

THE PURSUIT OF IMMORTALITY

Masterpieces from the Scher Collection of Portrait Medals





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The Frick Collection, New York
in association with D Giles Limited, London

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IN THE ROUND

One of the most important artistic inventions of the Renaissance, portrait medals were created to commemorate individuals and to be exchanged and distributed as tokens of identity—sometimes among intimate circles of friends, sometimes from grateful authorities to their subjects. They make the absent present, evoking the fullness of the individuals they represent through the likeness, imagery, and text they carry. A fine art form to be appreciated alongside paintings and sculptures, they are distinguished by their portability and were intended to be seen and felt, to be turned to catch the light and scrutinized from every angle, claiming attention from both the eyes and the hands. One of their most compelling attributes is their tactility, experienced on feeling the weight of a medal in the hand, on rubbing the metallic ridge of a tiny nose, or with a twist of the wrist revealing the other side. Most bear images and text on both sides, and some even carry messages along the edge (see fig. 24), demanding to be moved in space to reveal all of their surfaces to the beholder.

It is impossible to offer this intimate experience to museum visitors. The public display of medals typically requires that they be confined to vitrines, often positioned flat against a backing that hides one side. They become two-dimensional images around which viewers must move at a distance, inverting the optimal experience in which the viewer moves the

medal. Like so many objects displayed in museums, medals beg the imagination to supplement the limitations of being frozen in place and out of context.

Today, medals are generally associated with awards, but in the Italian Renaissance they were precious, portable objects whose primary function was to pay tribute to individuals and to shape and circulate their identities.¹ As such, they were popular among the wealthy and powerful, though over time they became accessible to a broader patronage. Typically, one side (the obverse) bears the person's likeness, usually in profile; and the other (the reverse), biographical imagery like a coat of arms or personal allegory. Inscriptions declare the sitter's titles, qualities, or motto. The medal of Cecilia Gonzaga, for example (figs. 1, 2), who entered a nunnery instead of marrying an assigned suitor, celebrates her chastity with an allegorical female figure accompanied by a subdued unicorn; according to medieval tradition, the fierce animal could only be tamed by a virgin, here Chastity personified. Meanwhile, the obverse leaves no room for misinterpretation, reading in a ring around the portrait: "Maiden [or Virgin] Cecilia, daughter of Gianfrancesco I, Marquess of Mantua."² Over time, medals were also made to mark events like marriage, death, and military victory, as well as to express religious and political ideas. The diversity and complexity of the genre make it difficult to generalize as to function, appearance, technique, and use; this text aims to introduce medals as they are primarily represented in the Scher Collection.

With inscriptions and reverses, portrait medals provide more information than portrait paintings or sculptures typically do. Reproducible and made in a small scale and of durable materials such as bronze (or copper alloy), lead, silver, and gold, they are more resilient than paint





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or stone and historically have had a broad reach as eminently portable objects.³ In some cases, they are the only remaining evidence of the depicted person. Far outlasting those they commemorate, medals offered a means by which individuals—or at least their identities—could seem to live forever. Tellingly, medals were sometimes buried with the dead and in the foundations of buildings, invested as everlasting relics in eternal resting places.⁴ This is not to say that they are indestructible; countless examples have been lost, destroyed, and, especially those made of precious metals, melted down.

In general, medals were 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 methods similar to those for bronze sculpture. Striking, since antiquity the means of forming coins, became popular for medals in the early sixteenth century with the invention of the screw press (adapted from the printing industry), which allowed for refinement of detail, higher relief, and larger size than earlier striking technology. Exactly how individual artists made medals from the fifteenth century on remains the subject of research and debate, for the processes of casting and striking varied and continued to evolve.⁵ Over the centuries, medals' functions diversified and distribution widened, but medals remained distinguished from objects made for mass dissemination (like coins, tokens, and pilgrims' badges) by their distinctive quality and limited quantity.⁶

Medals are often confused with coins, which, as currency, were struck at mints using specific materials at specific weights. Being commemorative, medals could be any size, weight, and material and are generally larger than coins. Like much of Renaissance culture, they were inspired by classical Greece