

Actual Size: 85mm



OBJECTS OF *Desire*

38 NUMISMATIST • SEPTEMBER 2007

www.money.org

MEDALLIC ART

Intimate and inspiring, art medals have evolved as devotees around the globe experiment with themes, materials and methods of creation.

by D. Wayne Johnson A N A 1 1 8 4 9 5 0

IN JUST A FEW WEEKS, scores of medallic artists from around the globe will converge on the American Numismatic Association in Colorado Springs for the 30th Congress of the Fédération Internationale de la Médaille (FIDEM), September 19-22. The focus of their often imaginative work is as removed from medals as medals are from coins, which are overburdened with restrictions, such as size, weight and nationalistic propriety. "Medallic objects" break the rules of coin and medal design, transcend technical restraints and overcome medallic bias, all the while remaining interesting, aesthetic pieces of art for the eye to behold . . . and the hand to hold.

Actual Size: 133 x 143mm

Oftentimes, medallic objects are free-standing, but they are not small statues, nor upright or overgrown medallions. The painter considers his art in color and shadows, the sculptor in forms and planes, and the medalist in relief and miniature scope. But the creators of medallic objects, while they may be guided by the precepts of these graphic and glyptic arts, are not bound by their restrictions.

If medallic objects have sculptural tridimensionality, it is only incidental. They are more apt to display their designs and any modulated relief on two sides—front and back. (I won't use the numismatic terms "obverse" and "reverse.") However, they can have more than two sides or surfaces. If I had to choose one phrase to characterize their form, I would say medallic objects are "bas-relief unleashed."

New Concepts in Shape and Technique

Medallic objects often have unusual shapes or what artists call "negative space." They frequently extend beyond the boundaries of traditional planchets and feature adornments, or as

the French say, *enrichies*. Artifacts of any kind—found or fashioned—are fair game for embellishing medallic pieces. They may be enameled or bejeweled. Some practitioners incorporate found objects. For example, French artist Roger Bezombes made a bird out of scissors, while Salvador Dali created a medallic object from spoons. Such works are the modern art of the medallic field.

A medallic object frequently is a limited edition, usually less than 50 or 100. If it can be die-struck, that's fine. It also can be reproduced by

any of a dozen casting methods using flexible or ceramic molds, or it can be assembled or fabricated using epoxy, solder or hinges. Anything goes. Deep relief? No problem. No lettering? That's permissible, too. It's up to the artist.

In 1969 Finnish medalist Kauko

◀ *Re-born* (left), cast in polyurethane resin by Angeles Sánchez Davia, makes interesting use of negative space. Magdalena Lesniak's brass *Sadness in August* (opposite) represents the fragility of relationships.



Räsänen introduced two-part medals.

The front of his *Jonah in the Whale* separates from the back to reveal Jonah inside the medal. His subsequent works evolved to include several parts, exemplifying the art form's flexibility and the artist's innovation.

Characteristics of Medallic Objects

Never larger than 15 inches, medallic objects resonate as intimate art. They are best appreciated when handheld and viewed from every angle—all around, above and below, inside and out. In this respect, they are unlike coins or medals. (None, however, require the magnification so necessary for coins.)

Because they are relative newcomers on the art scene, medallic objects have yet to be tested in the crucible of public opinion. Their acceptance must come from both critic and collector. They should be examined for their beauty, ☉

If a technique works, the artist can employ it for future creations; if it doesn't, the artist has expanded his or her knowledge base.

Actual Size: 130 x 60mm



▲ Two pieces produced by British artists incorporate found materials: Jacqueline Scholes' *Slavery* (left) and Catalina Torres Mejia's *Ancestral Honour*.

their perception, their charm, their desirability and their content.

Innovation and Imagination

Appropriately, medallic objects provide a testing ground for the medallic field. If a technique works, the artist can employ it for future creations; if it doesn't, the artist has expanded his or her

knowledge base. The experience helps the artist determine and stretch the boundaries of this emerging art form.

Innovation is born of imagination. What developments might we see in the future? Let your imagination run wild. For example, why not a talking medal? No need for printed literature—a sound chip could provide data about the artist and the reason behind the medal's issuance. Or it might simply tell a story, illustrated, of course, by the miniature, bas-relief sculpture you hold in your hand.

Perhaps the medal's surface could feature an "olfactory release." One side picturing a charred forest might smell of burnt wood, while the other gives off the fragrance of wildflowers that have grown up amid the devastation.

Actual Size: 115 x 96mm



◀ Portrait medals still have a place in medallic art. This cast-aluminum piece by Danius Drulys commemorates Hans Christian Andersen.

American Forays into Medallic Art

In 1965 *Art in America*, a widely respected publication, conducted an experiment in New York City. It commissioned Edward Albert Bryant, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, to manage a project that would reproduce a series of bas-reliefs. Bryant sought the help of William Trees Louth (a National Sculpture Association patron who created several Presidential inaugural medals) and Medallic Art Company (MACO). Together, they literally invented a new art form!

Choosing seven contemporary sculptors, the pair offered them explicit instructions: express yourself without restraint in bas-relief that can be reproduced. The seven reliefs ranged from a traditional *Salome* (by Elbert Weinberg) to recasting and rearranging newspaper printer's plates (by Greek-American artist Chryssa). The others were quite contemporary: James Wines' *Art and the Machine*, Harold Tovish's *Mashed Faces*, Constantino Nivola's *Classical Gods*, Roy Gussow's *Water over the Edge of a Pool* and Ernest Trova's *Falling Man*.

Actual Size: 75 x 55mm



The French welcomed the possibilities of the fresh media. In essence, they became the proprietors, if not the innovators, of the new art form.

