

Pin the blame on them

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An exhibition of medals designed to dishonour their recipients shows that our current climate of indignation is part of a rich tradition of scorn and shame.



You don't imagine curators as the type to rub their hands together in gleeful satisfaction, or pat themselves on the back for their shrewd judgement – we leave that to the bankers. Their timing at the British Museum, however, is spectacular. An exhibition about medals that confer disgrace rather than honour upon the recipients, memorialising triumphs of negative achievement, will surely pull in the outraged in droves. The *Daily Telegraph* might think it has mastered it, but the art of shaming is a more complicated practice than merely naming names.

"Medals of Dishonour" unearths a pertinent history of disgrace, suggesting there is little extraordinary about our current climate of indignation. The targets range widely, but it may be cold comfort to learn that the enduring contenders for such gongs are the bankers, religious leaders and politicians of this world. Financial Speculation (1720), the work of an anonymous German artist, could readily apply to 2009 in its scorn of venture capitalism. Referring to the economic bubble that led to the collapse of the South Sea Company, which at the time had a monopoly on trade with South America, and so brought financial ruin to many speculators, a figure blows banknotes from a set of bellows and asks, "Who will buy shares?" while the inscription reads: "Who in the desire for money will allow himself to be led by this wind?" Political lampooning finds a natural home in the form of the medal.

When medals first flourished during the Renaissance they were not intended to be awards, but were circulated by hand as personal and diplomatic gifts. We would do well to resurrect this practice. The medals by contemporary artists (commissioned by the British Art Medal Trust in 2008) refuse moral transparency, demonstrating just how compounded, indeed commercialised, shame has become in our global culture of consumerism. Grayson Perry's *For Faith in Shopping* captures this crossfire by playing with Christian symbolism. The Virgin Mary becomes "Our Lady of Bond Street", her image adorned with brand names; the obverse depicts the Christ Child as "born to shop" – symptomatic, Perry explains, of "the ideal infantilised worshipper that hyper-consumerism depends on". Mass consumption gets the ironic thumbs-up, as does a brand culture that feeds off feelings of inadequacy, shaming individuals into "needing" the latest designer clutch bag, its status far outweighing the meagre capacity.

And in a cultural economy of overinflated celebrity status, the notoriety of shame acquires a market currency all its own as shame morphs into resistance, appropriated by the marginalised as a badge of honour. Michael Landy's glittering brass medal is a scathing indictment of Labour's "antidote" to "broken Britain", the Asbo. A mugshot of a 17-year-old Asbo recipient, Dean Rowbotham, stares vacantly outward, while the reverse lists his crimes – "issued threats of violence, harassed residents of Hartlepool . . ." Selfishness and destructiveness are seemingly celebrated here, but shame becomes the slipperiest of fishes when the brass is so shiny that you can't fail to see your own face reflected in it.

To feel shame (MPs, take note) is to scrutinise oneself through the eyes of others and not by internal values. As Perry suggests, "These medals only have an impact if you have a conscience." Unlike guilt's individualistic fixation, shame is the most social of emotions, which explains why the medal of dishonour, like the sonnet, or the essays of Montaigne, is the

product of humanist thinking, characterised by self-examination. Liberalism may regard “naming and shaming” as a pernicious instrument of social control, the bastion of the Daily Mail, but the sting of these “decorations” rests on Aristotle’s view of shame as a quasi-virtue – a precondition without which no other virtue can be understood.

Not surprisingly, the destructiveness of war features heavily. The exhibition takes its title from the American sculptor David Smith’s series *Medals for Dishonour*, which responded directly to the United States’ highest military award, the Congressional Medal of Honour. Hanging medals on gallery walls for the first time, Smith’s surrealist and symbolic series, produced in the late 1930s after a trip to Europe, lambasted war and the system he considered responsible for it. His targets were fascism and capitalism, and the political and religious leaders whose activities promoted hatred, thus laying the ground for war, along with the industrialists, scientists and media who colluded with them.

Smith’s innovation rested on the obscurity of his designs, in keeping with the nuanced approach of contemporary art in general. The artistic impulse to shame took on a more complex charge as ideological structures rather than individuals were targeted. Marcel Duchamp’s *Sink Stopper* (1964), the most beautiful medal on display, goes furthest. Produced by the artist as the solution to a lost shower plug, Duchamp’s silver cast of a plughole discredits the medal system entirely. With no political, only a practical and aesthetic value, it drains (quite literally) the genre’s potency to denote.

But is it the artist’s duty to shame? Cornelia Parker, best known for her installation *Cold, Dark Matter* (1991), believes so. *We Know Who You Are. We Know What You Have Done* (2008) criticises the Bush-Blair coalition by turning their close alliance into an impenetrable conspiracy, showing the backs of their heads: they gaze into the heart of the medal and each other’s eyes. Whatever went on between them has been compressed into an unknowable space.

“Artists have a responsibility like anyone else to hold power to account,” Parker suggests. “Sometimes words fail and it has to be done with images. Shaming is important, but it’s more about asking questions. The back is always as big as the front, so you need medals for the negative, if you’re going to honour the good.”

True enough. The artist only exists, Tarkovsky said, because the world is not perfect. These medals – particularly those produced in a post-9/11, post-Iraq, post-Blair world – demonstrate the cyclical nature of shame cultures. Humiliation risks repelling the person condemned; degradation is passed on, transformed and transposed. And yet the collective impression suggests that more than mere questions are being asked here. In fact, these “prizes” without moralising are deeply moral.

As the most powerful literature about shame intimates – one thinks of J M Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, or Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* – shame is often our salvation, as well as our ruin. Perhaps our MPs, and the likes of Bernard Madoff and Sir Fred Goodwin, will come to appreciate the medals of dishonour that the public is bestowing on them? Perhaps.

“Medals of Dishonour” runs until 27 September. More information: www.britishmuseum.org