



Medals of Dishonour

Until Sun Sep 27 *British Museum*

Art

Time Out says

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A few years ago the British Museum staged a small but exhilarating display of badges, many of which were emblazoned with the very sorts of pro-CND or anti-Thatcher slogans that I would wear as a politically confused teenager. Aptly called 'Status Symbols: Identity and Belief on Modern Badges', the show was held in a discrete side chapel off the coins and medals gallery, where another flash of youthful curiosity was piqued by a mysterious curved metal door at the far end of the room. I assumed this silver barrier was some impregnable vault behind which the museum stored its most valuable coins and bejewelled artefacts - and it turns out that I wasn't far wrong.

There are indeed drawers full of priceless coins behind that door, but there are also scores of precious medals hidden therein, except that very few of them are the kind awarded for feats of military valour or sporting prowess.

Throughout history, medals have not only been used to bestow virtue on heroes, validate rulers and behold great kings or thinkers. A smaller number of these handheld souvenirs have functioned in a similar way to those modern badges of my misspent youth; cajoling the bearer, slandering their opponents and disseminating often radical political viewpoints.

The BM is now staging a much more ambitious show, 'Medals of Dishonour', for which curators Phillip Attwood and Felicity Powell have picked out 23 medallic badges of shame from the last 400 years and commissioned 13 new medals from some of the world's leading contemporary artists. The earliest medal to be included is a staunchly Protestant, double-sided silver disk from 1588 that commemorates the destruction of the Spanish Armada, revelling in the ships being violently cast upon the rocks and depicting the corrupt Catholic powers blindfolded with their feet dangling above spikes.

Artists have portrayed the ills of war on canvas since time immemorial, but medallists have at their disposal the much smaller but perfectly portrait-sized medium on which to point the finger of blame at one head over all others. Cornelia Parker's new commission depicts back-of-the-head views of two men, bearing the legend 'We Know What You Have Done' and 'We Know Who You Are'. Indeed, these carefully coiffured heads were based on rear views of Bush and Blair.

Reprehensible behaviour of a different kind inspires Michael Landy's medallion - which, at first glimpse, looks like an Olympic gold. But Landy's award goes to? 'Dean Rowbotham for breaking his Asbo on more than 20 occasions: damaging property, throwing missiles, harassing residents of Hartlepool'. The mark of dishonour thus becomes transubstantiated as an emblem of pride, an exemplar of this young man's obnoxious, anti-social skills. It's an achievement by another name, a symbol of difference, much like the anti-establishment sentiment of pledging allegiance to the circled 'A' of anarchy.

Grayson Perry also takes aim at an aspect of broken Britain, but broadens the exhibition's focus from politics and power to high street consumer culture. His copper medal, 'For Faith in Shopping' borrows a medieval-looking virginal queen, but clads her anorexic body in Prada, Chanel, Armani and so on - bestowing her with the title, 'Our Lady of Bond Street' and replacing her sceptre with a shopping bag.

If these contradictory decorations stand for anything collectively, it's for a return to truthfulness in art and life in general. The propagandist purpose or hero worship redolent of most medals is so well known as to make them seem untrustworthy. If the medal doesn't have a darker flipside, then why would you ever take one at face value?