

Visual thinking

The sculptural medals of Geer Steyn

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AT THE PRESENT MOMENT Geer Steyn (b. 1945) is one of the most prominent representatives of the sculptural medal in the Netherlands.¹ In the work of this artist, large sculptures and medals are of equal importance. This is unique in the world of Netherlandish sculpture, as, for most sculptors who practice both disciplines, medals have another, quite different status.

Steyn's sculptures and medals are on display in the Museum Beelden aan Zee in The Hague from 13 February until 15 May 2016, in an exhibition that brings together both early and recent work and reveals the artist's unceasing quest for sculptural excellence. For the occasion Steyn has designed a new medal for the museum (fig. 1). A book has also been published, containing a discussion of Steyn's work and a catalogue of his sculptures and medals.² This therefore seems to be the right moment to evaluate Geer Steyn's importance as an artist and as a professor at the Koninklijke Academie and to highlight the strong impulse that he has given to the continuation of a sculptural tradition in Dutch medallic art.

Geer Steyn was attracted to sculpture from a young age, studying history of art during the daytime and in the evening working in the Amsterdam studio of Arie Teeuwisse (1919-93), a talented sculptor of historical figures and animals who also made some medals.³ There he met many artists, such as the well-known Dutch sculptors Jan Meefout (1915-93) and Cor Hund (1915-2008), and he soon developed a desire to become more experienced in this particular discipline. He therefore became a student of sculpture for five years from 1968, opting to attend the Rijksakademie, where he was a pupil of Piet Esser (1914-2004), an eminent teacher of sculpture and medallic art.⁴ At the academy, Esser had succeeded Professor Jan Bronner (1881-1972), who had established Dutch sculpture as a free and independent discipline, emancipating it from its strong connection with architecture. At the hands of his mentor Steyn developed a taste for making medals and

became aware of how much the small scale of this type of work satisfied him. His first medals date from 1970 and are sensitively modelled portraits of women from his circle, followed by portraits of other relatives and friends. The influence of his teacher's style is visible in this early work (fig. 2).

In 1973 Steyn finished his training and was awarded the silver Prix de Rome. He continued his studies abroad, for, as he has put it himself, he was desirous of 'hearing another story about sculpture. The Dutch side about modelling I know, it nourished me and raised me artistically. Now I am open for another mentality'.⁵ In the Vienna studio of sculptor Fritz Wotruba (1907-75), Steyn trained for a year in carving stone. This resulted in a series of sculptures under the heading, 'Sculpture as a form of serial thinking'. From this period also dates a medal bearing the portrait of Wotruba (fig. 3), one of the pioneers of modern sculpture alongside Henry Moore (1898-1986), Alberto Giacometti (1901-66) and Marino Marini (1901-80).⁶

Back in the Netherlands, Geer Steyn became a teacher at the evening school of the Academy of Industrial Design at Eindhoven, where his first pupil was Jos Reniers (b. 1948), who was to become a celebrated sculptor and medallist in his own right. Later Steyn taught at the teacher's school of the Rietveldacademie at Amsterdam, and from 1980 in the sculpture section of the Koninklijke Academie at The Hague, along with fellow sculptor and medallist Frank Letterie (b. 1931). In the meantime he received his first commissions, and in this way his body of work of sculptures and medals started to develop. Steyn has summarised his teaching activities with the words: 'My own work, the fundamental and never-ending wrestling, the notion that things can be done differently, opens a perspective on one's growth. My own sculptural development is not static. Teaching is a confrontation in which the student has always the final say, even when I think I am right'.⁷ Although the teaching at the Koninkli-



1. Steyn: *Museum Beelden aan Zee*, 2015, terracotta, 80 x 85mm.

jke Academie was directed towards sculpture, Steyn managed also to interest his pupils in medals:

During the year we formed a medal club with a small number of students. In their spare time they made medals that were discussed once a month by the group. We spent complete evenings in this activity, it developed into a true passion. In June the sessions were brought to an end with a home-cooked dinner. During this meeting I presented my own 'year medal' ('jaarpemning') to every participant. The feeling of solidarity was of great importance.⁸

