

JOÃO DUARTE – ONE OF THE PIONEERS OF THE OBJECT -MEDAL IN PORTUGAL

I feel should explain my reasons for choosing the medal work of this artist to present to you.

In my role as Director of the Contemporary Art Movement (*Movimento Arte Contemporânea-MAC*) gallery in Lisbon, the sculptor and medallist João Duarte approached me in 1997 to arrange an individual exhibition of his complete medals work. I was expecting highly realistic commemorative medals, with a layout dominated by 'chiaroscuro' criteria, in the usual round medal form found in the market. When his portfolio was presented to me, I was immediately freed from the classic concepts, which we normally label 'medal' and to add 'object' as a dominant description. It is through this transformation that, for the first time, a commercial gallery in Portugal opened its doors to medallist art. MAC had this privilege.(fig.4)

MAC will celebrate ten years of existence next year and João Duarte has been regularly exhibiting sculptures there since its foundation. The 2000 MAC Medal Prize was awarded to him on the 6th Anniversary of the Contemporary art movement, as was he 2002 MAC Career Prize on its 8th Anniversary and the 2003 MAC Prestige Prize on its 9th Anniversary.(fig.5)

Talking about his work in relation to its respective periods in order to understand it better, I find a deep passion for the medal in both its execution and its exhibition. His first medal is dated 1985. In only eighteen years he has now edited ninety medals.

Duarte was born in Lisbon on 29 November 1952. In 1978 he received his Degree in Plastic Arts (Sculpture) from the then School of Fine Arts in Lisbon (now the Faculty of Fine Arts of Lisbon), and where he is presently a Professor in Sculpture and Medal.

He became an effective member of FIDEM (Fédération Internationale de la Médaille) in 1990.

He has held eight individual exhibitions of contemporary medals, two overseas – in Bilbao and New York – and has taken part in many collective medals exhibitions both in Portugal and abroad.

He has won several first prizes in public medal competitions, notably the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's International Prize for Innovation and Creativity at the 28th FIDEM Congress in Paris in 2002 (fig.7), and the Innovation Prize of the International Biennial of Contemporary Medal - Seixal in November 2003 (fig.2).

He has given a number of conferences about the medals, the most important of which are: 'The teaching of medallist art in the Faculty of Fine Arts of Lisbon University' at the Philadelphia University of Arts, U.S.A in 1999; 'New Contemporary Attitudes in the Production of Medals in Portugal' at the Academy of Fine Arts of Lisbon; and 'The Role of the Project "Volte Face – Medalha Contemporânea" in the Renewal of Contemporary Medallist Art Language in Portugal' at the 28th International Congress of FIDEM in Paris.

Together with five other artists, Duarte founded the Anverso Reverso-Contemporary Medal Group. In the 1997/98 academic year he set up the Volte Face – Contemporary Medal Project as Professor of the Medallist Art in the Faculty of Fine Arts of Lisbon. In 2003 he asked the Faculty to set up the Study Centre Volte Face-Contemporary Medal and this request was unanimously agreed. This Centre has made various agreements with national and international institutions, with the aim of promoting national medal in countries around the world.

Turning our attention briefly to the history of art medals, it is the 1960s that a break with traditional forms of medal design occurs. Without denying influences inherited from previous generations, artists presented new approaches at the formal and technical levels.

After the April Revolution of 1974, cast medals were issued in greater numbers, sometimes sacrificing artistic quality to expression of the political and party political achievements being commemorated. At the same time, some sculptors produced medals, which broke free from all constraints.

It is at this time that Portuguese Artists started to take part at FIDEM CONGRESSES (14th FIDEM CONGRESS in Cologne). It is also a period when the medals began to be seen as an object, which existed in a personal, autonomous and independent space.(fig.6) The artist identified himself or herself with the freedom of his or her analysis, dealing ironically with – or even rejecting –the characteristics of the medal and then transforming these characteristics according to personal criteria and using a wide range of materials and forms in order to renew the genre.

Such agitation produced a renewal of the language, especially advancing in recent years to more conceptual models within the `Object-Medals` or `Constructed Medals` denominations.

João Duarte is one of the pioneers of this definitive era, contributing in an unequivocal way to the elevation of the Object-Medal.(fig.3)

The object-medal creates an internal organisational structure, which allows it to distance itself from the obvious and to increase its ritual and evocative power because it is transformed into an enigmatic object, worthy of being deciphered, which creates its own self-structuring nature by opposition to the canonical nature of classicism. The viewer is invited to take a more active role – the individual is provided with a stimulus to perception in a succinct and fragmented form, crystallized in the object. This is never the case with the classical figurative image, where what we perceive is very similar to what we see.(fig.1).

This is the point which renewed interest in the medal and the novelty of the medal derive, an object, which objectifies formless matter in a synthesis between fragments of the quotidian and amorphous materials. These fragments refer back to the totality – the part is given by the whole.

In all senses the medal is becoming ever more a work of art. (fig.8)

It is in this perspective that I present some of the more representative medals of João Duarte's work.

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November 2003