

# IVANKA MINCHEVA'S ART AS PART OF THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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1. Mincheva: *The Visitor*, 1988, bronze, 90 x 85mm.

Driving down Route 64, it took less than forty-five minutes to travel from our summer rental at Virginia Beach to the Hampton home of Ivanka Mincheva. It was summer 2001, and it was a welcome treat to leave behind the ocean and the kids in order to visit this extraordinary medallist and examine the treasures she has produced over the years.

Ivanka Mincheva greeted me with a smile at the door of her small yellow cottage. Though I had never met her before, the moment I saw this dignified woman with pale blonde hair in a dark print dress open the door, I felt that I had known her for a long time. Indeed, I had become familiar with her medals and had had several telephone conversations with her about her work, but I could not help thinking when we met how true it is that to know the artist's work is to know the artist.

After offering me some coffee and a wonderful Bulgarian pastry filled with spinach, we sat in the living room and spoke at length. Large plaster cast plaques that Mincheva had been working on over the last few years looked down upon us from the white walls. I recognised many from the photos that she had sent me, but the actuality of the colours and textures reflecting the indirect light of the summer Virginia sun brought the pieces to life in a way that the photographs could not.

The years since 1993, when Mincheva left Bulgaria to live in the United States, have been a transitional time for the artist, for she has had to adjust to American life and cope with the stress of her husband's illness, which began in 1997. Notwithstanding her personal hardships, Mincheva has retained her enthusiasm for medals. She has had one-person shows of medals and plasters at the Twentieth Century Gallery in Williamsburg and the Blue Sky Gallery in Hampton,<sup>1</sup> and participated in the annual Pen and Brush sculpture and medals exhibition in New York from 1995 to 1999, winning an award each year. During this transitional time, Mincheva has been working in plaster and porcelain. These new materials result in works very different from such pieces as *Alien* and *The Visitor* (fig. 1), which first caught the attention of the international medal community.<sup>2</sup> Yet this new work both encompasses and surpasses what Mincheva had done before. The artist explained to me that working in plaster allows her to carve and cast more easily. The plaster also allows her to experiment and to incorporate acrylics, shells, mirrors and other objects into the relief. As we talked, Mincheva took out several boxes of medals and placed them in front of me. A piece called *Promises* was prominent among them (fig. 2). In this work one body has two faces, which look in different



2. Mincheva: *Promises*, 1993, bronze, 100 x 140mm.

directions: one gazes forward as if looking to the future, whilst the other looks towards stairs leading up a hill to a landscape of European buildings from the past. At the bottom right, balancing the image, one of Mincheva's signature birds faces this two-headed figure. Mincheva made this medal about three months before she left Bulgaria in anticipation of her new American home. Like few medals made by American artists, this work truly represents the American experience. The future that the medal's forward-looking face gazes upon is the uncertain future of life in America, whilst the face that looks towards the stairs recalls the artist's European roots. Even after many generations here, Americans still refer fondly to their native country as a source of their individual identity. It is common for Americans to consider themselves as Italian American, Irish American, African American, and so on, this identification with cultural roots being an American's second side. It is that aspect of Americans that Mincheva portrays in the face looking towards a symbol of the continent from which most of us emigrated.

In his article of 1993 Terence Mullaly divided Mincheva's work into two periods.<sup>3</sup> The advantage of seeing her work almost ten years later allows me to add a third – and even a fourth – period, and to suggest some modifications to Mullaly's dividing lines.

Mincheva's first period extends from her first medallic work in about 1979 to about 1985. It is represented by medals such as *Crucifixion* (fig. 3) and the three series *Menace*, *Christi's World*, and *Children's World*. In preparation for her first solo show in 1983, she produced works including *Daedalus and Icarus* and

*Alien*, examples of which are now in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, and also *Kite* (fig. 4) and *Catholic Motif I and II* (fig. 5).

The second period, from 1986 to about 1990, was a time of despondency and other-worldliness. In 1986 she produced *Dream* (fig. 6) and *Attempted Portrait* (fig. 7), along with the *Theatre* and *By the Window* series, also now in the Pushkin Museum. *The Visitor* belongs to 1988,<sup>4</sup> the year that also saw *Cruel Ocean*, which was issued by BAMS.<sup>5</sup> In the same year the *Likes of Hell* series looked back at the years of communist oppression in Bulgaria and the rest of eastern Europe. A commissioned medal for the Sofia environmental meeting of 1989 was a two-part piece that allows the holder to alternate the two halves of the obverse and reverse (fig. 8). This medal, a radical departure for her work, being both two-sided and interactive, demonstrates Mincheva's versatility and powers of innovation.

