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Appreciating and Collecting Contemporary Art Medals

Since the ANA is our host, I thought there should be at least one paper directed specifically to collectors. I hope to put the contemporary art medal in its historical context and discuss the highlights of its evolution that led to the medals exhibited here at FIDEM 2007.

For collectors, contemporary art medals are difficult to find for sale. They are seldom exhibited; and, when they are exhibited, the catalog is either nonexistent or incomplete. Information about contemporary art medals is often as scarce and as rare as the medals themselves. More often than not, the information that you need the most is not available in English translation. Worse still, the collector base is so thin that there aren't many people with whom you can share your enthusiasm and experiences.

Even though most contemporary art medals are all very rare, with editions of twenty medals considered a large edition, the week demand means that there is not much of a secondary market for them right now. When you buy a medal, you need to really like it. You must buy it after careful thought to your budget, the space required to store it and your passion for it and consider it as a long term hold.

Why collect Contemporary medals?

The very issues that will frustrate you the most are the best reasons that I could give to collect contemporary art medals. Medal collectors have the opportunity to do original research to an extent that exists in very few numismatic related areas today. Medals, like coins, reflect the history of the time in which they are created. Medals, more than coins, reflect trends in art and the very psyche of the times.

Collecting contemporary art medals requires interaction with the artists who make them. Without an intermediary, dealing directly with some artists can be a frightening experience if you are not prepared for it. On the positive side, many artists are nice, friendly and open to hearing from collectors and people who want to know more about their work. Many will share photographs and engage the collector in interesting discussions that could enhance your enjoyment of their art. Another good reason that collectors collect is to enjoy the ownership of something that few others can own—the joy of rarity. The rarity of medals in general and contemporary art

medals in particular coupled with the rarity of the collectors who collect them means that, though rare, these precious objects are obtainable today at reasonable prices. It also means that very few new collectors and very little additional interest is needed to move market prices up significantly and add great value to your collection both financially and as a numismatic related holding of significance.

What are these things?

My first encounter with a cast contemporary art medal happened at the ANA annual convention held in Detroit in July, 1994. That was when I saw the AMSA exhibit, "The New Medal" sponsored by the Franklin Mint.

For a numismatist accustomed to seeing representational or decorative art on coins and medals in America up to that time, I did not understand how to look at the contemporary medals in that exhibit. Like many numismatists in Detroit in 1994 I wondered, "What are these things?" I was both intrigued and curious about them.

This exhibit made it clear to me for the first time in America that the art medal had ceased to become a representational or decorative object. The art medal had departed from the decorative arts and rejoined sculpture. The ideas of modernism and post modernism had come to dominate the art of the medal as the medal resumed its rightful place in art as sculpture.

The American art medal abandoned the decorative arts later than most countries. FIDEM 1987 would be the earliest demarcation point for this transition in America because of Mico Kaufman's American delegation medal, but by the AMSA/Franklin Mint exhibit of 1994, it is more clear and consistent.

I use the appointment of Dehaye as the director of the Paris mint in 1961 as the demarcation point for the triumph of modernism for the international art medal. That is two (2) or three (3) decades earlier than in America.

It was the pioneers of modernist art medals like Roger Bezombes first medal for the third series of French Art medals, "Homage to Van Gogh," produced in 1966. Another early third series art medal by Bezombes was "Homage to Music," 1968. Earlier than either of these was Polish artist, Bronislaw Chromy's, "Animal Lovers Medal," 1961, *Plate 1*, with three owls and a piercing allowing the third to be seen on the reverse.



Plate 1

The work of these artists was very important in leading the rest of the art medal world toward modernism. In the western hemisphere, it was Dora De Pedery Hunt taking the medal in a new direction with medals like the struck "Adam and Eve with Owl" of 1966. Bezombes, Chromy and Hunt may have had influence on a few American artists, but not many. In Europe, however, their influence was profound.

How did we get here?

The trends and tastes in the sculptural arts dominated the medal from its inception in the Renaissance up to about the time of David D'Angers in the 1830's. Even though Louis 14th positioned the medal as a commemorative object, the engraved medals through the French third empire followed the trends in the fine arts. Mark Jones said in his book, "The art of the Medal", that through the work of David D'Angers, "the three-dimensional nature of medallic art was increasingly emphasized and the 'art medal', as opposed to the popular medal began to be regarded as a specialized form of sculpture."

