

## Special exhibit

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### Unusual gold coins from Japan

The Obankin depicted here was minted at the Edo mint (Tokyo) by order of Shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune (1716-45) in October of the tenth year of the Kyoho era (1725). It is one of only 8,515 pieces of its kind. The name is derived from *Oban* meaning “large plate” and the suffix

*-kin*, the Japanese word for “gold”.

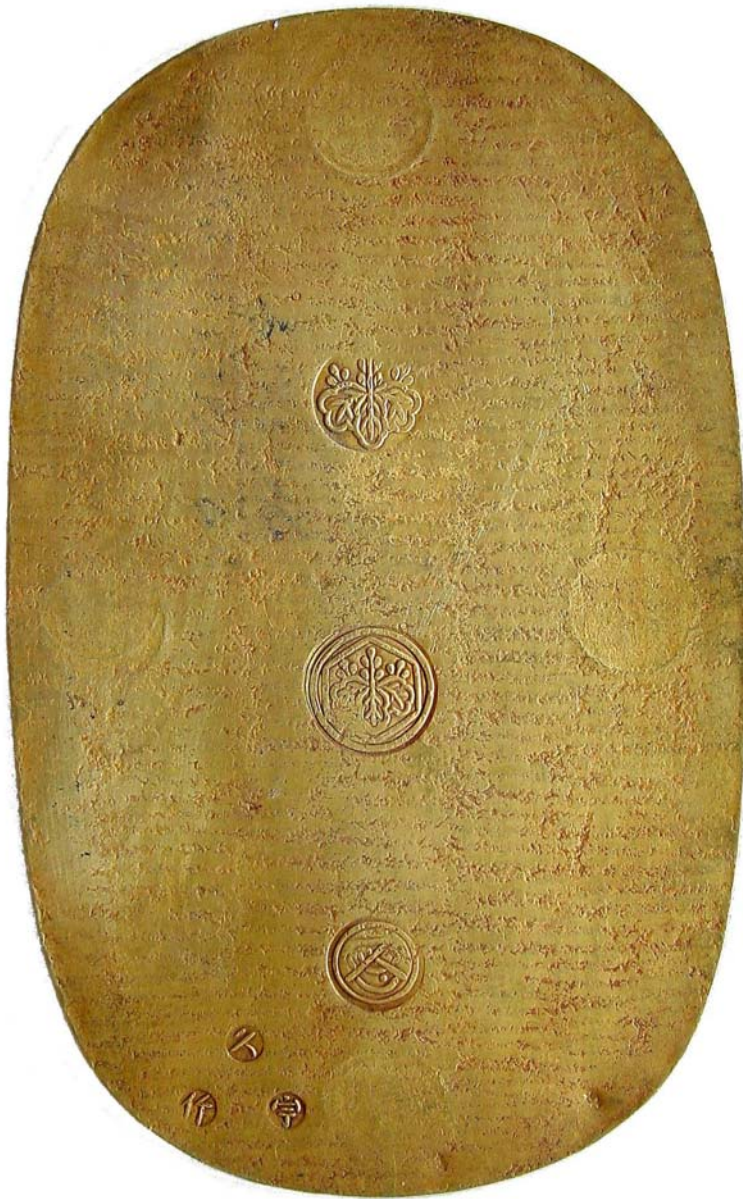
The coin’s value, 10 ryo, is written in ink on the obverse. Below this is the signature of the Goto family member responsible for minting in gold. To prevent the writing from being rubbed off, the individual coins were wrapped in silk or cotton; larger numbers of coins were stored in wooden crates with appropriate interior compartments.

The writing could be renewed for a fee. Besides the writing, the obverse also has four stamp marks in the form of the kiri flower, the ancient symbol of power. The horizontal grooves covering the coin’s entire obverse were probably intended to show that the whole coin was made of precious metal. The reverse is relatively plain in design. It bears only three large and



three small stamp marks. The two upper larger stamp marks depict the kiri flower: one is enclosed in a hexagon and a circle, while the other does not have a border. The lowest large

stamp mark denotes "Goto". The three small impressions in the bottom left-hand corner are from the mint's staff. The two lower stamps give – in abbreviated form – the names of the workers who minted this Oban; the upper stamp was made by a supervisor. The small



indentation on the right-hand side indicates that the coin's weight and fineness were examined by private entities – **principally money changers and traders**. If a coin again passed through the hands of someone who had already examined it and had appended his personal mark, re-examining it was no longer necessary.

Weighing 165 g and with a face value of 10 ryo (which was equivalent to 75 kg of copper coins), the Oban had enormous purchasing power – much too high for normal circulation. These coins were originally used only for business conducted by the imperial court; the court nobility also used them as gifts.

Later, foreign trade and larger domestic transactions were also carried out using the Oban. With their standardised sizes, fixed weights and stated values, these gold coins, which had been in existence since the 16th century, were the first legal tender throughout Japan. What is striking about this coin (apart from its shape) is that it does not give the name of who commissioned it – neither emperor nor shogun.

After having been minted for almost three hundred years, the last Obans were produced in the first year of the Manen era (1860).

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Recommended reading

Neil Gordon Munro (1904), *Coins of Japan*, Yokohama.

Norman Jacobs and Cornelius C Vermeule (1972), *Japanese Coinage*, New York.

Deutsche Bundesbank (1985), *Neuzeitliche Goldmünzen*. Frankfurt am Main.