The artist's third period, from about 1990 to 1997, was a time that might be called, 'the artist renewed'. During this period Mincheva produced her *Inspired by an Artist* series of 1992, as well as such medals as *Attempted Flight* (fig. 9), *A Thought* (fig. 10), and *Prodigal Son* (fig. 11). It should be noted that Mincheva, who generally does not like to discuss her work, does not consider her output in terms of periods, preferring to think of it as a flow of experience that is transferred into physical form in moments of creative impulse.

Mincheva began her career as a sculptor in Bulgaria after graduating from the Sofia Academy of Art in



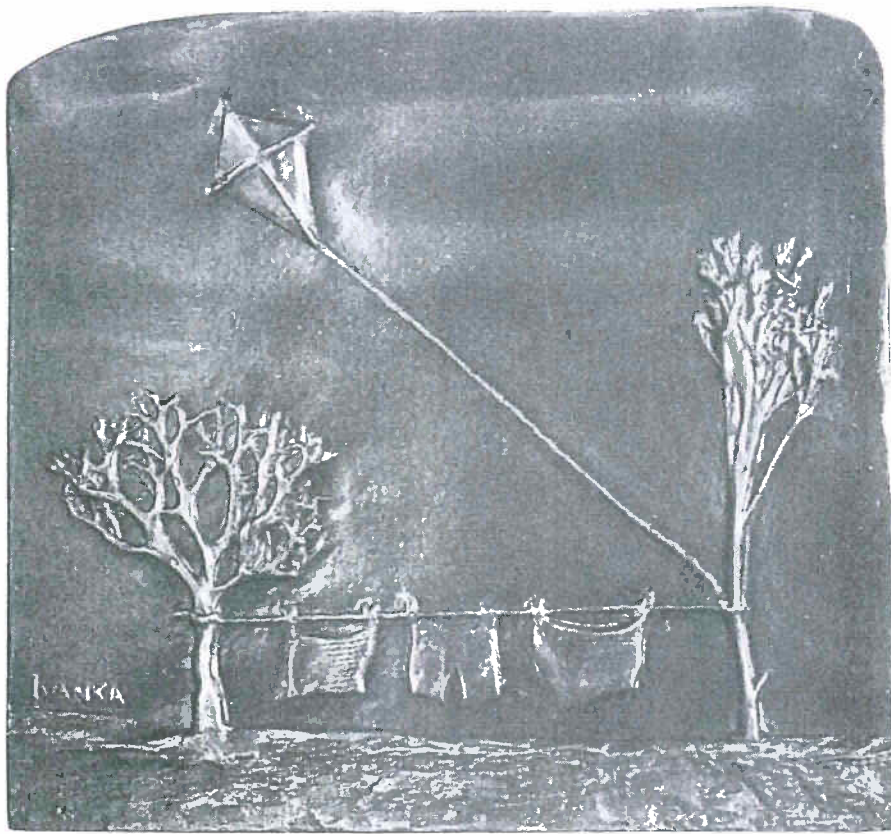
3. Mincheva: *Crucifixion*, 1979, bronze, 150mm.

1974. She cites the influence of Erica Ligeti and the Hungarian medallists of the time, who caused her first to experiment with medals in 1979. The medals that she produced during this year included *My Room*, which displays her firm grasp of composition and perspective. The high relief arranged in a balanced trilogy of a dresser at the upper left, a table with cups in the centre, and a human head at the lower left creates a spiritual space from which emanates a feeling of security and safety. Mincheva told me that this was a medallic depiction of her room in Bulgaria.

Also in 1979, Mincheva produced her first medal on the theme of the Crucifixion (fig. 3), with a haunting image of a female Christ crucified against a barren landscape, with no-one to watch and mourn for her suffering body, the only other presence being a single tree. The cross, the sun and the tree stand in relief in a triangle or trinity, and look as if they might leap off the surface of the medal. Mincheva has never departed far from her early fascination with Christian bible stories

and the role of woman, and indicates that she will devote more attention to these themes in the future.