Through the development of artists like Oudine and Chaplain in France, the art medal was transformed from a sculptural art to a decorative art. By the Paris exhibit of 1878 this trend was clear. By the Paris Exhibition of 1900 the transformation was complete. The medal was now an object of beauty used to adorn objects like furniture and small cases and create strong national coinage or awards.

While sculpture continued to evolve like the fine arts as modernism with all of its corollary "isms" in the first half of the 20th century, the art medal followed the decorative art trends of Art Nouveau up to World War 1 and Art Deco between the two world wars. It was not until after World War 2, that the first truly modernist art medals were made.

In post world war 2 Europe it was the Netherlands,

Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Italy and the inspiration of the great Director of the Paris Mint, Pierre Dehaye and his chief engraver, Raymond Joly, beginning in 1961 that spearheaded the Art medal's worldwide break from the decorative arts and return home to the sculptural arts. The first hints of that break were a few medals produced after World War 1 from France, Spain, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, most notably,

Why all the history?

With this brief and oversimplified, broad stroke summary history of the art medal lets move from the World War 2 to the present by looking at the work of a few artists. As we talk about the medals, I hope that you will think about the commentary that follows as much for method as for content. For anyone having their first encounter with contemporary art medals, maybe my thoughts can help you appreciate and understand them a little better when you view them in the gallery yourself.

Paul Manship, Donald Delue & Karen Worth



Plate 2

Since we are in America, and since she is the perfect artist to illustrate the bridge between art deco and modernism in America, lets begin with American royalty — Karen Worth: Karen Worth is the bridge between the art deco of Paul

Manship and the modernism of Donald DeLue. In "Hail to Dionysus," SOM 2, 1930, **Plate 2**, you see the quintessential Manship style.

Notice the straight deliberate lines and the rectangular forms in the beard, the hair, and the grapes. This is a bold image with a subtle humor. As Manship himself said about this medal in 1930, which was highly controversial at the time, it is



Plate 3

"symbolic of a present-day attitude toward certain restraints of the times." He was, of course, referring to prohibition. Now look at Karen Worth's "Jacob wrestling with the angel," 1975, **Plate 3**. Notice the straight lines and triangles

in the angel's wing and in the legs of the two figures. The clothing drapes naturally over the wrestling figures, even though the lines are more straight than curved. Notice also how the 27 is cut into the medal and forms the palate for man and angel. This medal was originally prepared for the Judaic Heritage Society's celebration of Israel's 27th anniversary. What a clever way to state the medal's function and integrate it into the design.

Karen Worth won the Saltus Award in 1979. She is the last living student of Paulanship and she is an heir to the technique of Donald DeLue with whom she also studied. DeLue's influence on Karen Worth is obvious when we look at these two medals side by side.



Plate 4



Plate 5

Look at the medal by Donald DeLue sculpted in 1975, *Plate 4*, and compare it to Karen Worth's Brookgreen Gardens medal of 1982, *Plate 5*.

Notice the somewhat elongated male figure. He

is muscular and curves gracefully as if in dance to form an arc in parallel with the medal. For these figures, the round bronze surface is a boundary. It is a limitation from which the figure tries to break free. Yet each figure is at peace in the moment. The DeLue figure finds his place with the bird in his hand against the sun and its rays. The Worth figure is at peace in play with the animals around him. The DeLue figure floats in the air as it always does in DeLue. The Worth figure is grounded. For both artists, the exaggerated muscles and the elongated stretch imply effort in stillness.

As I said before, the rest of the world turned to modernism decades earlier than America did. Once the art medal broke free from the conventions of the decorative arts in 1961, anything was possible. The medal could now communicate in an abstract way. It could have multiple parts; it could stand on its own like small sculpture and it could include materials other than bronze or silver.

Kauko Rasanen and the Multi Part Medal

The 1970's saw many innovations in the art of the medal. Kauko Rasanen perfected the multi part medal. As best I can tell, the first multi-part medal was done in 1970 and it is exhibited at the ANA exhibit hall as part of the FIDEM retrospective exhibit.

