

# Geer Steyn. The secret of medal making

Arnold Nieuwendam

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## CREATING MEDALS

The sculptor and medallist Geer Steyn (1945) had a retrospective exhibition in the Museum Beelden aan Zee in Schevingen (province South Holland) from 12 February until 16 May 2016. The exhibition featured both sculptures and medals from the artist as well as a tenfold designs for medals. There are no landscape or socially engaged medals; his subjects are human beings and animals. He has made over 10.0000 designs, many of which have been destroyed. In fact, his total oeuvre consists of 125 artworks. Steyn maintains that destruction is part of the process of creation. In this way only the best models remain. For me a reason to have a conversation with him in his studio about designing a medal with variations (fig. 1). From experience I know how difficult it is to assess how medallists go from one version to another in order to reach the final result. Steyn was willing to talk about precisely this interesting aspect of his thought-process and designing, something that is exceptional. On the basis of several examples we will develop this theme in depth further on. Having been a teacher until 10 May 2011 at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in The Hague, the artist is very well able to explain complicated matters. Moreover, he has consistently stretched the boundaries of medal art while also encouraging others to do so, for example with his master class *Over the Edge*<sup>(1)</sup>(2004/2005), in which he urged seven artists to think about medal art.

## VISUAL THINKING

Every artist goes through a process while designing and this applies to the actual making as well as to the careful thinking about an artwork. Steyn calls this visual thinking. What is important is to discover how far you can go and in which direction. Besides: what does the artist want to express in his or her work, what is resemblance? It doesn't matter to Steyn whether it is a medal or a sculpture, what matters is the meaning of the form; a form which he changes by applying small variations in order to approach his subject closer and closer. By way of example he told me about the medal Brecht: *'You first get the resemblance right, but nonetheless you get simultaneously further removed from the person. Until I became furious and in my frustration I flattened the medal with my thumb, as a result of which the face became livelier because of the empty surface that was created. The rear part swelled and in that way I caught Brecht the way I see him. All of a sudden the medal had the expressiveness that I had been looking for.'* On the other hand, things should also consciously be omitted. The material is applied in flat surfaces and small balls and some are completely empty in order to enhance the image. Moreover, on all Steyn's medals there is a small incuse with the letters ST, which stand for his name.

Of the French writer Gustave Flaubert<sup>(2)</sup> the medallist modelled a portrait on the effigy with an imposing moustache, which was later cast in bronze (fig. 2). The triangular composition is well balanced on the surface. The round nose makes the features softer. On the reverse there is a female figure that portrays Madame Bovary (fig. 2a). She is kicking the letter R in the circumscription FLAUBERT, as a result of which it tilts. Literally and figuratively she kicks the writer, who once sighed: *'Madame Bovary, c'est moi.'* Right under the B you can see his thumbprint, which appears on several creations. It is a signature of sorts of the maker. In the second terracotta model of Flaubert there are several layers. Steyn points out that the bronzes and the terracotta are equal. We see imperfection because of the crackle with which artist brings to life the artist's vulnerability, his physiology and personality (fig. 3). The rough surface makes it seem unfinished. It is not. When it would be worked on more it wouldn't be quite as articulate. It is also noteworthy that Steyn with this piece goes from a closed to an open form, the circle is broken up -something which can be seen in other medals as well. The writer, who rarely used the word I in his work, searched for depth just like Steyn.

Of the terracotta model of the medal Sigmund Freud<sup>(3)</sup> the edge is more irregular (fig. 4) than is the case with the polished bronze model (fig. 5). An composition of pieces of clay that make up for a medal, just like Freud's analyses that combine bits of information to provide an insight. The twelve small islands of clay form together the composition of the portrait, in which no eye can be seen, but just a glass of his

glasses. The irregular edge implies disintegration. The hat is the horizontal edge, which together with the slanting stripe of his coat makes for a strong composition with the glasses, the nose and the mouth as the central point. The slanting stripe reappears on the reverse with letters that form the name FREUD (fig. 4a). In the emptiness on the reverse there is nothing to analyze so that the attention is drawn to the letters of his name. These are placed in a quarter of a circle. The appearance of the bronze and the terracotta model are very different. (fig. 5). Details are sharpened and the reverse is made a bit emptier (fig. 5a) Freud left Austria when it was occupied by Nazi-Germany and settled in the United Kingdom. He is still seen as one of the most influential psychologists and thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The painter Matisse<sup>(4)</sup> is famous for his boldly coloured paintings and paper cuttings. Besides these he also designed stained glass windows. He was part of the fauvist movement (fig. 6). At an advanced age he suffered from several ailments and could not stand anymore. Matisse's disease was the reason why he drew doves or models seated on a chair or his bed. He also cut paper shapes, which were applied to a wall by an assistant. On the obverse of the terracotta medal the French artist can be seen drawing. On his right there is one of his beloved doves. Steyn chose a rectangular model and a bold patina as most paintings too are rectangular and very colourful. Also, on this medal you can clearly distinguish his glasses shaped by a small round ball of clay. The reverse is different, on the big terracotta model an incuse can be seen with the word Matisse composed in the shape of a mountain (with the letters MA and letters TISSE (fig. 6a) On the second and smaller design, made in silver, he made a large indentation which displays only his portrait (fig. 7). On the reverse there is a small dove in a lower level, with the letters MATISSE around it (fig. 7a). Finally, the medal was placed in a pretty box, because the container, the box, is important in the presentation of his work (fig. 8).