A number of pupils such as Barbara Kletter, Mirjam Mieras, Elly Baltus, Pauline Hoeboer and Lina Hodoroaba became skilled medallists, all creating medals with open minds and the

concept occupying a central position. All limitations in shape, material, technique and content were abandoned, and packaging and presentation sometimes became an integral part of the total – an idea that Geer Steyn had introduced with his own medals. Barbara Kletter recalled the following memories:

Geer was the most versatile teacher who acquainted us with the diverse appearance of sculptural art, substantive and technical ... In the second year the many aspects of designing a medal were brought into play ... The 1997 commission from the Vereniging voor Penningkunst to create an experimental medal – resulting in *Uitdijend Heelal (Expanding Universe)* – I most certainly received thanks to my understanding of the diverse aspects of sculptural art that Geer had taught us passionately. Apart from technique,



2. Steyn: *Titia*, 1972,
terracotta, 74mm.



3. Steyn: *Wotruba*, 1973,
terracotta, 78mm.





4. Steyn: *Brecht*, 1976, terracotta, 62mm.

scale and material, these involve the 'intimate detail opposing the grand gesture' and the 'placing' of several meanings: in space, but also searching between tradition and renewal ...⁹

As a teacher at the academy, Geer Steyn belonged to the tradition established by his two predecessors. Like Bronner and Esser, he gave attention to the idea and the structure of the medal and therefore strengthened the interest of students in this medium, thus creating the next generation of medallists with their groundbreaking ideas.

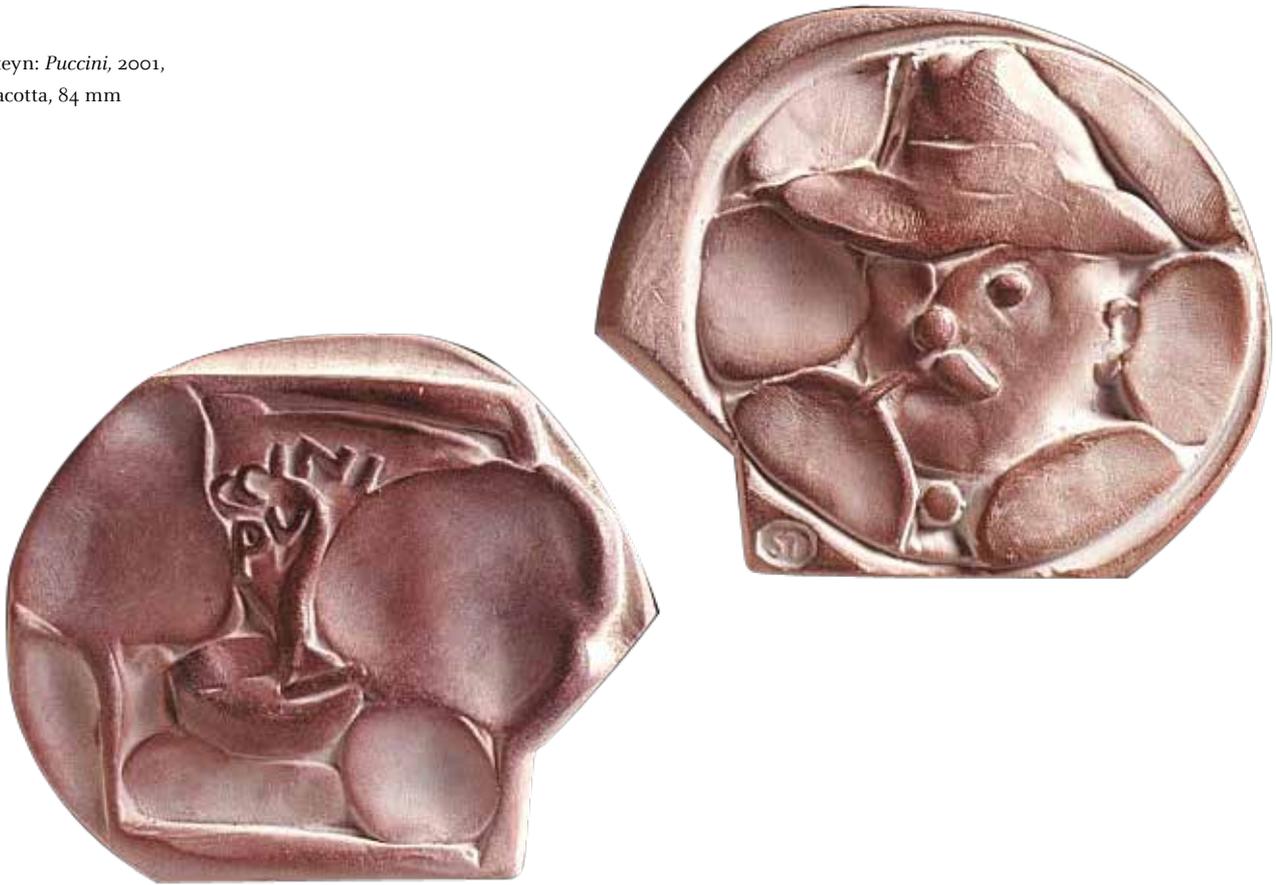
Turning to Steyn's work as an artist, in the year 2015 his medallic oeuvre numbered over 125 pieces. New medals are added every year, demonstrating that the artist – now seventy years of age – is still fully engaged in the creative process. He consistently goes his own