Let's look at Kauko Rasanen's "One Earth" medal for the United Nations Conference on the Environment in 1972, *Plate 6*.



Plate 6

As the medal sits in the hand it feels like a cocoon. The image of the woman's body on the reverse is folded within the confines of the medal which here takes the form of an egg or womb containing life. The obverse has a woman's face with her hair flowing around her in lines like the water that engulfs our planet and is necessary for our survival.



Plate 7

Open the medal, *Plate 7*, and inside the womb is a fully grown woman in a fetal position. On the left, a grid image of the earth is an overlay to the human figure suggesting the earth as mother. On the right there are no latitude and longitude lines, just a woman naked and vulnerable. The two halves of this medal illustrate the human body nurtured by the earth on one half, and the human body without the earth's embrace on the other half. These images juxtaposed remind us that while we CAN and sometimes DO view ourselves as separate from the earth we are not separate from it at all.

Three years after he did this medal, Rasanen produced a multi part medal to celebrate the Nobel Laureates of 1975. The obverse of each of the six square medals is a portrait. The reverse is a piece of a puzzle that goes together to form

an abstract image. You can immediately recognize the dove, the chess board and the womb.

Rasanen's work has had a profound influence on the art medal. Jeannie Stevens Sollman, an American artist has a new multipart medal on exhibit here and this technique has been used by other artists as well over the last three decades. Several of Rasanen's medals were exhibited in the 70 over 70 special exhibit displayed with the FIDEM 2007.

Alex Shagin and the Standing Medal Form

In 1976 Alex Shagin, while still at the Leningrad Mint, produced what I believe to be the first medals to stand as sculpture. They were to be exhibited at FIDEM 1977; but, according to Shagin, the authorities would not allow such a dramatic departure from Socialist Realism to be exhibited at an international conference. Unfortunately, when Alex Shagin came to America, the Soviet government would not allow him to take these medals with him. I can only hope that they still exist somewhere and can be photographed and exhibited some day.

Shagin challenged the very concept of the art medal! He had felt for some time that medals should not be flat but should be prominently displayed. By 1984 he produced another free standing medal for the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles that year, *Plate 8*, prominently featuring the statue of liberty and commemorating the passing of the Olympic torch from Greece to New York to Los Angeles. It was so popular that it went into a second edition with over 250 cast medals sold.



Plate 8

I should note here that Eugene Daub came out with "Adam & Eve", a free standing medal in 1983. Daub's medal is a wonderful example of early American modernism which uses the two sides of the medal to show the world in its polarity—in this case, man and woman. By 1990, Daub was experimenting with the use of two alloys on the same medal to create an effect. This is the

cast version of "Fire and Ice", a Society of Medalist issue.

In 1987, another very popular free standing art medal was made for the Society of medalists. Robert Weinman's "Cat and Mouse" was collaboration between Weinman and Joseph Noble, then Art Director of the Society of Medalists. It is a whimsical subject of a cat looking for the mouse set in a cheese as the mouse eludes him. The importance of this medal does not lie in its content but in its form. The medal makes the statement that medallic art IS sculpture. By 1987 there could be little doubt about that.

Don Everhart used the standing medal for his Brookgreen Garden "Hermit Crab" in 1991 illustrating a species of hermit crab indigenous to South Carolina, where Brookgreen Gardens is located.

Alex Shagin's contribution to the contemporary art medal is significant and often overlooked because of the sheer number of medals and world coins he produces while making a full time living at this. Not only his work, but his contagious love for the art medal has had tremendous influence throughout the world. There are several standing medals displayed here at FIDEM 2007 that communicate quite powerfully this way.

Ron Dutton and the British Art Medal Society

By the 1980's, the third series of French art medals was beginning to run out of steam with over 700 medals produced between 1961 and then. The sales of medals in the United States from the Franklin mint and the Medallic Art Company's Society of Medalists series was on the decline. A new leadership in the art of the medal came from an unlikely place where, in the words of Phillip Attwood, "in the years following the Second World War very few medals of any quality were produced in Britain."

In February, 1982, following a suggestion by Ron Dutton, the British Art Medal Society was formed. With the support of the British Museum and the hard work of a dedicated group of people, The United Kingdom took a leadership role and began producing one of the finest journals of medallic art, "The Medal."