At the time that she became committed to medals as her primary means of artistic expression, Mincheva was a young woman maturing against the backdrop of the fall of communism and the personal and political liberation that evolved in the eastern bloc countries during the 1980s. She experienced the usual emotional ups and downs of personal relationships, as the world around her changed in dramatic ways and the rules of her childhood were slowly replaced with the unknown boundaries of a new freedom. Finally, she broke with even this loose bond to her childhood memories and her personal experiences, and emigrated to America. More recently, she has had to adapt once more, by coping with the personal tragedy of her husband's illness. While she did not care to talk much about this during my visit, it was obvious that personal and financial hardships combined with the pressure of living in America have become her hammer and anvil, from



4. Mincheva: *Kite*, 1983, bronze, 115 x 120mm.



5. Mincheva: *Catholic Motif II*, 1983, bronze, 70mm.



6. Mincheva: *Dream*, 1986, bronze, 120mm.



7. Mincheva: *Attempted Portrait*, 1986, bronze, 88 x 88mm.



8. Mincheva: Sofia Environmental Meeting, 1989, brass, 95mm.



9. Mincheva: Attempted Flight, 1993, bronze, 120mm.



10. Mincheva: *A Thought*, 1993, bronze, 160 x 126mm.

which new material is inevitably emerging.

The greatest excitement of my visit came when the artist told me that she had begun to produce medals again after a three-year hiatus, and that she had prepared medals for casting for submission to FIDEM 2002. These medals were new and exciting. The blend of the American experience with this talented Bulgarian's past and the hardships that the artist had experienced over the last several years had led to medals that, I thought, could well be among the most powerful exhibits from an American artist or any artist at the forthcoming FIDEM exhibition in Paris.

Mincheva's new freedom as a medallic artist is also expressed in her experimental work in plaster of the last few years. While these pieces combine elements with which those who know her work will be familiar, they go far beyond the symbolism with which she has worked up to now. There are, for example, the trees and

birds *Gothic Sky* (fig. 12) and *Princes Everywhere* (fig. 13), both produced in 2001. Trees were key elements in such works as the Tree medal of 1982, an example of which is now in the British Museum,<sup>6</sup> and *Dream* (fig. 6). *Dream*, produced in 1986, is a haunting image of two trees, one with a little life and the other seemingly almost dead. From the tree that appears to have some life is suspended a swing on which sits an owl. By the time of *Dream*, the bird in the form of an owl was beginning to appear regularly in Mincheva's work. Prior to that, birds were only hinted at, as in one of the 1983 *Children's World* medals, but they are important elements of *The Visitor* and other medals of the second and third periods. Perhaps the owl and other birds should be interpreted traditionally as archetypes of wisdom and knowledge. The bird may be the observer of (or listener to) our own inner wisdom. Certainly, for most of us wisdom is as fleeting and elusive as a bird.



11. Mincheva: *Prodigal Son*, 1997, bronze, 90 x 100mm.

*Dream* may represent a failed relationship. One member of the couple, represented by the tree on the left, retains some playfulness. A child's swing hangs from its branches. But there is no child on the swing; instead there is the owl. Whilst this relationship may have failed, the individuals are perhaps a little wiser as a result of it. Demonic figures are also prevalent in the new works, as they have been in many of Mincheva's medals since *Alien* and the *Menace* series. The *Inspired by an Artist* series also used faces that appeared threatening. It is as if the menacing face is an inner voice that is at once inspiration and fear, motivation and torment, pleasure and pain. In *Gothic Sky* and *Princes Everywhere* these symbols are used to convey a sense of life surrounded by the sensual, the demonic, and the hopeful.

As well as trees, birds and demon figures, Mincheva has made full use of the symbolism associated with women's breasts. This was first hinted at in her *Conversation* series of 1986, but she did not make full use of this imagery until *A Thought* of 1993 (fig. 10). *A Thought* is a seemingly simple piece, in which a figure suggested by Rodin's *The Thinker* contemplates a full-breasted voluptuous woman. He sits in deep contemplation, undisturbed by clothing, an archetypal image of man. His head is joined to the image of the woman by a cloud-like form redolent of the devices employed in cartoon comic strips. She is in proportion to the man – his life-size counterpart – but is below him and tilted slightly to one side. The medal is a statement

about the status of women and the relationship between the sexes, and has overtones of the Adam and Eve story, as well as Oedipus and the Sphinx.<sup>7</sup> In the mind of man the woman is a sensual creature: the breast, one exposed and one clothed, implies beauty in a sensual way. She is also unknowable. Here Mincheva develops fully her use of the breast for the first time. She later used it in her masterpiece, *Promises*, of 1993 (fig. 2), and the exaggerated breast has now become part of her symbolic repertoire, appearing in almost all of those of her plasters in which the sensuality of woman moves the central theme.

