

Badge of shame

Contemporary artists are drawing on an alternative tradition using medals to ridicule job culture, consumerism and politicians. Frances Stonor Saunders explores the flipside of ceremonial works

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Born to shop ... Grayson Perry, For Faith in Shopping, 2008 Photograph: British Museum/Guardian

Medals have always been associated with honour and glory. I remember the pride I felt as a child when I received a gymnastics medal for what amounted to little more than behaving like a sausage roll on a blue rubber mat. I remember with mixed feelings the medals I was given in the mid-1970s by my Romanian cousins while visiting them in Bucharest. Shimmering in my hand, these communist badges of honour (awarded for all but obligatory participation in athletic exercises) spoke to a reality whose significance I was too young to appreciate. For my cousins, they were tokens of dishonour, worthless mementoes of social engineering. I have them still, but my collection would be enhanced by a medal cast in 1991 by the Finnish artist Pertti Kukkonen, in which the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena are portrayed crawling awkwardly through passageways, only to emerge in front of the firing squad that will execute them.

Medals of Dishonour

British Museum,
London
WC1
Starts 25 June
Until 27 September
Details:
020 7323 8181
[British Museum](#)

Medals first proliferated in Italy during the Renaissance, and were part of an ideological aesthetic directed at reviving the classical themes of reputation and high achievement. Produced as multiples and exchanged as gifts, they were struck in a variety of metals, precious or base, and widely circulated. As the medal was turned admiringly in the hand, the person represented became a metaphor for steadfastness, prudence, benevolence, piety, wisdom, beauty, or all of these. Thus the subject, like the medium honouring him (and occasionally her), became an object of virtue. The effect was sometimes mildly ridiculous. A 16th-century medal portraying the Italian bishop Gabriele Fiamma carries a 25-line inscription listing his marvellous attributes: "Even as a boy he produced works of highly accomplished learning ... Rivalling the divine eloquence of our ancient fore-fathers, he gained not a little glory," and so on and so on, a windy tribute to a windbag preacher.

Produced in Fiamma's lifetime, this medal exemplifies the pompous, self-aggrandising tendencies of the genre. It is hilariously (if unintentionally) up-ended by Michael Landy's Asbo Medal,

commissioned for the British Museum exhibition Medals of Dishonour. Landy's subject is Dean Martin Rowbotham who, at the age of 17, received an asbo for a shower of antisocial acts, which are listed on the reverse of the medal (verbal abuse, threats of violence, harassment, throwing missiles). Asbos having become something of a badge of honour for the recipient, Rowbotham is happy to inflate his negative achievements, boasting that he has breached his asbo "more than 20 times", while Hartlepool police have records of a mere seven infringements. Rowbotham agreed to pose for the medal, which prompts the question whether this is yet a further symbolic reward, or if the job has in fact become the target of its satire.

Landy's medal belongs to what the curator Philip Attwood has labelled the history of "medallic acrimony", whereby, running in parallel with the better-known celebratory pieces, there is a rich, if less familiar, tradition of medals that disparage, condemn or ridicule. These are permanent memorials of failure, disaster and general nastiness whose early examples predate the broadsheet cartoon and its more sophisticated successors, but their medium and commemorative connotations give them a life that is more than just topical and ephemeral.

The substitution of Fiamma's exemplary virtues with Rowbotham's "unacceptable behaviour" articulates this basic antinomy - namely, that there are two sides to every story - for which the medal acts as the perfect vehicle, with its built-in structural reversibility. It can be flipped not only from obverse to reverse, but also revolved so that up becomes down. In this manner, The Devil Cromwell and the Fool Fairfax, a crudely executed medal struck in 1650, literally turns satire on its head. By rotating it 180 degrees, Oliver Cromwell, shown wearing a cap, becomes a horned devil with pointed ears, while on the other side his commander-in-chief, Thomas Fairfax, is transformed into a fool wearing a cap with bells.