Ron Dutton's contribution to the evolution of the art medal goes well beyond BAMS. His landscapes are a link from the rocks and landscapes in Pisanello's medals to the modernism of "Sun Corn," *Plate 9*, which he produced in 1981.

Notice the use of blue enamel for the sky with the gold sun that stands out and shares the color of the earth it nurtures. The lines of corn fields are simple, yet the perspective of the ground against the blue sky makes you feel like you are riding in a car from one small English town to another on one of those special sunny England days.

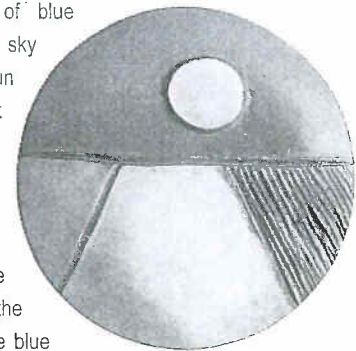


Plate 9

In "Moon Cow," *Plate 10*, we look closely at the cow's face and see the landscape of the mountain and the moon behind him. The lines of the cow and the landscape blend so perfectly to create a quiet intimacy with the cow, the landscape and the moment before darkness when the moon shines in the twilight.



Plate 10

Ron Dutton's recent work builds upon his landscapes but allows the mind even more freedom to construct and interpret while showing the symmetry of nature in all of its purity. Dutton has a wonderful history of his work in the FIDEM retrospective exhibit at the ANA that demonstrates what I am saying more than a dozen slides.

Nikolov and the soul of the contemporary medal

There is not enough time today to discuss the contribution of so many important artists throughout the world. The Dutch Art Medal Society and the Finnish Art Medal Society have nurtured and encouraged wonderful art in those countries which have had a profound influence around the world. With the little time I have today I cannot say much about these countries, nor can I talk about Poland, Spain, the Netherlands, Hungary and Czechoslovakia the way I would like. Today, I have to talk about Portugal and I have to say something about Bogomil Nikolov.

Nikolov is the very soul of Bulgaria in art medals.



Plate 11

His work, like "Violence" in 1977, *Plate 11*, captures, without oversimplification, the very consciousness of Eastern Europe

under the strong fist of communism. Nikolov uses the cold, hard brick wall and prison bars on one side to highlight in stark contrast, the beautiful flower growing from that harshness and from within that prison on the other.

In a medal called, "Apple", 1977, *Plate 12*, Nikolov uses the shape of an apple half in bronze.

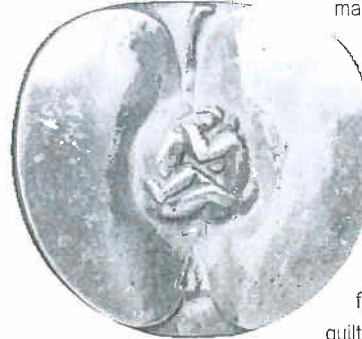


Plate 12

In the middle, the entwined man and woman form the core of the apple. Nikolov makes the point that humans were not cast from paradise because they ate the forbidden fruit. There is no guilt or shame. The intimacy of man and woman

is the very core of the forbidden fruit itself. Breaking the fruit open merely revealed that reality hidden inside.

Nikolov uses themes from the Bible in his art to make powerful statements about the human condition.

In this medal called, "Crucifixion", *Plate 13*, made in 1989, Nikolov employs the history of this image in art and, like a

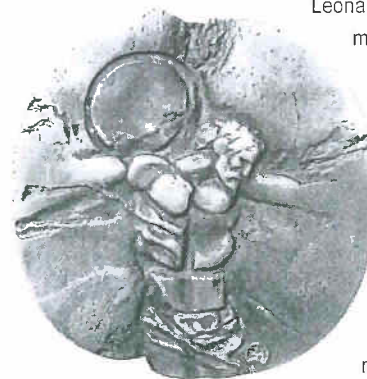


Plate 13

Leonardo Da'vinci marble, the body of the crucified Christ dies again on the cross brought out of the bronze medal by the artist's hands. Notice the crudeness of the medal's shape and the armature exposing the artist's process.

