



# PRESS RELEASE

from

## THE FRICK COLLECTION

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### SUMMER EXHIBITION CELEBRATES THE LARGEST ACQUISITION IN THE FRICK COLLECTION'S HISTORY

#### *THE PURSUIT OF IMMORTALITY: MASTERPIECES FROM THE SCHER COLLECTION OF PORTRAIT MEDALS*

May 9 through September 10, 2017



Pierre-Jean David d'Angers (1788–1856), *Josephine Bonaparte*, ca. 1832, gilt copper alloy (cast), Scher Collection, promised gift to The Frick Collection

Over the course of six decades, Stephen K. Scher—a collector, scholar, and curator—has assembled the most comprehensive and significant private collection of portrait medals in the world, part of which he and his wife, Janie Woo Scher, gave to The Frick Collection last year. To celebrate the Schers' generous gift of what is the largest acquisition in the museum's history, the Frick presents more than one hundred of the finest examples from their collection in *The Pursuit of Immortality*, on view from May 9 through September 10, 2017. The exhibition is organized by Aimee Ng, Associate Curator, The Frick Collection, and Stephen K. Scher. Comments Director Ian Wardropper, "Henry Clay Frick had an abiding

interest in portraiture as expressed in the paintings, sculpture, enamels, and works on paper he acquired. The Scher medals will coalesce beautifully with these holdings, being understood in our galleries within the broader contexts of European art and culture. At the same time, the intimate scale of the institution will offer a superb platform for the medals to be appreciated as an independent art form, one long overdue for fresh attention and public appreciation." The exhibition, to take place in the lower-level galleries, showcases superlative examples from Italy, Germany, France, the Netherlands, England, and other regions together with related sculptures and works on paper from the Frick's permanent collection, helping to illuminate the place of medals in a larger history of art and their centrality in the history of portraiture



Antonio di Puccio Pisano, called Pisanello (ca. 1395–ca. 1455) *Leonello d'Este, Marquess of Ferrara*, ca. 1445, copper alloy, The Frick Collection; Gift of Stephen K. and Janie Woo Scher, 2016

in Western art. A short film will demonstrate one method by which medals were made, and visitors will have the opportunity to handle a reproduction of one of the most famous medals of the Renaissance.

Accompanying *The Pursuit of Immortality: Masterpieces from the Scher Collection of Portrait Medals* is a richly illustrated hardcover catalogue including an essay by Aimee Ng (64 pages, 7 1/8 x 7 1/8 inches, 43 illustrations; \$19.95, \$17.96, member price). Additionally, in the fall of 2018, a catalogue of the entire Scher Collection will be published, featuring essays by leading medals scholars and illustrated entries about each of the almost one thousand medals in the collection. The exhibition publication is available in the Museum Shop or can be ordered through the Frick's Web site ([frick.org](http://frick.org)) or by phone at 212.547.6848.

## ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ARTISTIC INVENTIONS OF THE RENAISSANCE

Portrait medals are one of the most important artistic inventions of the Italian Renaissance and flourished as an art form across Europe for four centuries. Created to be exchanged and distributed as tokens of identity—sometimes among intimate circles of friends, sometimes from powerful rulers to their subjects—they make the absent present, evoking the fullness of the individuals they commemorate through the likeness, imagery, and text they carry.



Antonio di Puccio Pisano, called Pisanello (ca. 1395–1455), *Cecilia Gonzaga*, dated 1447, copper alloy (cast), Scher Collection

Today, medals are generally associated with awards, but during the Italian Renaissance, their primary function was to pay tribute to individuals and to shape and promote their identities. Typically, the front of the medal, or obverse, bears the person's likeness, usually in profile, while the reverse presents biographical imagery, such as a coat of arms or personal allegory. Inscriptions declare the sitter's titles, qualities, or motto. The reverse of a medal commemorating

Cecilia Gonzaga, for example, who entered a nunnery instead of marrying the suitor chosen by her family, celebrates her chastity with an allegorical female figure accompanied by a subdued unicorn; according to medieval tradition, the fierce animal could be tamed only by a virgin. The medal's obverse leaves no room for misinterpretation, reading in a ring around Cecilia's portrait: "Virgin Cecilia, daughter of Gianfrancesco I, Marquess of Mantua." Over time, medals were also made to mark events such as marriage, death, and military victory, as well as to express religious and political ideas.

