



INTRODUCTION

Hunting the Wild Aftercast: Confessions of a Medal Collector

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BEGINNINGS

I am frequently asked how and why I began collecting medals. Those of you who are inveterate collectors will understand when I confess that since childhood I have had the collector's disease. At the same time, I have always been fascinated by history and portraiture, and when one combines these interests, the results are inevitable and, referring to the disease, fatal, although the demise is a blissful one. It is this combination of passions that led me, under very particular circumstances, to begin collecting medals.

I had no idea of the existence of medals when, as an undergraduate, I read the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt's seminal book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, first published in 1860.¹ Burckhardt was one of the first historians to describe the distinct form of individualism that has been traditionally considered a major characteristic of the Italian Renaissance, associated with a revival or re-examination of the cultures of classical antiquity, the growth of a new realism in the pictorial arts, and the use of innovative techniques for expressing these values and beliefs. In order to illustrate his point, Burckhardt focused attention on a number of the most prominent personalities of the Renaissance—personalities with whom, as a young man, I became fascinated.

So it was that during a trip to Europe as an undergraduate I found myself in the cradle of the Renaissance, Florence, wide-eyed, innocent, and voracious for knowledge and experience. While wandering along the banks of the Arno, I happened to notice the entrance to an antiquary's shop. With the courage of one who had nothing to lose—and, for that matter, nothing to spend—and in the hopes that I would not be bothering anyone but would, in fact, find some sympathy for a poor student, I entered the premises and asked if I might look around.

The hospitality I had been hoping for was forthcoming, and eventually the dealer brought out several objects he thought might interest me. One was a piece of Renaissance jewelry, the sort made of a mounted baroque pearl that is found quite commonly because it is so often forged. The other was a portrait medal, which I am almost certain was Matteo de' Pasti's superb medal of Sigismondo Malatesta (no. 12).

From that moment on, I was hooked. The evocation by this object of the very individuals described by Burckhardt was so strong that I felt it forged a spiritual link between me and those remarkable personalities of the Italian Renaissance. I was holding in my hand an object containing on its surface a portrait of one of the princes whose turbulent life had been so vividly described by the Swiss historian. Being on the strictest of student budgets, I could not purchase the piece, but, during the rest of the journey in Italy, I made it a point to visit the medal displays in as many museums as possible.

Subsequently, I went on to graduate school for advanced degrees in art history, followed by a career teaching the subject, primarily as a medievalist, and during most of that time did not have the means to collect seriously, although that did not deter me from purchasing art in a small way, usually paying in installments. I shall always be grateful to those understanding dealers whose sympathy for my passion made them tolerant of my impecunious state. I must confess that there were times when my parents helped or were persuaded to acquire an object for themselves, a ruse that fooled no one but left no one unhappy either.

It was while I was a graduate student at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York and taking a course titled Museum Training (now Curatorial Studies) that I finally purchased my first medal. One of the more delightful assignments given to the students was a competition in which each of us was tasked with purchasing a work of art—spending no more than \$10 (this was 1957!). The faculty would then determine who had acquired the “best” object. Although I did not win, my career as a collector of medals had begun. Only afterward did I discover that what I had purchased was a later restitution of a papal medal. This was the first of many important lessons I learned as a fledgling collector and eventual connoisseur: always conduct thorough research before making a purchase.

My collecting of medals could begin in earnest only after I left the academic world in 1974 and took over the family chemical manufacturing business. As I learned more about medals and became familiar with the market—as represented in dealers’ stock and auction catalogues—the collection grew, both chronologically, from about 1400 to the nineteenth century, and geographically, including Great Britain, Continental Europe, and the United States. This publication represents a personal collection, which is, perforce, idiosyncratic. The portrait medals obviously dominate, but since the medal was a useful instrument to commemorate a wide variety of subjects, most of these are also represented in the collection. Subject matter was not of particular concern to me. Rather, it was always the aesthetic aspect of the medal as a work of art that was the first and most important criterion in my selections.