*Tightrope Dancer*, made in 2001 (fig. 14), is another plaster that combines many of the elements found in past work in a bold new way. In this work the dancer's extremities blend into the plaster, and her limbs form diagonals that offset the squares of the wall and floor. As the dancer loses herself in the movement of the dance, she holds on to a washing-line with a clothes-peg on one side and two birds on the other. This evokes the early piece, *Kite* (fig. 4), in which the kite is attached to a similar line. In that work the kite represents the soaring human condition; the washing line is the grounding in the mundane. While we can soar to great heights, we remain connected to the needs of our daily life.

In these plasters, Mincheva has also experimented with combinations of materials. *Tightrope Dancer* has two mirrors set in the plaster image of the wall, inviting





12. Mincheva: *Gothic Sky*, 2001, plaster, acrylic and glass, 160 x 210mm.

the viewer to see his or her face within the image. An earlier use of another material is the enamel incorporated into *Attempted Flight* (fig. 9). In that piece a human-headed bird suggests the ability of the human spirit to soar, but it is confined in its human habitation and can only peer out of the window. Beyond the window-frame dashes of colour stand out against the bronze patina and provide another dimension towards which to strive. This use of mirrors and shell in *Tightrope Dancer* and the return to the human form may point to what we might expect to see in the artist's new medals.

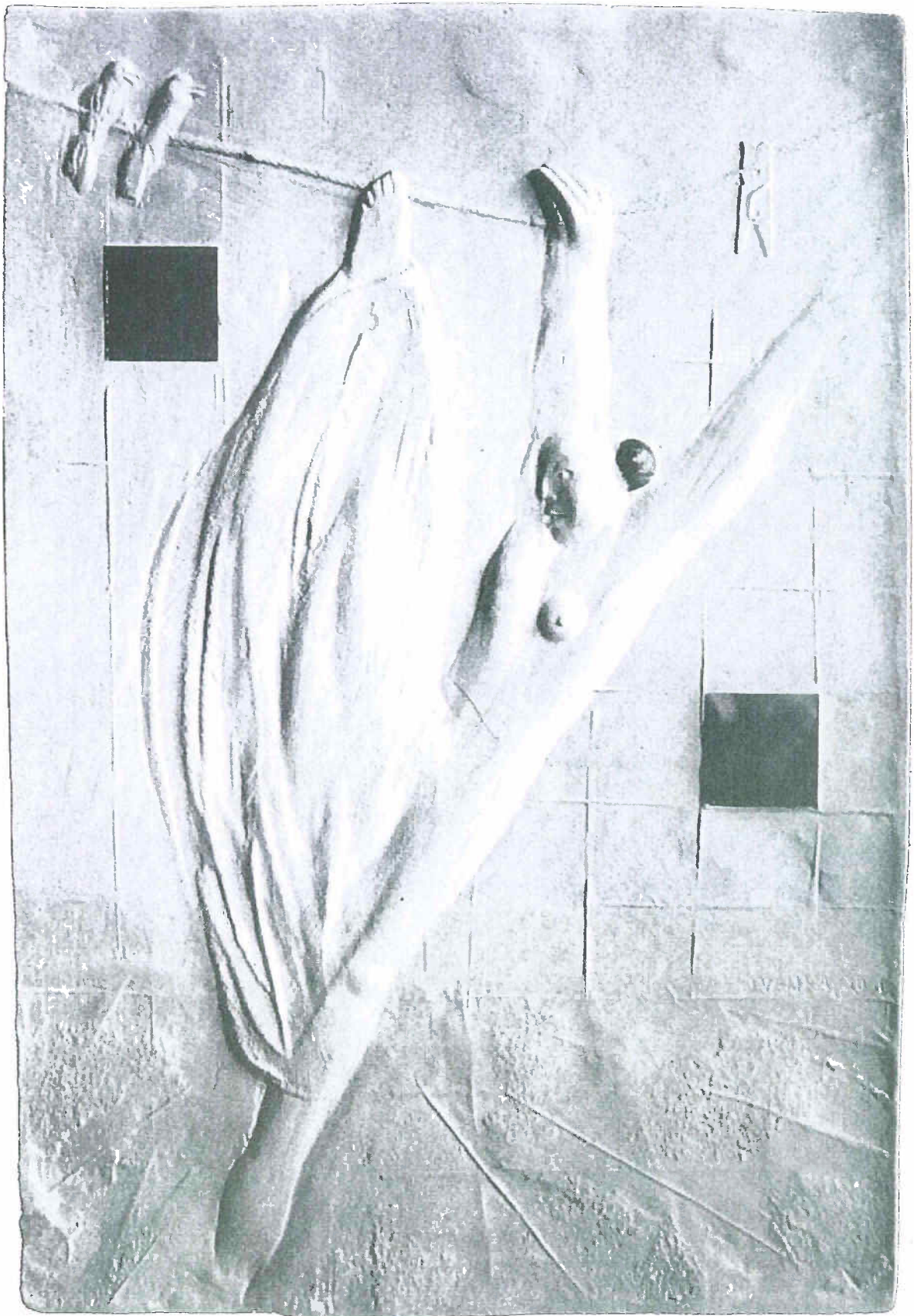
A comparison between the simplicity of *Kite*, made in Bulgaria nearly twenty years ago, with the image of *Tightrope Dancer*, made in America in 2001, demonstrates how far Mincheva has evolved. She has