With their inscriptions and reverses, portrait medals typically provide more information than portrait paintings or sculptures. In addition, their small size and the durability of their materials (including bronze or copper alloy, lead, silver, and gold) make them more resilient than paint or stone. As eminently portable objects, they historically had a broader reach than portraits in other media. Far outlasting the mortals they commemorate, medals offered a means by

which individuals—or at least their identities—could live forever. Appropriately, medals were sometimes buried with the dead and in the foundations of buildings, invested as everlasting relics in eternal resting places.

In general, medals are made using one of two techniques: casting (pouring molten metal into a mold) or striking (using physical force to shape a blank disk between two dies). The first Renaissance medals were cast using a process similar to that used to make bronze sculpture. Striking, the technique used since antiquity to form coins, became popular for making medals in the early sixteenth century with the development of the screw press (adapted from the printing industry), and allowed for refinement of detail, higher relief, and larger size. Medals are often confused with coins, which, as currency, are struck at mints from specific materials at specific weights. As they are commemorative, medals can be any size, weight, and material and are generally larger than coins. Like much of Renaissance culture, they were inspired by the culture of ancient Greece and Rome, in this case, by coins.

The first portrait medal has historically been attributed to the painter Antonio di Puccio Pisano, called Pisanello, who, while working in Ferrara for the Este court, produced a medal in about 1438 depicting John VIII Paleologus, the Byzantine emperor. He went on to cast at least twenty-six medals of contemporary individuals that are distinctly larger than anything that could then be struck at a mint, and which translated into metal the celebrated naturalism he



Antonio di Puccio Pisano, called Pisanello (ca. 1395–1455), *John VIII Paleologus*, ca. 1438, lead (cast), Scher Collection

achieved in his painted portraits. Scholars have pointed to other objects that may have influenced him—from seals to Roman pottery lamps to Etruscan mirror backs and covers—and it is perhaps because of the richness of Pisanello’s sources that the art form he developed was so complex, versatile, and popular. Nearly pristine medals in the Scher Collection, including those of Cecilia Gonzaga and Leonello d’Este (shown on page 1), contrast with the deteriorated state of some of Pisanello’s contemporaneous paintings, underscoring how effective the medal can be as a vehicle of perpetuity. The reverse of Leonello’s medal presents the encounter between an old man and a young man, both bearing baskets of olive branches. Celebrating Leonello’s good governance, the image represents the combination of youth and experience, the balance of strength and caution, which brings peace (symbolized by the olive branches).

## A FLOURISHING ART FORM FOR FOUR CENTURIES

Medals provided an arena for creative expression for artists of various media, and painters, printmakers, sculptors, goldsmiths, and others across Europe adopted the art form. The development of the medallic art in the main geographic areas represented in the Scher Collection—Italy, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and England—is a dynamic field of research. With some caution, one can identify characteristics of a region, although any distinguished medals collection will reveal many exceptions to the rule.



Bertoldo di Giovanni (1420/1430–1491), *Heraldic Wild Man*, early 1470s, bronze with extensive traces of gilding, The Frick Collection; New York

Following the tradition begun by Pisanello, medals produced in Italy can be characterized by idealized and, at the same time, naturalistic portraiture in classical style, with inventive reverses that celebrate individuality. Bronze sculptors including Antico and Bertoldo di Giovanni, whose sculptures from the permanent collection are included in the exhibition, advanced the genre by adapting their talents to medals. Comparing a sculptor's statuettes or reliefs to his medals reveals how he grappled with the related, but unique, challenges of medal-making. It also situates the medal in a fuller context of artistic production. The unusual border of Bertoldo's medal of Filippo de' Medici demonstrates the sculptor's innovation of a typically generic feature: attached to the border, a winding banderole extolls the sitter's virtue (VIRTUTE SVPERA [by higher virtue]); a miniscule Medici coat of arms declares his lineage; and bizarre flower-like forms probably represent tassels suspended from the clerical hat that Filippo de' Medici,

an archbishop, would have worn. On the medal's reverse, Bertoldo presents the scene of the *Last Judgment*. Evidently, he thought the medal was an appropriate format for such a monumental composition, and it has long been suggested that Michelangelo (one of Bertoldo's pupils) drew from it when he painted his gigantic *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel.