In building the collection over a span of sixty years, I have had the opportunity to examine thousands of medals of all periods in museums, private collections, dealers’ stock, and auction houses. There were always certain factors inherent in a medal that either enhanced or detracted from the aesthetic excellence to which I had been initially attracted. As a result, I established strict standards regarding the specific connoisseurial requirements for collecting medals. These included, among many other factors, excellence of design, the condition of a particular specimen, and, whether cast or struck, the quality of its fabrication.

Patina, whether applied or naturally acquired over time, was important to consider (particularly for bronze medals) in relation to the possible age of the medal. Sharpness of

detail and whether or not the piece had been tooled could not be ignored; and, in cast pieces, a comparison of dimensions (usually the overall diameter but preferably internal measurements) could indicate a later example in a succession of casts; while in struck medals, evidence of a cracked die or movement during striking, causing what is called “chattering,” had to be avoided.

Rarely is there a fear of outright forgery, which is much more common with coins. With cast medals, copies were always being made, and only when they were treated to look older than they really were and then offered as original casts was there intent to deceive. Struck medals are more difficult to counterfeit since the process requires sophisticated machinery. Molds can be taken of a struck medal and a cast copy produced, but these are not too difficult to detect and are not necessarily meant to deceive. The desire to complete a series or own a particular medal never influences me if the specimen I am examining is mediocre, even if the type is extremely rare.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Although I have always considered medals as works of sculpture, it is important to remember that their roots are firmly established in the field of numismatics. To begin, it should be understood that a medal is not a coin, although there are commemorative coins that share the characteristics of medals. Coins are almost always struck, usually produced by or for a governing authority, and conform to specific weights and materials in their function as units of exchange and commerce. Medals are solely commemorative in nature, can be commissioned by anyone, may be struck or cast, and need not conform to any standards of size, weight, or material.

The widespread transmission of information by means of small, metallic objects has a very long history. In classical Greece, civic pride based on economic well-being and political and military strength was expressed in coinage of extraordinary beauty, occasionally marked by special issues in larger denominations commemorating a particular event—especially a military victory—such as the Syracusan and Athenian silver *decadrachms* (fig. 1). Such excellence of imagery was continued in the Hellenistic period, beginning with the coinage of Alexander the Great of Macedon and of the rulers who followed, introducing portraiture of outstanding quality, individuality, and sensitivity (fig. 2).

The inclusion of exact portraiture continued in Republican and Imperial Rome, gradually changing in character and accuracy toward the end of the imperial period,

Fig. 1 Euainetos, *decadrachm* of the head of Arethusa, surrounded by four dolphins (reverse), 405–400 BC
Syracuse, Sicily
Silver, 42.8 g
American Numismatic Society, New York (1997.9.64)



Fig. 2 *Tetradrachm* of Kingdom of Bactria, Antimachos I Theos (r. 171–160 BC)
Silver, 16.9 g
Scher Collection





Fig. 3 *Sestertius* of Servius Galba
Caesar Augustus (24 BC–AD
69), with Este collector’s mark
(obverse), AD 69
Rome mint
Bronze, 26.4 g
Scher Collection

Fig. 4 *Solidus* of Constantius II,
Roman Emperor (b. AD 317;
r. AD 337–361), ca. AD 353
Rome mint
Gold, 4.5 g
The Metropolitan Museum of
Art, New York; Gift of Darius
Ogden Mills, 1904 (04.35.18)

leading to the more stylized and symbolic representation of the ruler on Byzantine coinage (figs. 3, 4). In the West, portraiture on coinage essentially disappeared except for the deliberate inclusion of a portrait *all’antica*, albeit idealized on the coinage of Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) (fig. 5).

