As a rule they display a roaring lion attacking a bull standing opposite to it. Both of these animals symbolise power and strength.

Though Croesus was not, as is often assumed, the inventor of money, his precious metal mintages made coin history. The currency system based on gold and silver has survived for over 2500 years well into the 20th century.
Gold plunderage in South America

A gold figure of the Inca culture from the region of Cusco, Peru, from the 15th or 16th century

For the Incas, who regarded themselves as the children of the sun god Inti, gold was the sun's "beads of sweat." They lived in a society without money and used the precious metal for purely religious purposes. The golden masks of the mummified Inca rulers glittered in the Sun Temple of Cusco. The main entrance and the side corridors were covered with sheets of pure gold and in the "Holy Garden" golden lamas were grazing and golden maize was growing.

In 1532 the Spanish conquerors under Francisco Pizarro, on the other hand, came with strong economic interests and their king's order to provide as much gold as possible for the deeply indebted Spanish court.

Unfamiliar with the Western view of the world and the modern Spanish weapon technology, the Inca king Atahualpa (* c. 1500, †1533), however, underestimated the only 160 foreign invaders: the numerically far superior Inca army succumbed to the steel weapons of the Spanish crown and its cavalry, and Atahualpa was captured.
Thereupon the Inca king offered Pizarro a 50 square metre room filled with gold to pay for his release. The Spaniards' stoves are said to have burnt for 34 days to melt down the gold that was fetched from all parts of the empire. But the immense reserves of gold were of no avail: nevertheless, nine months later Pizarro had his prisoner executed.
The dream of alchemy to make gold out of lead

Alchemy, an ancient branch of natural philosophy, reached Europe from ancient Egypt via Spain. It experimented with materials and elements and reached its zenith in the Middle Ages. One of the alchemists' aims – in addition to the search for the philosopher's stone or a panacea – was to produce gold artificially in the laboratory from non-precious metals. They were encouraged to do so by the teachings of Aristotle (*384, †322 BC), which gave them reason to assume that the gold inside the earth forms from other metals.

That is why out of economic interests rulers and popes employed alchemists in the Middle Ages. Johann Friedrich Böttger is said to have produced gold in a laboratory for Prince Elector Friedrich August of Saxony (*1682, †1719) in large quantities. But he, like all the alchemists, did not succeed in producing the precious metal in large quantities artificially. Instead he did, by chance, manage to produce the first porcelain.

Another by-product of the search for gold is the (re-)invention of black powder, i.e. gunpowder, in Europe. Modern chemistry, too, is also indebted to alchemy for many processes such as, for example, distillation, filtration and compounds with ammonia, ether or phosphorus.
The gnomes or the ambivalence of gold

"Three Gnomes," a group of figures by Imre Mesterházy (*1951)

"Well known as surgeons of the mountain rocks; / We milk the high mountains, / We ladle from the full veins: (...) / We are the friends of good people. / But we bring the gold to the surface / So that one can steal and couple, (...) / All that is not our fault; / So have patience at once like we do.

"(From Goethe's Faust II, Act 1, Verse 5849 f.)

In Goethe's Faust the earth and mountain spirits, called gnomes by Paracelsus, carry the gold to the surface and make it available to humans. But they reject responsibility for the effect of this wealth. Whether it is used in a good or a bad sense is the responsibility of the owner alone.

But probably better known than Goethe's gnomes are the "gnomes of Zurich." The sources are not agreed on which of the two British politicians, Harold Wilson or George Brown, was the first to call the Swiss bankers gnomes. The reproach behind this is clear: namely, that by speculation and acting behind the scenes they had weakened the British pound. The term went into (financial) history and also indicates not least the ambivalence inherent in gold and money.
Integrity is rewarded

Charity stamp 1967 Frau Holle of the Federal Post Berlin

Fairy tales impart knowledge from long ago. In Grimm's fairy tale *Frau Holle* (Mother Holda), a girl is forced by her stepmother to jump into a well to look for the lost spindle. She enters Mother Holda's world in whose service she works diligently. The picture shows how the girl, on returning home, is showered with gold by Mother Holda as a reward.

The diligent Goldmarie personifies virtue and probity. Good qualities, which in many fairy tales – perhaps also for educational reasons – are rewarded with gold, a symbol of the highest value. Her lazy sister, on the other hand, who acts in the same way from pure greed, performs her duties inadequately and is punished with a shower of sticky tar.

In 2006 *Frau Holle* was awarded a prize for "Germany's Best Fairy Tale."

By the way, not in all gold stories that are to be found in Grimm's fairy tales is gold the absolutely most desirable article. The hero of *Hans im Glück* (Happy-Go-Lucky) starts with a lump of gold as big as a head that he exchanges for other things in the course of his wanderings and he only becomes happy when he loses his last possession, a millstone.
Agent 007 defends his hoard of gold

James Bond in the Fort Knox gold vault, a scene from the Bond film "Goldfinger" by Guy Hamilton from the year 1964

Fort Knox, a permanent military post of the US army in the state of Kentucky, which serves the Internal Revenue Service as the US Bullion Depository for gold reserves of various other state banks. In the film Goldfinger the saviour of this gold vault is the fictitious British secret service agent James Bond, also known as 007.

The great money smuggler Auric Goldfinger – his name, soaked in gold, refers to the legendary king Midas – has the devilish plan to use an atomic bomb to blow up the entire gold reserves of the USA in Fort Knox with the help of the People's Republic of China. By doing so the value of his own supplies would increase many times over. James Bond prevents this after a fierce fight seven seconds before the bomb detonates.

Goldfinger has become the epitome of the Bond films. It has entered the Guinness World Records as the film that earned the quickest money of all time. In the first two weeks it brought in 2.9 million dollars and after only three weeks its box office takings covered the production costs.

Gold also plays a part in the famous scene at the beginning of the film: one of Goldfinger's assistants is killed when her body is completely covered in gold, resulting in her suffocation.
Yearning for the Golden Age

"The Golden Age," a painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder (*1472, †1553) from around 1530, the Bavarian State Collection of Paintings, Munich

The idea of a Golden Age can be found in the ancient mythology of the Western world and in the religious-philosophical traditions of the Near and Far East. In this context "Golden" stands for an original ideal condition of humanity, for a life in accordance with nature that richly provides food, without war, without agriculture, sea voyages and trading.

The Roman poet Ovid (*43 BC, † c. 17 AD) describes in his *Metamorphoses* this paradisiacal world as an age, which knew neither laws nor punishments, as every individual behaves responsibly and ethically without compulsion.

But the yearning for the Golden Age models itself not only on the past. As a vision (Utopia) it points to a future, a new "golden" age. It is not clear when the hoped for future of mankind, which at present lives in the "unshakable" age, will dawn. It is certain that the current economic system with its flow of gold and money only functions well if every individual acts responsibly and ethically.