

LAND AND SKY THE MEDALLIC WORK OF RON DUTTON

DONALD SCARINCI

Few artists claim the success and influence in medallic art as the Cheshire-born artist Ron Dutton. Mark Jories has described him as “a sculptor, a medalist, a poet, and a performer: an exceptionally varied and talented artist whose work is well worth enjoying and pondering as a whole.” With numerous solo and group exhibitions in the United Kingdom and abroad and extensive critique and commentary on his work, Ron Dutton now has the additional honor of receiving the 2009 Saltus award for his lifetime of achievement in the art of the medal.

The ANS celebrates Ron Dutton with this year’s Steven Sher lecture, followed by an award ceremony and reception in his honor. There will also be an exhibition of his medals along with the work of many artists he helped encourage and promote through the British Art Medal Society (BAMS), which he was instrumental in founding in 1982. BAMS, with the support of the British Museum and the hard work of a dedicated group of people, publishes *The Medal* biannually and produces up to six cast medals a year, which it offers for sale to the public. As a result of its existence, the United Kingdom has become a

world leader in the art of the medal, and its international influence is without dispute.

Dutton’s work has changed and evolved since he produced his first medal in 1974. He has explored new ways of expressing the beauty of a landscape, the majesty of nature, and the power of flight. His work can be divided into three periods. The early medals (1974–1986) began as an experiment with single-side relief sculpture and evolved into the use of sculptural techniques on a two-sided medallic object designed to appeal both the senses of touch and sight.

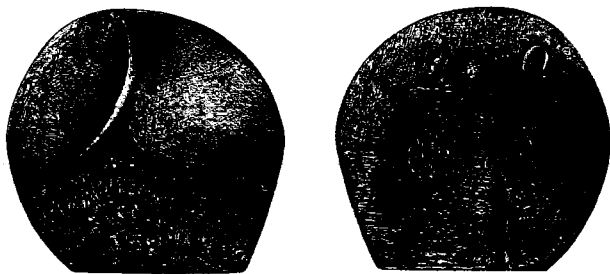
Apple Tree Ladder (1975) uses the landscape as a grounding for the human spirit, which ascends each step of a ladder leading skyward. The ladder unites earth with heaven, the mundane with the profound. The allusion to the Edenic tree of knowledge is not lost here. The ladder is an invitation to the possibility of reuniting God and man. Thomas Mullaly, the London-based art critic, considers this one of the twenty most important medals of the second half of the twentieth century.



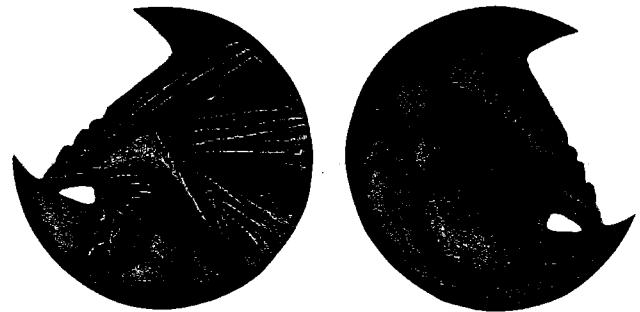
Sheep Storm (1982)



Stonehenge (1987)

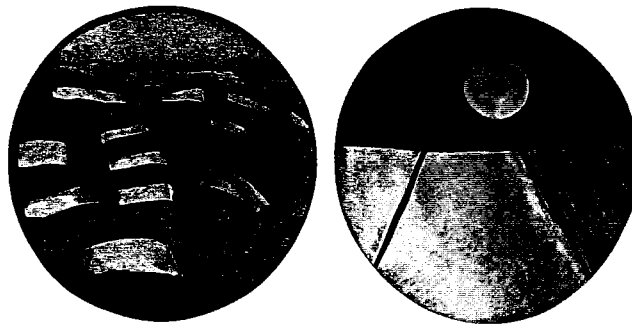


Bude Waves (1995)



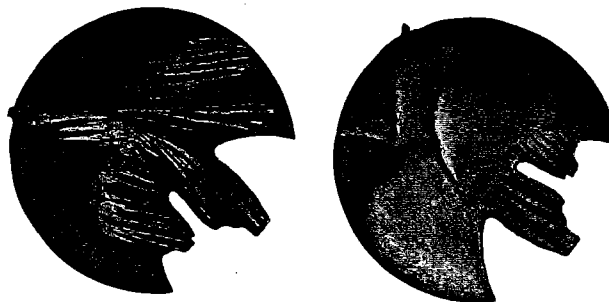
Moon Cloud Strike (2006)

Dutton links the rocks and landscapes of Pisanello's medals to the modernism of *Sun Corn* (1981). This piece features an early use of enamel on a medal. The blue enamel for the sky contrasts with the golden sun, which shares the color of the earth it nurtures. The lines of the cornfields are simple, and the perspective of the ground against the blue sky evokes the feeling of a special sunny day in northern England.



Sun Corn (1981)

Sheep Storm (1982) was one of Ron Dutton's early successes. The artist's process is made visible by the impressions of his hand and his tools, which remain on the medal and are deliberately incorporated into the landscape. The sheep look out at the viewer as they huddle together for shelter near the wall. Are we looking at them or are they looking at us? All are equal against the power of nature, which shapes the earth we share. In *Moon Cow* (1982), we look closely at the cow's face and see the landscape of the mountain and the moon behind her. The lines of the cow blend into the landscape, suggesting the unity of the organic and inorganic.



Lunar Amour (2006)

From about 1987 to 1994, beginning with his *Stonehenge* (1987) medal for BAMS, Dutton incorporated poetry into his work. *Stonehenge* is one of a series of medals titled "Marks of Time," which includes four other medals that contain Dutton's poetry. The inscription on the reverse of *Stonehenge* reads: "Stones unencumbered by priest ritual chant / Stand sadly posed upon untrodden grass / A monument to faded hope and spirit passed."



Cloud Diver (2007)

Another BAMS medal, *Bude Waves* (1995), represents the beginning of a three-year transition to the current phase of his work, which began in 1997. Dutton now embraces abstraction to communicate. In his words: "Over recent years, I have been exploring parts of our coastline and making medals of its many varied aspects. In the autumn of 1995, a visit was made to the north Devon and Cornwall coast. Bright light, racing clouds, the rise and dip of the coastal path through scuds of rain emphasized the power and majesty that this coastline holds. . . . A short steep climb crests a ridge, below the surging force of rocks massed, cracked and raised by nature's energy, and on the distant horizon perched monuments to man's use of nature's forces."

In *Cloud Diver* (2007), Dutton uses mixed materials of bronze and silver wire to open the mind of the viewer to the pure symmetry of nature. The distinction between the bird and the inorganic forces of nature are blurred by the creative power of the human mind. This medal is Dutton's most current expression of his lifelong engagement with the aesthetics and spirituality of landscape, nature, and flight.