It was the revival of this particular manner of representing the individual in the ancient world that was among the extraordinary contributions made by the Italian Renaissance in the form of the portrait medal. As a mode of expression, it was completely original; within this form, the essence of the Renaissance was expressed to perfection, transmitting within a small, yet complex object the fierce pride and self-conscious dignity of Renaissance men and women. There is, in fact, a certain inevitability about the invention of the portrait medal, which seems to respond to a basic need not only within Renaissance culture but also timelessly and universally. As a means of virtually indestructible communication in multiple examples, the medal contains, in most cases, not only a portrait but also essential information about the subject.

It represents to an astonishing degree the union of a number of closely interconnected elements, namely, the growth of humanism with its intense interest in all phases of classical antiquity, in the course of which collectors encountered and acquired with enthusiasm such ancient artifacts as sculpture, gems, and coins; a revised concept of the dignity of man and his central place in the universe; the appearance of a new realism concurrent with an important change in the status of the artist; and the evolution of the portrait.

In a broader sense, humanism brought a changed attitude toward the dignity of man and a need to find corresponding sources in the ancient world from which these ideas



Fig. 5 *Augustalis* of Frederick
II Hohenstaufen, Holy Roman
Emperor (b. 1194; r. 1215–50),
1231–50
Gold, 5.28 g
Scher Collection

could be drawn. Self-awareness was a natural consequence of this belief in the concept of individual glory, or *fama*, which was the result of excellence, or *virtus*, and which led to a desire to celebrate one's particular accomplishments and talents and to inspire a passion for fame. The tangible manifestation of this desire appears most clearly in the biographical and descriptive literature of the time, as well as in portrait painting and sculpture, and, supremely, in the portrait medal, which was durable, could be reproduced in quantity, and could be widely distributed in the manner of ancient coins. Certainly, the medal has achieved its purpose in giving immortality to a large number of men and women who might otherwise have disappeared from the stage of history. It has celebrated their power and beauty, their successes and intellectual accomplishments, their family status and dynastic links, their personal skills, courage, hopes, and aspirations, their most valued attributes, the significant events in their lives (births, engagements, marriages, awards, deaths), their religious and philosophical beliefs. All of this was achieved through these small disks of metal, wood, or stone upon which is compressed—either explicitly or by the obscure language of symbol, allegory, or emblem—a wealth of information.

The most successful examples convey the skill of the artist in evoking such complexity within the confines of a tiny disk: the elegance of lettering, the sensitivity of portraiture, the masterful depiction of textures and substances, the pleasing and balanced composition, the richness of narrative. At its best, the medal embodies the basic values of the Renaissance man: purity of style, harmony, dignity, balance, the *gravitas* so important as a foundation of character.

As early as the late fourteenth century, the impulse to imitate the essentially commemorative nature of ancient coins, particularly Roman, existed in the north of Italy. The proto-humanist Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) had been collecting Roman coins as evidence of an Italy whose ancient greatness he wished to revive. His influence was undoubtedly felt when Francesco II da Carrara, il Novello, the scion of the ruling family of Padua, liberated the city in 1390 from the occupying forces of Giangaleazzo Visconti of Milan and freed his father, who had been taken prisoner. To commemorate this event, two numismatic objects were struck in the form of the large Roman bronze coin, the *sestertius*, each bearing a portrait, all'antica, of the two Carraras (fig. 6). These precocious pieces had no immediate successors, although they must have attracted considerable attention since an example in lead of one of them makes an unlikely appearance in the inventories of the French royal prince Jean, the Duke of Berry (1340–1416), who, as collector and patron, played an indirect, though significant, role in the evolution of the medal.

In about 1400, the duke purchased several large gold pendants in jewel-encrusted mounts attached to chains for wearing, each representing a Roman emperor and other imperial family members. He subsequently ordered copies to be made in gold (but unmounted) of two of them: the famous medals of Constantine and Heraclius (nos. 504, 505). These were widely circulated and, until the early seventeenth century, considered to be ancient and therefore belonging within the entire known corpus of Roman coinage. As impressive artifacts portraying emperors associated with the life of Christ, they undoubtedly served as models for the Renaissance portrait medal, as did seals, whose format and size, along with their function as important indications of identity and social status, were adopted as another source (figs. 7, 8).



