

Modern medals are taking on new and varied forms. **Philip Attwood** looks at these contemporary objects that have broken with tradition

## Monumentality in your hand

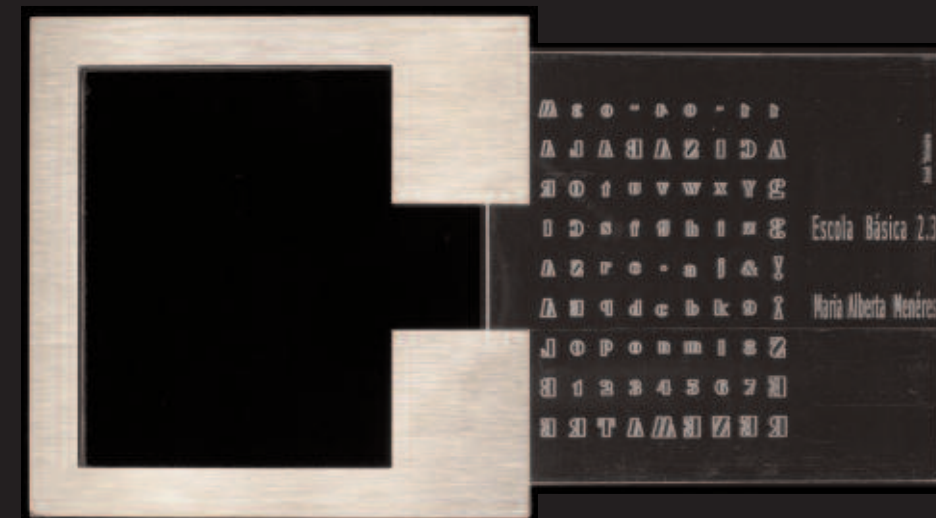
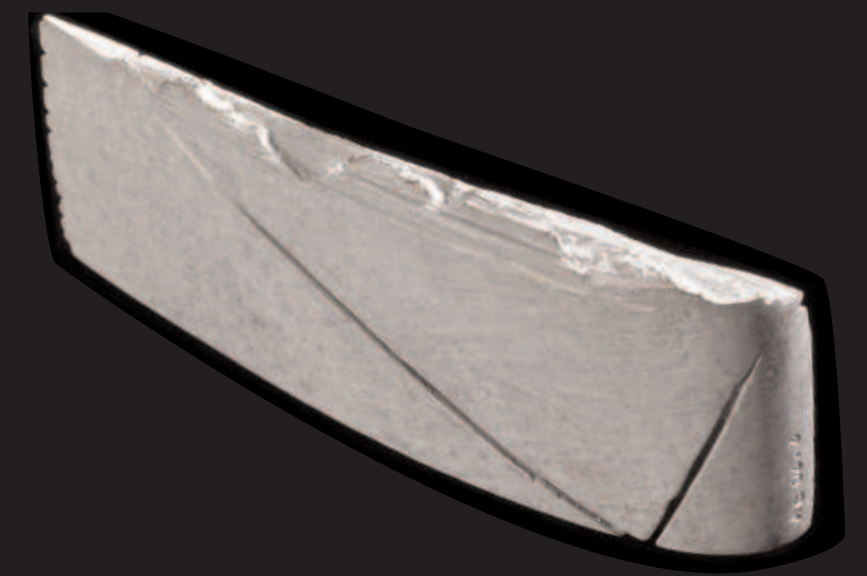
'I'm a dweller on the threshold, And I'm waiting at the door, And I'm standing in the darkness, I don't want to wait no more.' The lyrics of Van Morrison may not be the most obvious point of departure for a discussion of the British Museum's collection of contemporary medals. Perhaps even more unexpected is the combination of sources for the particular medal that suggested this beginning: along with Morrison's *Dweller on the Threshold* are the gateless gate of Zen Buddhism, the 'Fibonacci sequence' of numbers discovered by the medieval mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci, the trilithons of Stonehenge. What has happened to medals?!

*The Gateless Gate*, a medal made last year by Amsterdam artist Riki Mijling, exemplifies the complex ideas and intriguing forms that characterise the best modern medals. A slab of bronze only a few centimetres across, the piece is ingeniously constructed so that one part can be rotated. Opened up, the medal embraces the space around it, and its proportions, based on those found in natural forms, take on an architectural dimension, suggesting a way through into another, spiritual world. Constructed with extraordinary precision,

this medal was issued last year by the Dutch Vereniging voor Penningkunst (Art Medal Society), from which it was acquired by the British Museum. *In the Sky there is no East or West*, by the sculptor Ann Christopher, was issued in the same year by the British equivalent, the British Art Medal Society. Cast in bronze and patinated to an ethereal white, the medal has subtly differentiated edges and surfaces and

a never-ending linear incision wrapping around it. Beautiful both to look at and to hold, it evokes ideas of distance, eternity, weightlessness. This medal, like Mijling's, invites meditation.

