

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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January 10, 1994 Tina Coplan
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ART OF RENAISSANCE PORTRAIT MEDALS IS REVEALED

AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Washington, D.C. -- The first major survey in America on the art of Renaissance portrait medals opens at the National Gallery of Art on January 23, 1994. The Currency of Fame: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance will include more than 200 of the most beautiful and important medals from the major European centers of production -- Italy, Germany, France, England, and the Netherlands. The medals will be displayed in free-standing cases in the West Garden Court of the West Building through May 1, 1994.

Co-organized by the National Gallery and The Frick Collection in New York, the exhibition will travel to The Frick from May 24 through August 22, 1994, and to the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, from September 22 through December 20, 1994. The exhibition is supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany. An indemnity has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Portrait medals on view will span the high points of the form from around 1400 to 1600. Among those represented are the most brilliant and cultured rulers of the period -- Lorenzo de' Medici, Elizabeth I, French King Henri IV and his Queen

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Marie de' Medici, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror -- as well as Martin Luther, French Cardinal Richelieu, Spanish Conquistador Hernan Cortes, and artists Michelangelo and Albrecht Dürer.

The survey begins with the self-portrait (c. 1435) of Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), the celebrated Italian humanist, whose single-sided plaque is a forerunner of the portrait medal, which achieved full maturity in Italy in the fifteenth century. The exhibition continues with examples from the sixteenth century, when the form reached Germany and was practiced by such artists as the prolific and accomplished Matthes Gebel (c. 1523-1574). The show also includes the finely detailed work of Guillaume Dupré (c. 1579-1640), representing the flowering of the medallic tradition in France.

"We are pleased to present this comprehensive exhibition of exceptional portrait medals, focusing on the subtle artistry of this fascinating, if often neglected, form of relief sculpture," said Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery. "While objects in the exhibition come from as far away as St. Petersburg, Russia, many are drawn from our own holdings, one of the leading collections of Renaissance medals in the world."

From its beginnings in the early 1400s, the medal has been an archetypal expression of Renaissance culture, celebrating humanism and the individual. As a durable, commemorative object that could be easily reproduced and distributed, it provided a lasting testament to the sitter's worldly achievements. Patrons took great pride in the medals, commissioning highly skilled artists sometimes acclaimed for their

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work in other media as well.

Most portrait medals feature the sitter's profile accompanied by an identifying inscription on one side. The reverse is often embellished with heraldry, allegories, symbolic devices, or narrative scenes related to the subject, in some cases surrounded by mottoes, epigrams, or historical data. Cast or struck in bronze, lead, gold, or silver as presentation pieces, they are at once objects of beauty and valuable documents.

The basic form of the Renaissance portrait medal was invented in 1438 by Antonio Pisano (c. 1395-1455), called Pisanello. The unsurpassed quality of his work is distinguished by precisely drawn profiles, elegant lettering, and subtlety of modeling, all balanced within the confines of a small circle.

His medal of Leonello d'Este of Ferrara (1444), the paragon of a cultured prince, is typical. Shown on the occasion of his marriage to Maria of Aragon, Leonello is symbolically depicted on the reverse as a lion being taught to sing by Cupid. The charming scene represents matrimonial love and signifies that the powerful prince, also an accomplished musician, is tamed by marriage. An inscription attests to the political implications as the prince becomes the son-in-law of Neapolitan ruler King Alfonso V of Aragon.

Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the form flourished in Italy and established a model for other European countries. Among the most prominent medalists were Sperandio of Mantua (c. 1425-1504) and Niccolò Fiorentino

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(1430-1514) in Florence, whose robust, sculptural styles contrasted with the painterly approach of Pisanello. The sixteenth century, dominated by the Milanese school, was characterized by a greater attention to detail and virtuosity of technique.

While Italian medals were cast from models formed in wax, German medalists generally worked from models carved in stone or wood. Nearly sixty German examples include several models, among them extraordinary wood carvings by one of the most important German medalists, Friedrich Hagenauer.

The Currency of Fame: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance has been organized by guest curator Stephen K. Scher, an art historian, noted scholar of medals, and former chairman of the art department at Brown University. Donald Myers, assistant curator of sculpture, is coordinating curator for the exhibition at the Gallery. A fully illustrated exhibition catalogue with entries by Scher and thirty international scholars is published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

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