The pierced hands are not yet revealed by the bronze. Christ is imperfect and incomplete as we are imperfect and incomplete in our human failings. The circle on the shoulders of the Christ figure is rough and unfinished by the artist. The artist's world weighs down on his creation as the sins of the world weighed down on Christ at the time of his death.

The success of the new generation of artists that Nikolov has nurtured as his life's work is obvious at FIDEM 2007 with an exhibit of great depth overall.

The Portuguese and the medallic object

Turning to the Portuguese medals, it was just impossible for me to pick just one artist. I've spoken and written in the past about the great work of Helder Batista, whose medals on exhibit show that his crown cannot be taken. Lets also look

at the place Joao Duarte's work has in the evolution of the contemporary art medal.

Duarte's use of different materials and precision crafting to make commercially viable medals are taking the medal in new and fascinating directions. These medals commemorate events, people and places with objects that are souvenirs and direct reminders of the thing they represent. Duarte's choice of materials and his decisions about the form, color and shape of the object itself convey its meaning. For Duarte, the material IS the message.

Scholars like Dick Johnson have written about "the medalic object" as the new term to describe the contemporary art medal. It was Joao Duarte who first used the term at a FIDEM 2002 conference panel where he said, "The fascinating scientific and technological evolution occurring in the last decades of the 20th Century had an inevitable impact on the creation of medals. This turmoil produced a renewal of the language used in medals, which became more conceptual." The Portuguese State Mint taps artists like Battista, Teixeira and Ferreira to make Portugal's coinage. It was Theodore Roosevelt, the turn of the Century American President who said that a country's coinage should reflect its greatness.

Trending toward an American Neo-Renaissance

I opened by talking about an American artist and I will close by coming back home to America to insert something that is missing from the American Delegation's medal exhibit.

On November 20, 2003, Henrietta Holsman Fore, then Director of the U.S. Mint, announced a "call for Artists." The Mint wanted up to 20 "master" designers and 20 "associate" designers. This infusion of artists brought in talent like Don Everhart, Jim Licarez, Phoebe Hempill, and others. Under Mint Director Edward Moy, John Marcanti was named Chief Engraver, a position not filled since Elizabeth Jones left the U.S. Mint in the 1980's.

The changes that Fore initiated and the Moy/Marcanti leadership have been nurturing may well be leading to a Neo Renaissance of American coinage design. Coinage has more congressional restrictions than medals so let's look at



Plate 14

the first two medals under Director Moy. They represent a sharp break with the art of the medals that have come before them.

Look at the reverse of last year's "Byron Nelson" medal, *Plate 14*, produced by Don Everhart. The use of the circle creates a three dimensional quality. The golf ball sits within the circularity of the medal and the golfer's swing sits

within the circularity of the golf ball. If the medal was struck in some relief, correctly patinated and some minor changes made here and there, which the artist does not control, this would be even more remarkable than it is already.



Plate 15

The "Dr. Norman E. Borlaug" Bronze medal, *Plate 15*, produced this year by Phoebe Hempill and Don Everhart is another brilliant piece. Dr. Borlaug, a winner of the Nobel peace prize for his work in agriculture, is engulfed in a wheat field from which he emerges and is surrounded field with a seemingly infinite horizon. It is the expanded horizon of food that formed Dr. Borlog's life work, here beautifully represented by the artist. The reverse again uses the circle within a circle as a nicely drawn set of hands which holds and supports the earth the way Dr. Borlaug's work with agriculture support the people living on the earth.

When you keep in mind that the topics for coins and medals are decided by Congress, not by individuals, and that Congress is very precise about what they want, what these artists have done with limited flexibility is amazing. There is no question that something new and bold is happening at the U.S. Mint and that there is a clear break from the medals produced by the US Mint for a long time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, collectors who become interested in contemporary art medals can collect these medals by country, by artist, by theme, or by type of medal — multi part, standing, enameled, or non-bronze and silver. You can specialize by collecting award medals, commemorative medals or art medals with ideas, slogans, or social messages.

The possibilities are endless; but, like any good advice to collectors of anything, you should buy what you like and avoid what you don't like. You should also accept the fact that with medals, completion is impossible.