Fig. 6 Medal of Francesco II da Carrara, il Novello, Lord of Padua (1359–1406), dated June 19, 1390
Bronze, 35 mm
Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin



Fig. 7 Seal of Jean de France,
Duke of Berry (1340–1416),
ca. 1400
Colored plaster copy, 89.4 mm
(without rim)
Scher Collection



Fig. 8 Niccolò di Forzore Spinelli
(called Niccolò Fiorentino), seal
of Charles the Bold, Duke of
Burgundy (1433–1477), ca. 1450
Colored plaster copy, 115.2 mm
Scher Collection

The true history of the Renaissance portrait medal, however, is generally thought to have begun in 1438 or 1439, with the celebrated painter Antonio di Puccio Pisano, called Pisanello (ca. 1395–1455), who also collected Roman coins. In order to commemorate the presence in Ferrara of the emperor of the eastern Roman Empire, John VIII Paleologus, Pisanello created what was certainly meant to represent the latest in the long line of imperial, commemorative numismatic objects. It was, instead, with great originality, a relatively large, cast, disk with a portrait of the emperor in contemporary dress on the obverse and a scene on the reverse showing him on horseback praying before a wayside crucifix (no. 1).

The effect of this extraordinary creation was immediate and widespread. Pisanello, in his mid-forties and well advanced in his career when he made his first medal, would proceed to produce at least twenty-three more, traveling to the north Italian principalities—Ferrara, Mantua, Milan, Rimini—and finally serving Alfonso of Aragon, the Magnanimous, in Naples before ending his career in Rome, where he died (nos. 2–11). Almost immediately, other artists began to craft medals for a wide variety of patrons in Italy, frequently moving from city to city, engaging in a range of activities besides making medals. We find sculptors, painters, die engravers, mint masters, jewelers, gem engravers, goldsmiths, architects, and pure amateurs all engaged in the production of medals.

Until the early sixteenth century and the introduction of the screw press—which replaced the striking of coins by hand—medals, unlike coins, were produced by the casting method, which consists of pouring molten metal into a mold. With the screw press, medals, as well as coins, were struck from dies by both government and private mints. In each case, the conditions and results varied considerably.

The desire for medals quickly spread from Italian examples to those from other European countries. The impulse to record one's features that was present in Italy, to establish one's unique presence, was an integral part of humanist philosophy further north as well and was expressed clearly by Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor (r. 1508–19): "The man who makes himself no memorial in life is forgotten with the tolling of his death bell."

Although Italian medals were known in Germany by the mid-fifteenth century, medals were not produced there until about fifty years later. Although one can speak of a German Renaissance in learning, literature, and the arts over a period of time beginning as early as the fourteenth century, the effect of such efforts on the visual arts varied greatly. With very few exceptions, the influence of the Italian Renaissance on architecture and sculpture was minimal and did not displace the dominant Gothic style throughout the sixteenth century, and perhaps not until the eighteenth century. In painting and the graphic arts, on the other hand, Germany produced a spectacular group of artists who worked during the first three decades of the sixteenth century, dominated by the figure of Albrecht Dürer, who traveled in Italy and was intimate with a circle of humanists. Not all of these artists drew upon classical or Italian models, and one must therefore use the term "German Renaissance" judiciously and recognize the distinctly northern character of that art.

In most aspects, German Renaissance medals are distinctly different from their Italian counterparts. Although cast, they are generally made from stone or wood models carved in fine detail with brilliant technique, in contrast to the more common use of wax or plaster for models in other countries. Yet despite their foundation in humanist thought,

PISANELLO

1

Antonio di Puccio Pisano, called Pisanello (ca. 1395–1455)
JOHN VIII PALEOLOGUS, EMPEROR OF BYZANTIUM
(b. 1392; r. 1425–48)
ca. 1438
Lead, cast; 104.1 mm
Scher Collection

Obverse: The emperor wearing a tall, conical hat with a high, upturned brim, pointed at front; spiral curls and pointed beard.
Inscription: + ΙΩΑΝΝΗC ΒΑCΙΛΕΥC ΚΑΙ ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΩΡ ΡΩΜΑΙΩΝ Ο ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΟC [Ioannis Paleologos, King and Emperor of the Romans].