The various societies that exist to promote medallic art are a fruitful source of new acquisitions for the British Museum's collection. The biennial congresses of the Fédération Internationale de la Médaille (FIDEM) are another great hunting ground. Each congress is accompanied by an exhibition of recent work from around the world and provides an excellent opportunity to identify potential new acquisitions. In 1992 the FIDEM congress was held in London, with the exhibition at the British Museum: 33 countries and around 600 artists were represented. Last year it was the turn of Seixal, a municipality across the River Tagus from Lisbon in the process of converting itself from a post-industrial wasteland into a thriving cultural centre. Artists from around the world



Far left: *The Gateless Gate*, by Riki Mijling, 2004; above: *In the Sky there is no East or West*, by Ann

Christopher, 2004; left: *Maria Alberta Menéres*, by José Teixeira, 2003





Right: *The Black Spot*, by Natasha Ratcliffe, 2004;  
below: *Movimento Arte Contemporânea*, by João Duarte, 2004

converged on this small town, although the Portuguese obviously predominated.

Like the Netherlands and Britain, Portugal is a country that has witnessed the production of much innovative medallic work over the last few decades. Although the forms employed may be revolutionary, they are never arbitrary. João Duarte's medal for the Movimento Arte Contemporânea Gallery in Lisbon encloses ten ball-bearings in a series of interlocking perspex discs to commemorate the tenth anniversary of this showcase for modern art. José Teixeira also uses the transparency of perspex in his medal for a school named after the educationalist Maria Alberta Menéres, its form suggestive of learning. Both can be taken apart and reassembled. Very different but equally startling is *How the World perceives the US*, a medal by American artist James Malone Beach, which I first saw at the 2002 FIDEM congress in Paris, that adopts the visual language of the strip cartoon to make its

point. *Tsuba II* by Ireland's Eamon Gray uses the tradition of the Japanese sword-guard to comment on modern warfare.

If the forms are new, the functions of these medals remain those of the historical medals now in the British Museum's unrivalled collection: commemorating anniversaries, serving as prizes, making political comments. The use of the medium for more personal statements on the part of artists also has a long tradition, with French medallists of the late 19th century the first to make medals that were self-contained works of art. With the demolition of artistic boundaries that followed the Second World War, medals also discovered a new freedom on which today's artists continue to build.

Have some developed so far that they can no longer be called medals? Although we may all think we know what a medal is, the definition has varied considerably in the 450 years since the first medals were made in Renaissance Italy. By the 16th century the Italian word '*medaglia*' was used to indicate a wide range of objects, including jewels, coins and prints, which were not necessarily circular, metal or two-sided. The historical medals now in the collection of the Museum's Department of Coins and Medals conform to a more recent, narrower definition. Yet even these vary enormously, in the methods of their manufacture, the forms applied to them, and the functions they were intended to fulfil: cast medals from Renaissance Italy suggesting an individual's virtue by juxtaposing a portrait with an allegorical figure; struck medals from the 17th-century Netherlands evoking national hubris by showing the French king Louis XIV – the sun king – falling from his chariot; engraved medals from 18th-century Scotland commemorating victory in the game of curling and consisting almost entirely of text.

Whatever definition is chosen for the medal, the characteristic that remains constant is the very intimate link with the individual derived from their scale. Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* can be experienced on an individual level; we can all approach it and touch it – and yet its size means that we are always sharing it with countless others. The smaller sculptures that we

Right: *How the World perceives the US*, by James Malone Beach, 2001;  
below: the two sides of *Tsuba II*, by Eamon Gray, 2002



call medals are also shared, for they are generally produced in editions, and yet when one is holding a medal in one's hand, the experience is intensely personal. The sculptural relief that is a feature of traditional medals has led some commentators to place medallic art somewhere between two and three dimensions, but it is perhaps closer to four, for time is an integral part of the medallic experience, built into the very form itself. No amount of peripheral vision can allow a medal to be experienced at any one moment. It must be turned – and turned again – before its various elements are discerned and

their significance understood. Today's abandonment of the old constraints has increased the importance of the fourth dimension: an appreciation of *The Black Spot* by young British artist Natasha Ratcliffe is dependent on the sequential reading of the two sides and the edge. The use of moving parts, as in *The Gateless Gate* and the Portuguese medals, has further increased this aspect, with the medals themselves taking different forms at different times.

If for many in modern western society art has replaced religion as the principal expression of

the spiritual life, the talismanic quality of the medal makes its adoption by modern artists as a vehicle for some of their innermost thoughts highly appropriate. Indeed, looked at in this way, the contemporary medal becomes an especially valid expropriation of an established medium, exhibiting a more profound use of the form than many in the past: the less-than-spiritual promotion of a cruel tyrant as a virtuous paragon (the Italian Renaissance again springs to mind), the commemoration of a bloody military campaign, the celebration of an ability to slide stones over ice.

All artistic media have undergone transformations in modern times. The artists who make medals have led a centuries-old tradition in directions that can sometimes leave their roots virtually indiscernible. But the link between the visual and the tactile remains constant, and it is this sensory combination that stimulates journeys of the mind. There is no need to remain, like Van Morrison's Dweller, 'standing in the darkness'.

*Contemporary medals in the British Museum's collection can be seen by appointment in the Department of Coins and Medals study room (tel. 020 7323 8607). For the British Art Medal Society, visit [www.bams.org.uk](http://www.bams.org.uk) or telephone 020 7323 8260.*