It has always been the fate of rulers and prominent figures to draw scorn as well as praise. Juvenal mocked the great men of yesterday whose statues were melted down and recycled as "little jugs, basins, frying pans and chamber pots". The medals in the British Museum exhibition do a similar job: subjecting fame and glory to the furnace of derision and recasting them, in a mimetic parody of the original form, as folly or villainy. Louis XIV, king of France for 72 years from 1643, who styled himself "the sun king", is shown on a Dutch medal receiving an enema; the parties who negotiated the Treaty of Utrecht (which ended 10 years of hostilities between France, Britain, the Netherlands and the Habsburg empire) are portrayed by the German medallist Christian Wermuth as a council of defecating arses - a comment on the shitty politicking that led to the treaty; the American senator Huey Long is humiliated in a medal shaped as a lavatory seat which commemorates a punch in the eye he received in a washroom.

Such Rabelaisian treatment is meted out to types as well as individuals. Medals flogging bankers and financiers peaked during the speculative frenzy of the early 1700s (famously satirised by Swift in Gulliver's Travels) and the subsequent collapse in 1720 in the share prices of the South Sea Company in Britain and the Compagnie des Indes in France. "Credit is as dead as a rat" reads one inscription (1701), next to which lies a dead man holding a briefcase marked "Bills of exchange". The reverse is inscribed "Bankruptcy is the fashion", and shows a financier, his back turned to the world, crowned with the motto "VISIBILIS INVISIBILIS" - now you see him, now you don't. Its message of evasiveness and untrustworthiness speaks to us as strongly today as it did 300 years ago. A medal attacking the Compagnie des Indes offers the following negative creed: "On Sunday, using banknotes, we empty all the purses [of their coins]; on Monday we buy shares; on Tuesday we have millions; on Wednesday we hire our house staff; on Thursday we set up a horse and carriage; on Friday we go to the ball; and on Saturday to the poor house."

The vagaries of commerce and acquisitiveness are taken up by Grayson Perry, who has produced an exquisite piece, modelled in terracotta and struck in copper, titled For Faith in Shopping. Playfully deploying medieval religious prototypes, Perry depicts the Virgin Mary not as the Queen of Heaven, but as "Our Lady of Bond Street", the patroness of avarice, draped in a cloak stiff with dollar signs and the logos of luxury retailers. On the reverse, the distorted, semi-tumescient figure of the infant Christ ("Born to Shop") presides over a judgment day scene in which consumers are saved and those who toil for a deeper understanding of the world are consumed in the fires of hell.

The theme of life's horrific potential is also mined by Jake and Dinos Chapman in their archly punning Meddling with Dishonour, a 15cm reworking in bronze of their panoramic sculptural projects Hell and Fucking Hell. As before, Goya's Disasters of War is powerfully referenced. But, exhibited alongside medals by the German artist Arnold Zadikow depicting the brutality of war, the influence here is also seen as specifically located in medallic art. Appropriately, given the medal's propagandistic function in wartime, many of the new commissions for this show subvert its meritorious tradition. Richard Hamilton, Mona Hatoum, Yun-Fei Ji and Cornelia Parker all question the wisdom of current military conflicts and the politicians and opinion-makers who act as

the dodgy impresarios of war.

Fittingly, Marcel Duchamp supplies the ultimate reduction of the medal's function as an indicator of superior status with his piece Sink Stopper (1964-67). Modelled in clay from the perforated drain of a porcelain shower tray and then cast by the artist in lead that he had melted in a saucepan, this "medal" was originally nothing more than an answer to a plumbing problem (Duchamp liked to soak his feet, but the shower tray leaked). A couple of years later, he was invited by an American company to strike a medallion. Just as he had pissed on the inflated claims made for art with his 1917 urinal, he now couldn't resist offering the stopper, which was subsequently cast in silver, bronze and stainless steel and circulated as an "original limited edition Medallion Sculpture". As a comment on the aesthetic and political range of choices available in the medium, nothing in this exhibition can touch it.

Duchamp's "medal" was destined for talismanic status. The edition still crops up at auction, still circulates in the art market he so derided. But this is what medals - much like coins - are designed to do. They should pass from hand to hand and become part of the material culture. Exhibiting them is inevitably a compromise, because they cannot be handled, only viewed (and sometimes only half of the story they tell can be seen). It's a pity, then, that the British Museum could not see a way of producing and circulating multiples of the new medals it has commissioned. Only three of each have been struck, one for the museum's collection, and two for the artists. A sad case of what comes round not going around.