

## Huybrechts Attends Opening of Belgium Art Medal Exhibit

(by Donald Scarinci)

Paul Huybrechts, Belgium sculptor and artist of that country's first ECU coins was on hand for the opening reception of *Independence in Medals: Belgium Since 1830*. The exhibit opened December 12, 2009 at Medialia...Rack & Hamper Gallery in New York City and will remain open through January 23, 2010. It can be viewed online at [www.medialiagallery.com](http://www.medialiagallery.com). Contemporary Belgian art medals have a distinctively international theme. As a sculptor, Paul Huybrechts is the voice of Belgium to the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Many of his medals are on exhibit.

Highlights of Huybrechts' work include his collaboration with Elizabeth Jones in 1992 for a medal commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Discovery of America. Huybrechts sculpted the obverse which shows a Spanish caravan heading west across the horizon. Jones sculpted a reverse showing COBE "Discovery of fluctuations in cosmic background," representing present day America.

A commission Huybrechts won as a result of an international competition produced the official medal for *Europalia Mexico '93*. This medal shows Mexico on the reverse and a native in Mayan dress on the obverse as a tribute to the rich history and culture of that country.

Some of Huybrechts' more recent work on display included *Sunken Treasures of Egypt*, sculpted in 2007. This medal employs blue enamel beneath a polished lacquered surface, which gives the piece a dreamlike quality. The creative patination enhances the medal's subject, the recovery of long-lost Egyptian artifacts found in the Mediterranean Sea a year or so earlier. This medal celebrates a discovery of international significance and contrasts the art of the past, represented by the Egyptian statues, with the very modern use of patination

and technology employed to create the visual effect.

Huybrecht says that: "The enamel symbolizes the Mediterranean Sea with some treasures at the bottom. All the pieces represented were found in the sunken site of Canope to the east of Alexandria. The statue of Queen Arsinoe II (the finest of the finds) shows Greek influence and the god Serapis (on the right) is in a completely Hellenistic style."<sup>v</sup> Those attending the exhibit were treated to another one of Maschico's outstanding catalogs. This one contains an introduction by Luc Vandamme which outlines the history of the Belgium medal and creates the framework for the exhibit.

Vandamme divides the history of the Belgium medal into four periods. The first, the engraved medals, 1830-1890, explains how King Leopold I commissioned artists to create a sense of nationalism after the revolution of 1830, when the nation was formed. He explains that Leopold used medals to commemorate the history of the new nation, which had successively been a part of Austria, France and the Netherlands.<sup>vi</sup>

Vandamme explains Belgium's internationalism succinctly in the first paragraph of his introduction. He says, "Indeed, an inhabitant in his fifties in 1830 had successively been an Austrian, a Frenchman and a Dutchman. How was he supposed to feel Belgian all of a sudden?"<sup>vii</sup>

Maschico's exhibit includes the work of artists like Adolphe Jouvenel, Julien Leclercq and Charles Weiner, to illustrate the skill of Belgian artists. Their medals portray the monarchy and other great people of the new nation.

The second period, the "Belle Epoque," 1890 to 1915, according to Vandamme, "gave sculptors the opportunity to write a major period of history through medals."<sup>viii</sup> Art nouveau flourished in Paris, and Belgian artists were trained and influenced there. However, they produced medals with distinctly Belgian subjects.

Machico's exhibit showcases the great artists of this period: Godefroid Devreese (1861-1941); Paul Du Bois (1859-1938); Jules Jourdain (1873-1967); Jules Lagae (1862-1931); Pierre Theunis (1885-1950) and several others. The work of these artists illustrates mastery of technique and the developing Belgian voice.

In 1901, the Belgian-Dutch Society of the Friends of the Art Medal was formed. Attempting to mimic the success of the French Art Medal Society, they offered a medal from Belgium and a medal from the Netherlands on alternating years. Like its French counterpart, this series was a showcase for the artists, the mints, and both of the small nations.

Vandamme calls the period between the two world wars, 1915 to 1940, the "interbellum." He notes that while many artists of the previous period continued to work, newcomers began to create in art deco, the new style of the time.

Machico showcased the work of Armand Bonnetain (1883-1973); Eugene Debremaecker (1879-1963); Georges Petit (1879-1958); Geo Verbanck (1881-1961) and Marcel Rau (1886-1966).

In 1920, these artists and others sculpted medals for the "Friends of the Art Medal," an annual series like its predecessor, the Belgian-Dutch Society of the Friends of the Art Medal. This series, however, consisted exclusively of Belgian artists and featured exclusively Belgian themes and a Belgian mint. The series lasted until 1955.

It should be noted that in 1925, the Netherlands began its own series of art medals, as well. It was called, "Vereeniging voor Penningkunst" (Association for Medallistic Art) which still produces medals and has an active membership. They produced a magazine for members called "De Geuzenpenning" from 1951 to 1976. In 1976, the magazine was renamed "De Beeldenaar," and has been published quarterly since then.

The period between 1940 and 1980 is the "modern" period. Sculptors in France,

Poland, and other parts of Eastern Europe began to prefer cast medals over struck medals. The more they viewed themselves as sculptors, the more they embraced the modernism of sculpture.

Belgium was not a leader of modernism, but it was affected by new trends in art medals. The preference toward struck medals, however, remained. Machico illustrates this trend with work from artists like Charles Leplae, Duc Verlee, and Harry Elstrom.

After World War II, medals never seemed to generate the same excitement among the Belgium people as they had before the war. While Dutch artists such as Piet Esser led the experimentation with the cast medal and worked with modernist ideas in art, the Belgian art medal advanced somewhat more slowly. Paul Huybrechts explains that, "medallic art isn't known at all, especially by the younger generation."<sup>ix</sup>

He says, "The responsibility for this lies partly with teachers who do not value these small pieces of art which mostly commemorate the milestones of history. In other words: world history can be (and has often been) reconstructed by historical coins and medals."<sup>x</sup> In an attempt to bring Belgian medals into the spotlight once again, Paul Huybrechts and others formed a new art medal society in 1991 called, "Promotion of the Art Medal." This group encouraged new artists by publishing one medal a year for its members. They continue to be active and have become an incubator for new trends in the Belgian art medal.

Luc Vandamme and Machico use the 1980 date to mark the beginning of the "contemporary" or current period of Belgium art medals. They do not give a reason for selecting that date, as opposed to 1991, which might have been more logical. However, "contemporary" certainly can be defined as the period when living and working artists are producing their work.

Not surprisingly, Machico selects some of the medals from the "Promotion of the Art

Medal” to illustrate current trends in the Belgian art medal. Foremost among these artists is the work of Paul Huybrechts.

The opening reception for the exhibit, *Independence in Medals: Belgium Since 1830* had the class and sophistication of all of Maschico’s New York City gallery openings. The added treat this time was the inclusion of a piano recital by Monique Jobin of Belgium. Guests were treated to some of her original pieces performed in a setting among beautiful medals elegantly displayed.