Reverse: The emperor on horseback in hunting garb with a bow and quiver of arrows, halting to pray before a wayside cross; on the left, a page on horseback seen from behind, and rocks in the background.
Inscriptions: OPVS PISANI PICTO / RIS [The work of Pisano the painter]; ΕΡΓΟΝ ΤΟΝ ΠΙCΑΝΟΝ ΖΩΓΡΑΦΟΝ [Ergon Pisanou Zografou] [The work of Pisano the painter].

Literature: Hill 1930, 1: 7; 2: pl. 3, no. 19; Scher 1994, no. 4; Puppi 1996, no. 2; Cordellier 1996, 119; Pollard 2007, 1: no. 1.

Arguably the first true portrait medal, this was made to commemorate the 1438 visit of the Byzantine emperor John VIII Paleologus to Italy to seek reconciliation between the Orthodox and the Roman churches and to enlist aid against the Turks. Pisanello, court artist of Leonello d'Este when the Greek delegation traveled to Italy, created the portrait of the Byzantine emperor inspired by,

but not in imitation of, Roman imperial portraits on coins; the idea may have been suggested by Leon Battista Alberti, who was also in Ferrara at the time (Scher 1994). The reverse represents the emperor interrupting one of his favorite activities (hunting) to pray at a cross, which alludes to the main purpose of his trip to Italy. ADC

2

Antonio di Puccio Pisano, called Pisanello (ca. 1395–1455)
FILIPPO MARIA VISCONTI, DUKE OF MILAN (1392–1447)
ca. 1441
Lead, cast; 101.2 mm
The Frick Collection; Gift of Stephen K. and Janie Woo Scher, 2016
(2016.2.113)

Obverse: Visconti wearing a soft bonnet with high, flat border.
Inscription: PHILIPPVS MARIA ANGLVS DVX MEDIOLANI ETCETERA PAPIE ANGLERIE QVE COMES AC GENVE DOMINVS [Filippo Maria Anglus, Duke of Milan et cetera, Count of Pavia and Angera, and Lord of Genoa].

Reverse: Visconti on horseback in full tournament armor, with crested helmet and lance, riding in a mountainous landscape; on the right, seen from behind, a page on horseback; between them, a second horseman also in tournament armor and with lance; in the background on the right, a building with a dome flanked by two towers and a colossal female statue (Fortitude?) holding a column.
Inscription: OPVS PISANI PICTORIS [The work of Pisano the painter].

Literature: Hill 1930, 1: 8; 2: pl. 4, no. 21; Cordellier 1996, 127; Pollard 2007, 1: nos. 2, 3.



1





2

Visconti devoted his reign to the expansion of the Milanese state. The extremely corpulent duke was shy about his appearance, and this medal and a drawing by Pisanello are the only two known contemporaneous portraits of him. The medal was probably issued in 1441, when the artist could have encountered Visconti in Milan. The appellative "Anglus" refers to a legendary ancestor, the grandson of Aeneas, from whom the Visconti claimed descent. The reverse motif of the foreshortened horse seen from behind is a variant of the reverse of Pisanello's medal of John VIII Paleologus (no. 1) and is related to many drawings of the same subject. ADC



3

Antonio di Puccio Pisano, called Pisanello (ca. 1395–1455)

NICCOLÒ PICCININO (1386–1444)

ca. 1441

Lead, cast; 90.5 mm

Scher Collection

Obverse: Piccinino wearing armor and a *beretta alla capitanesca*, the red headgear of military leaders. Inscription: NICOLAVS PICCININVS VICECOMES MARCHIO CAPITANEVS MAX[imus] AC MARS ALTER [Niccolò Piccinino Visconti, marquis, commander in chief, and a second Mars].



3

