

Crimes and congratulations

By Peter Aspden

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When political and economic turmoil is all around, it is the duty of cultural institutions to remind us that nothing in human affairs is new. A sense of perspective and an appreciation of the long view provide the ballast that protects us from the flighty excesses of political opportunism. We need the examples of history to tell us: we have been here before. It will pass. Keep calm.

A remarkable little show at the British Museum (the latest in a run of brilliant exhibitions, by the way, that have the "whiff of PT Barnum combined with the most ferocious scholarship", as Nicholas Hytner, director of the National Theatre, described them to me recently) fulfils the brief admirably.

It takes as its subject a little-discussed but ubiquitous subject: dishonour. Twelve artists have been commissioned to produce medals that do the opposite of what most medals do. Instead of glorifying, they shame; in the place of heroes on their faces, there are villains.

What is most fascinating about the show, which opens later this month, are the examples that stretch back for more than 400 years, to unveil a tradition littered with joyfully scabrous moments.

There is the Dutch medal of the late 16th century, forged just after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, that shows the Pope and the Roman Catholic princes of Europe blindfolded, barefoot and treading ever-so-lightly on a sea of spikes: nothing will be the same for them again.

A century later, there is poor Louis XIV, defecating and vomiting, satirised mercilessly for concessions he had made to the Pope. Closer to home: Britain's first "prime minister" Robert Walpole leaning on a bag of money, with the inscription "I am kicked out of doors" wrapped around him, in reference to his ignominious resignation from government in 1742.

On the flip side, there is a head on a pole on a wall (get it?) and a more direct inscription still: "No Screen". This alludes to Walpole's obfuscatory talents, which had earned him the nickname of "Screenmaster-General". You begin to get the point about contemporary resonance?

Also from the 18th century, a German example of this most satisfying of artistic genres; on one side of the medal, a man who has killed himself, conjoined with the bleak words "Credit is dead". On the other side, a view of the back of a financier, disappearing fast, we presume, from the scene of his black magic. "Visibilis, invisibilis" – now you see him, now you don't. It was the aftermath of a stock market crash, you see, and the public raged against the faceless perpetrators. Fancy!

All these medals would have circulated freely (up to a point) among populations that surely enjoyed the joke: the subversion of a tradition that was meant primarily to reward valiance and good service. Medals of dishonour were the Private Eye magazines of their day, a reminder that base motives have always lurked beneath high-talking, and that we have always, since the time of Aristophanes, loved to make fun of those who profess to lead us.

It was the US sculptor David Smith who self-consciously turned this popular tradition into art with his "Medals for Dishonor" of the 1930s, 15 cast bronze medals that rallied against war, fascism and environmental destruction. Packed with satirical detail, their nightmarish visions are made grimmer by their compactness: look what I've got in my pocket – an inferno!

These are the tacit inspiration for the 12 artists newly commissioned by the museum for its show. The medals were conceived a couple of eventful years ago, so there is no reference to worldwide financial meltdown, let alone parliamentary expenses. But there was the war in Iraq. The New York-based Chinese artist Yun-Fei Ji shows the true nature of the "Coalition of the Willing": the corpse of a goat being picked at by vultures. Richard Hamilton names his medal the "Hutton Award" (in reference to the Hutton Inquiry into the death of David Kelly during the furore over weapons of mass destruction propaganda), with the heads of Tony Blair and Alastair Campbell accompanying the Latin inscription *De Albat*, or "Whitewashed".

Cornelia Parker has the backs of two heads seemingly talking to each other inside the medal. They are admonished by ominous inscriptions: "We know who you are" and "We know what you have done".

Away from war, Michael Landy's "Asbo medal" features a gleaming portrait of a (real) habitual offender with a list of his 20 misdemeanours. "We checked with the police and they could only find seven," says the show's co-curator Philip Attwood, appreciative of the further layer of irony: did the subject of the medal exaggerate his importance? Was he seeking further honour for his dishonour?

None of the medals is on permanent display, but perhaps they should be. We don't need reminding, right now, of the disreputable side of human conduct. Only that it was ever thus.

'Medals of Dishonour', British Museum, London, June 25-September 27 www.britishmuseum.org

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