way, with the concept of 'thinking sculpturally' as the foundation of all his work, both sculptures and medals.

As a medallist, Steyn has undergone an interesting personal development. His early medals clearly show the 'imprint' of his mentor Esser; these are strikingly modelled portraits of people close to the artist. Very soon new themes were added, and at the same time the search for a new style began. His interest in literature and music resulted in a series of portraits of authors and composers, including Goethe, Baudelaire, Brecht, Flaubert, Joyce, Mahler and Puccini (figs 4, 5). With these medals, often made in several versions, the process of striving for strong forms is very visible and the concept of 'sculptural thinking' clearly present, with the artist working to discover how far the concept may be taken.¹⁰ Around 1980 Steyn departed defini-

FEATURE

5. Steyn: *Puccini*, 2001,
terracotta, 84 mm



6. Steyn: *Jellyfish*, 2003,
terracotta, 72mm.



7. Steyn: *Bat*, 2005, terracotta, 74mm.



8. Steyn: *Freud*, 1993, terracotta, 62mm.





9. Steyn: *Picasso*, 2003, bronze, 59 x 61 mm.

tively from the well-trodden path and started to build medallic designs from separate elements, with the composition of each medal now determined by its subject. The idea of a sculptural experience at a small scale has been explored in depth in the medals that Steyn has made since.

In 1983 the first 'year medal' came into being, with Steyn beginning the habit of choosing an animal, insect or bird as a topic for an annual medal. An unexpected encounter with nature stands at the beginning of the process and supplies inspiration. Then, when the medal is finished, there is the act of giving the medals to friends and acquaintances, a ritual that takes place every year and has a deep meaning for the artist. These *jaarpenningen* are usually made of either bronze or terracotta. The terracotta examples are coloured in order to reinforce the plastic effect and to provide extra accents and

contrasts (figs 6, 7).

From 1993 a series entitled *People who dominated the 20th century* was produced, with Sigmund Freud, Maria Callas, Samuel Beckett, Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh and Albert Einstein depicted on medals in extremely original ways (figs 8-10). Here again packaging came to play an important role, and the additional space this provided was used to convey extra information, enabling the medal to develop further its meaning.

Most of Steyn's medal work has been made on his own initiative, but in addition medals have been commissioned by individuals and institutions. For Steyn, a medal is like chamber music: a small object with gigantic impact. It is a visualised gesture: you hand it over to another person. It has intimacy and thoughtfulness; it does not recognise institutions – it is a



10. Steyn: *Einstein*, 2013, terracotta, 79 x 78mm.

11. Steyn: *Berte, the first tooth*, 2000, terracotta, 65mm.

no-man's-land. The maker is forced to supply a definition of his own for the phenomenon that is the medal. For this artist, it has to be two-sided, with sculptural thinking providing an extra intensity.