moved from being a Bulgarian artist, absorbing the influences of a vibrant medallic community that included Bogomil Nikolov and Theodosi Antonov, to being an American artist, bombarded by the multimedia experience of art in many forms, but deprived of that close circle of medallic artists with whom experience was drawn and shared.<sup>8</sup> When we talked about her Bulgarian roots, her eyes looked lovingly into the distance for a time, and she fondly recalled both the camaraderie and the spirit of competition she experienced there as an artist. But her nostalgia for the past is tempered by her recollections of the hardships and oppression of the years when Bulgarian communism was coming to an end.

Mincheva shared her views with me about how different things are in America and how there is not one



13. Mincheva: *Princes Everywhere*, 2001, plaster and acrylic, 310 x 235mm.



14. Mincheva: *Tightrope Dancer*, 2001, plaster and mirrors, 305 x 205mm.

America. 'It is not conservative or liberal', she said. 'It is not religious or atheistic. America is so big and so different in all of its regions and with all of its people that it cannot be characterised in a general way.' With respect to medals, there is no long tradition in America. For many years the only commercially available art medals were those issued by the Society of Medalists,<sup>9</sup> along with various series of collectors' medals produced for profit by private mints. These struck medals sold for a fraction of the price of contemporary cast medals. In today's America, art medals are cast and compete in price with editioned sculptures, lithographic prints, and other collectors' pieces. It was her concern over prices that drove Mincheva to use plaster and porcelain, so as to make her art more affordable and allow it to find its way more readily into people's homes.

After a three-year hiatus during which she made no medals, Mincheva has begun to produce new medals that may represent the beginning of a new period in her work. If her work in plaster is any indication of the medals to come, this new period could result in some of the artist's greatest medals yet. She may now be regarded as an American medallist, and the impact her new material has on the medal in America may be as significant as the impact of her earlier work, produced in eastern Europe many years ago.

#### NOTES

1. The Twentieth Century Gallery in May 1996 and September 1999. The Blue Skies Gallery in February 2001.

2. See Terence Mullaly, 'Ivanka Mincheva: medals for our times', *The Medal*, 23 (1993), pp. 71-6, for an excellent critical review of Mincheva's work up to 1993. *Alien* and *The Visitor* appear as figs 4 and 9.

3. Mullaly, 'Ivanka Mincheva'. The periods were 1982-6 and 1986-3.

4. Terence Mullaly went on to consider this medal to be one of the twenty most important medals of the second half of the twentieth century. See his 'Twenty medals for 2000', *The Medal*, 36 (2000), pp. 54-67, at p. 61.

5. See *The Medal*, 14 (1989), p. 93; also Mullaly, 'Ivanka Mincheva', fig. 10.

6. The medal is illustrated as Terence Mullaly, 'Wit with an edge', *The Medal*, 13 (1988), fig. 3.

7. For example, as depicted in Ingres' celebrated *Oedipus and the Sphinx* in the Louvre.

8. For Mincheva, Nikolov and Antonov as the nucleus of the Bulgarian medallic community, see Dimiter G. Dimitrov, 'The modern Bulgarian medal', *The Medal*, 13 (1988), pp. 85-91, and Terence Mullaly, 'The medal in Bulgaria: an art with a future', *The Medal*, 22 (1993), pp. 77-81. Mullaly wrote (p. 80): 'Theodosi Antonov, Ivanka Mincheva and Bogomil Nikolov have gone beyond the point of establishing a medallic tradition in Bulgaria. They are among the most original medallists at work today.'

9. The Society of Medalists was run by the Medallic Art Company, and produced 128 medals between 1930 and 1995.