MEDALS OF THE RENAISSANCE

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The Italians of the Renaissance were a proudly self-conscious lot who were as aware of the judgment of history as of that of their contemporaries. They inevitably felt the need of perpetuating their fame in a lasting and tangible manner. So, with the ancient Roman coins in mind, they developed the idea of the medal, upon which their portraits and the imprint of their achievements could be placed. In choosing the medal as a vehicle for their fame, the Italians made no mistake, for it quickly became one of the most revealing of the art forms of that astonishing age. And rightly so, for no one who has ever studied a group of renaissance medals can escape the impression that the times abounded in men and women whose strongly individualized features made them choice subjects for the medalist and that skilled medalists existed in numbers to do full justice to their subjects.

Just as prints vary from impression to impression, so bronze medals, which are also seldom unique, vary from original castings—the equivalent of first impressions—to inferior "aftercastings," that is to say, casts of casts. The variations in state, in the opinion of students of medals, are of fundamental importance; and it is a sad fact that late aftercastings are the ones most commonly found, although original castings or early aftercastings are the ones sought for—so often in vain. Some of the more desirable are in the Museum's representative collection, where they have been long treasured for what they are. And now this select number has been increased by the purchase from the Pierpont Morgan Library of some notable examples that had formed part of a collection gathered together by the elder Mr. Morgan many years ago. This acquisition consists of only eighteen pieces—but what a picture gallery it presents of men of the Renaissance!

Among the medals of men in public life there is a superb casting, with the marks of the chasing tool still fresh upon it, of the wise and art-loving Lorenzo de’ Medici, who molded Florence to his heart’s desire and died in the fateful year of 1492. A strong and thoughtful portrait of this most illustrious Florentine, it is the work of Niccolò Fiorentino.

Among the medals of soldiers are superb examples by the first and greatest of all medalists, Pisanello. In 1445, this rare master designed the striking medal of the scoundrel and despot Sigismondo Malatesta, whose very portrait is a brutal thing. There are other soldiers, too, in this group of Morgan medals: the fighting Marquis of Gonzaga by Pisanello; Bartolomeo Colleoni, to whose memory Verrocchio erected the noble equestrian monument in Venice, portrayed with bourgeois realism by Guidizani; and that colorful member of the Medici family, Giovanni delle Bande Nere, limned in all his fleshly handsomeness by Francesco da Sangallo.

The clergy is well represented. There is Guaioliotti’s medal of Pope Pius II, who before he received the tiara was the adored humanist Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini of Siena; and Niccolo Fiorentino’s deeply probing portrait of the monk Savonarola, that phenomenon whose spell still rests upon Florence.

In the field of the arts there are two notable self-portraits by a leading architect and medalist of the late Renaissance Francesco da Sangallo, who also is the author of the medallic portrait of the humanist Paolo Giovio, famous for his histories and biographies.

More, perhaps, than many volumes, these medals transmit to our times the unique spirit of that dynamic age, which, alas, seems far more remote than dates alone would indicate.

A selection of the medals is now on view in the current exhibition of bronze sculpture from ancient times to the nineteenth century in the Museum’s collections.

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Sigismondo Malatesta, lord of Rimini, by Pisanello, 1445; Carlo Grati, nobleman of Bologna, by Sperandio, about 1485
Lodovico III Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, by Pisanello, 1447 or 1448; (reverse) the marquis in full armor astride a charger.
Fra Girolamo Savonarola, late XV century; Charles VIII of France, 1494 or 1495. Both medals are by Niccolò Fiorentino.
Lorenzo de' Medici, the Magnificent, by Niccolò Fiorentino, about 1490; (reverse) symbolic figure representing Florence
Giovanni de' Medici delle Bande Nere, by Francesco da Sangallo, about 1570; Paolo Giovio, historian, by Sangallo, 1552