Bertoldo di Giovanni (1420/30–1491), *Filippo de' Medici*, 1462–74, copper alloy (cast), The Frick Collection, gift of Stephen K. and Janie Woo Scher, 2016



Hans Reinhart the Elder (1500/10–1581), *Trinity Medal*, dated 1544, silver (cast), Scher Collection

Medals by German artists tend toward exacting portraiture (see portrait of Dürer by Gebel on page 5) and typically carry heraldic imagery on the reverse, in contrast to the individualized reverses of Italian medals. Hans Reinhart the Elder exemplifies the technical accomplishment of German artists. In his famous *Trinity* medal, the body of Christ and the cross from which he hangs were cast

separately then soldered onto the cast medal; they are fully in the round, inviting viewers to marvel at the detail achieved in such an intimate scale.

Medallic art in France largely followed Italian models until the end of the sixteenth century, when Guillaume Dupré, sculptor to Henri IV, began to cast medals and medallions (essentially, large medals) characterized by their subtlety and precision that, arguably, surpass the results achieved through striking. Struck medals dominated French medallic production under the patronage of Louis XIV in the seventeenth century until, beginning in the 1820s, the sculptor Pierre-Jean David d'Angers revived the cast medals of the Renaissance, albeit with a Romantic accent. The vivacity of David d'Angers' portraits, such



Guillaume Dupré (ca. 1579–1640), *Pierre Jeannin (1540–1622)*, dated 1618, Copper alloy, Scher Collection

as that of Empress Josephine (see front page), is rooted in his expressive modeling in wax. Although the artist's medallion features a posthumous portrait, it captures the first wife of Napoleon as though she had sat before him.



Wouter Muller (1604–1673), *Admiral Maarten Harpertszoon Tromp*, dated 1653, silver (two cast shells soldered together), Scher Collection

The art of the medal flourished during the Dutch Golden Age, and artists in seventeenth-century Amsterdam favored a technique of casting two thin shells and soldering them together. These hollow medals achieve impressively high relief as exemplified in Wouter Muller's medal commemorating the death in battle of Admiral Maarten Harpertszoon Tromp. When turned, the almost fully *en face* portrait offers a profile view of the sitter. Like this example, the

majority of Dutch medals of the period relate to events and individuals associated with battles with other European powers.

English medalists developed in large part from the tradition of coin production, and thus striking was the favored technique. One of the most impressive medallic creations of the nineteenth century was struck to celebrate Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, which presents the queen at age seventy-eight on the obverse and at eighteen on the reverse, the two portraits representing the sixty years of her reign.



George William de Saulles (1861–1903), *Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom*, dated 1897, gold (struck), Scher Collection



Matthes Gebel (ca. 1500–1574) *Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)*, not before 1528, copper alloy, Scher Collection

In a collection of portrait medals, the individuals depicted converse with one another, take their place in a narrative of the world, and, to some degree, live on. Those who commissioned them surely must have entertained the idea that their images and identities would survive into the future, just as ancient coins had. In their pursuit of immortality, men and women entrusted their legacies to these small-scale monuments, which dignify fleeting human life

with the remembrance of lives lived and outlast, in turn, each beholder who encounters them anew.

The exhibition is made possible by the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation, with major support from an anonymous gift in memory of Melvin R. Seiden and the Centennial Foundation in honor of Matthew McLennan. Additional funding is provided by Margot and Jerry Bogert, Frances Beatty and Allen R. Adler, the Christian Keesee Charitable Trust, and Charles Hack and Angella Hearn. The exhibition catalogue is underwritten, in part, by a grant from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.

All photography is by Michael Bodycomb.

## INTERACT

Social:    /FrickCollection

#MedalsattheFrick

#FrickCollection

## BASIC INFORMATION

**General Information Phone:** 212.288.0700

**Web site:** [www.frick.org](http://www.frick.org)

**Building project:** [www.frickfuture.org](http://www.frickfuture.org)

**E-mail:** [info@frick.org](mailto:info@frick.org)

**App:** [frick.org/app](http://frick.org/app)

**Where:** 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue

**Museum Hours:** open six days a week: 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day

**Admission:** \$22; senior citizens \$17; students \$12; "pay what you wish" on Sundays from 11 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

**First Fridays:** museum admission and gallery programs are free from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. on the first Friday evening of the month (except January)

**PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS:** Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection

**Subway:** #6 local to 68th Street station; #Q to 72<sup>nd</sup> Street station; Bus: M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

**Tour Information:** included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

**Shop:** The shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

**Group Visits:** Please call 212.288.0700 for details and to make reservations.

**Public Programs:** A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

**General Information Phone:** 212.288.0700

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For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Associate Director of Media Relations & Marketing

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