When it comes to the relationship between sculptures and medals, the artist says:

My medals are directly modelled by the hand, and their sculptural value can be judged from close distance, but also from further away. The proportion of my medals compared to the other work has the character of breathing in as against breathing out. The introvert opposed to the extrovert, almost as winter and summer. One cannot be without the other ... My small sculptures, such as *The Storytellers* in terracotta and those of my family, Berte and Mariken, are not big in centimetres, but I always try to achieve a monumentality

that works out well from a distance. This is what medals and sculptures have in common. One and the same way of placing matter in space, indeed as breathing in and out.¹¹

Steyn's statement indicates that his sculptures and medals originate from the same principle and are equally important to him as far as sculptural thinking is concerned: every sculptural statement is in fact an opening to a succeeding work, independent of its size. A small medal can be monumental, in the same way as a huge sculpture, and this is what the artist achieves in his work time and again. Steyn likes to make series of sculptures as well as of medals. For some years he portrayed his daughter Berte as a child in both genres. In this way a series of works was created, which records her growing up. In both types of work the same means of



12. Steyn: *Berte, 5 years old*, 2004, terracotta, 65mm.

13. Steyn: *Berte, 2 years old*, 2001, terracotta, 140 x 140 x 150mm.

expression can be found: the minimal use of accents, such as a small spot to suggest a nose, a mouth or an ear. The face is flattened and the angle at which it is placed is important. Medals and sculptures show Berte when she was born in 1999, when she was one and acquired her first tooth in 2000, as well as when she became two, five, seven and thirteen years of age (figs 11-15). Steyn has also sometimes designed a medal as the starting point for a large relief. An example is *Boerhaave*, made for the Boerhaave Medical Centre in Amsterdam in 1999 (figs 16, 17). Herman Boerhaave (1668-1738) was one of Europe's most famous physicians and a professor of medicine at Leiden. The obverse of the medal shows the portrait that is repeated in the relief, whilst the reverse carries a reference to medicine through its depiction of the hatching of a snake.

Geer Steyn was shaped at a time when Dutch medallic art was undergoing a veritable blossoming. He knew how to make use of the solid basis with which he and his teachers had equipped him and to develop it into an independent, unique perception. His motto is 'the sculptural medal, a way of visual thinking'. ^M

14. Steyn: *Berte, 7 years old*, 2006, terracotta, 160 x 100 x 70mm.





15. Steyn: *Berte*, 13 years old, 2012, terracotta, 160 x 150 x 70mm.



16. Steyn: *Boerhaave*, 1999, terracotta, 60 x 65mm.



17. Steyn: *Boerhaave*, 1999,
bronze, 100 x 100 x 25cm.

NOTES

1. For an introduction to the artist's work and thinking, see Geer Steyn, 'The value of imperfection. My work', *Médailles* (1993), pp. 78-83. The term 'sculptural medal' is used in the present article to differentiate this type of work from engineered and fabricated medals, for which various contemporary Netherlands artists are renowned. A version of this article appeared in *De Beeldenaar*, xl, 1 (January – February 2016), pp. 5-10.
2. Hans Sizoo *et al.*, *Geer Steyn. Beelden – Penningen* (Zwolle, 2016). The book contains a catalogue of medals by the present author.
3. J.P.W. Meefout *et al.*, *Arie Teeuwisse 71* (Bilthoven, 1990).
4. J. Teeuwisse *et al.*, Piet Esser. *Beeldhouwer en medailleur* (Leiden, 1996); J. Teeuwisse *et al.*, *V.P.S. Esser. Monografieën van het Sculptuur Instituut 2* (Zwolle 2006).
5. Sizoo, *Geer Steyn*, p. 16.
6. O. Breicha, *Fritz Wotruba Werkverzeichnis* (St Gallen, 2002), p. 10.
7. Sizoo, *Geer Steyn*, p. 20.
8. Sizoo, *Geer Steyn*, p. 28.
9. A. Nieuwendam, 'Geer Steyn – Passie en Ruimte. Lovend afscheid en opening', *Muntkoerier*, xl, 12 (December 2011), pp. 60-61.
10. A. Nieuwendam, 'Geer Steyn in Museum Beelden aan Zee. Beelden en penningen in Museum Beelden aan Zee', *Muntkoerier*, xlv, 12 (December 2015), pp. 44-7.
11. Personal communication by email, December 2015.