Each work—305 to 381mm (12 to 15 inches)—was reproduced in a limited edition of eight (sound familiar?). Tovish's and Nivola's works also were reproduced in smaller, medallion sizes and formats, even gold pins. To the credit of Medallion Art Company, its craftsmen knew which to cast by molds, which to reproduce by electrogalvanic means, and which to strike from dies.

Actual Size: 80mm



◀ The back of Kauko Räsänen's Lotta Salminen is a prime example of this groundbreaking Finnish medalist's work.

▼ Medallion objects typically break the rules of standard coin production and medal-making. Consider Eric Claus' free-standing Dutch State Bank.



Actual Size: 104 x 104 x 75mm

But most notable were the finishes. Gus-sow's galvano in copper was chromium-plated and highly polished. Nivola's galvano was bronze-plated with black oxidized patina. Tovish's *Meshed Faces* with three surface levels was given three finishes: the wide border was French

antiqued, the faces in the center were reflectively polished, and the background was manually textured. Hugo Greco, foreman of MACO's finishing department, could not satisfy the demanding Tovish until, perhaps in desperation, he picked up a beer-can opener and etched a random pattern of lines in the background surface. "That's it!" Tovish shouted.

Later explorations included Roy Lichtenstein's *Salute to Air-mail* and Sidney Simon's *Five Heads Plaque*, both created in 1968. After that, Americans evidenced little innovation in medallion art, except perhaps for Robert Weinman's *Cat and*

Mouse, the 115th issue of The Society of Medalists. But then the French stepped forward, welcoming the possibilities of the fresh media. In essence, they became the proprietors, if not the innovators, of the new art form.

Paris Mint Influence

Since the birth of medallion objects in the mid 1960s, Monnaie de Paris (the Paris Mint) has served as their nursery. The Mint's greatest, 20th-century director, Pierre deHaye, profoundly influenced the genre and should be given much credit for its development. Indeed, he commissioned a variety of artists, craftsmen and medalists, challenging them to create one new medallion object a day!

With its publication *La Médaille-Objet* in 1985, the Paris Mint solidified the term "medallion objects" for the field. This catalog showcased the world's finest medallion objects produced in the previous two decades, inspiring artists from around the globe to embrace the new trend.

FIDEM certainly has helped advance the creation and acceptance of medallion art, as has the American Medallion Sculpture Association and similar organizations in Canada, England, Netherlands, Finland, Poland and other countries. This year's FIDEM XXX Congress features the works of more than 540 artists from 32 countries, several of which are illustrated here.

Art You Can Live With

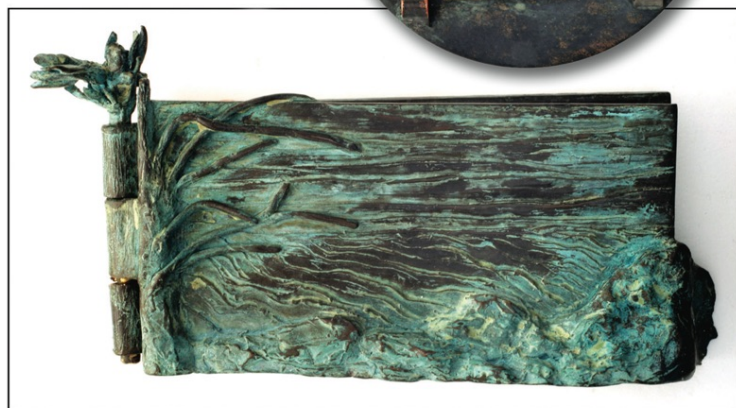
Medallion objects are the ideal collectibles. Their diminutive size makes them highly desirable, not only because they invite handling, but also because they take up very little space. They are readily displayed on mantels, tabletops and bookcases; they should never be hidden in a ☉

Medals should never be hidden in a drawer or, heaven forbid, a safe-deposit box. They must be seen, appreciated, venerated, enjoyed and loved.

► Works submitted by the U.S. delegation for exhibition at FIDEM XXX included Ann Shaper Pollack's *Destroyed by War* (top), Chu-Alice Chan's *Warrior* (right) and Mashiko's *Eternal*.



Actual Size: 85mm



Actual Size: 94 x 65 x 40mm



Actual Size: 37 x 22mm

drawer or, heaven forbid, a safe-deposit box. They must be seen, appreciated, venerated, enjoyed and loved. Best of all, like coins and medals, these objects likely will outlast other art forms, such as paintings and sculpture, which can fall victim to fire, flood and other disasters.

But are medallic objects within the realm of art or numismatics? For whom are they intended: artists, museums, coin collectors, the general public? And what about the people who create them? Should they be considered artists, medalists or sculptors? That these questions exist and are open to discussion is part of the charm of this art form.

Sharing the Passion

Once a collector develops a taste for medallic objects, addiction is likely to follow. Every art collector—and certainly every numismatist—should have one or two medallic objects. Not only are they great conversation pieces, but they also are symbolic of the collectors' membership in a worldwide network of enthusiasts.

Many artists' creations reside in the studio where they came to life. Medalists might create only a single specimen, often for display in a national or international exhibition. In some instances, the artist replicates his work in his own atelier. For editions of any quantity, however, he must turn this task over to medallic firms or mints that understand the media.

Collector and medallic-object enthusiast Donald Scarinci often has to cajole artists to sell their pieces. In one instance, a medalist considered Scarinci's offer for a year before agreeing to part with the desired item. (Amazingly, the artist waited another six months to submit an invoice.) Perhaps this is why art galleries should be purveyors of this new genre, but they must first comprehend and appreciate it.

Collectors and creators of medallic objects are, without a doubt, ahead of their time. Nevertheless, the medallic field is positioned for interesting developments as numismatists and art aficionados discover and explore these objects of desire.