Steyn modelled a portrait of the Irish writer James Joyce<sup>(5)</sup>. The first design with a rather realistic image, is a version of 90 millimetre (fig. 9), which eventually led to a much smaller model of 45 millimetre with a hat facing left (fig. 10). Small circles of clay together form the face. Joyce was blind in one eye. In order to suggest this it was rendered smaller, so that no eye can be seen while simultaneously the introvert character of the author is stressed. Steyn seeks to bring out the personality and this succeeds better with the smaller edition. On both sides there is his inseparable umbrella with the text JAMES JOYCE placed along the edge (fig. 9a and 10a). There are small differences in the text between the editions; the first one has the letters incised while the second one has them modelled on top and the dates are left out as well. The second edition of Joyce is generally simpler and more sober. Even though more flat surfaces are added, the image is more articulate. Steyn seeks to add another layer; he sees that as part of *visual thinking*. The same holds true for the umbrella, which comes about by modelling its surroundings, which in this case reveals a great deal about the writer.

A portrait of Gustav Mahler was created<sup>(6)</sup> facing to the right (fig. 11). He was considered one of the foremost conductors of his time, but above all he was a composer. The background of the design is neutral with softer lines, on the second one tension is created through the different surfaces and the triangular composition in which his face is modelled, which makes the composer appear fiercer. The lines add an extra dimension so that he is not a mere physical representation. You can read his medal portrait as music, wringing. Just like the character of the music of the composer, the portrait wrings itself into the background and it is this that the sculptor wants to stress. The date 1860-1911 on both sides depicts a horizon and the composer is propped against the rail with his name MAHLER along the edge in two syllables (fig. 11a and 12a). The outer edge is uneven and a bit heightened. The two sides show minimal differences. Every detail has been reflected upon and everything has a function, something that might easily escape one's attention. As the final version the designer opted for the second, larger model.

Almost everybody knows the operas *La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madame Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini<sup>(7)</sup> (fig. 13). Steyn admits: '*Puccini's music inspires me, he seduces me in a matter of speaking. It sounds at first cheap, almost to sing along with, you fall in love with it.*' Every year Steyn visits Torre del Lago in Italy, where the villa of Puccini is located. Since 1930 opera festivals have been organized in honour of the composer in and around the villa. Puccini was a chain-smoker, keen on hunting and eating. On the first version you see the famous Italian with a hat, moustache, analyzing eye and cigarette. The portrait in the second design is the same, but looks stronger, because the edge is broken. A large chunk has been taken out of the circle, which once again creates tension (fig. 14). On the reverse of the creation an ashtray can be seen with cigarette smoke of the chain-smoker with his name on the inside: PUCCINI (fig. 14a).

A small box contains the portrait of the psycho-dermatologist Herman Musaph<sup>(8)</sup>; it is an Award

that is handed out yearly in his field of study. You can see here a first sketch (fig. 15). The term psychodermatologist was unknown to me, but while reading his life-story he impressed me as an engaging person, who was far ahead of his time and speciality. He was born in Amsterdam, where he later settled as a general practitioner. After World War II he studied psychiatry and psychoanalyses. In 1946 the doctor became head of the medical team of the Aletta Jacobshuis in Amsterdam, where he focused on sexual problem-cases. From 1951 he worked on the dermatology ward in the Binnengasthuis hospital. Furthermore, he published books on his area of expertise that now are considered standard. He was also chief editor of the NVSH series 'Sex libris'. (NVSH is the Dutch Organisation for Sexual reform, which has been very important to the Netherlands). The Herman Musaph Institute has been named after him (focuses on psycho-dermatology). In the final version a portrait is displayed of Musaph facing left and when you look well you can distinguish the shape of a house that outline his face (fig.16). His thoughts and personality are as firm and solid as a house, Steyn apparently wants to imply. '*People who receive this medal belong to the house of Musaph,*' Steyn says. It's exactly all these little details that make it so interesting to assess a medal. On the reverse his portrait is outlined in silhouette in thin lines. And on a lower surface: HERMAN MUSAPH 1915-1992 (fig. 16a).

Several versions were made of Maria Callas<sup>(9)</sup>, *the voice of the century* (fig. 17). It is part of a series of medal portraits *People who defined the twentieth century*. On the first portrait Maria has a somewhat longer nose. In this version she is still young and gazes at the world seemingly unconcerned. On the reverse a large dog can be seen, her poodle with above that the word: CALLAS (fig. 17a). On the second model Maria Calles appears withdrawn, somewhat stocky and her nose is modelled much shorter so that she seems older (fig. 18). In this period Callas suffered from depression and took too much medicine, which most likely caused her premature death. The large dog has been reduced on this creation to a small poodle, placed on an almost empty surface, which represents her loneliness (fig. 18a). It is precisely this last reverse that says so much about the singer. By listening to Callas' voice singing opera and reading about her work, Steyn tries to fathom her and record something of her life on a small surface; yet another example of *visual thinking*.

In the Netherlands Rembrandt van Rijn<sup>(10)</sup> is a household name. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn was a Dutch painter, etcher and drawer. He is considered as one of the greatest painters and etchers in European art and as the foremost Dutch master from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. His best-known work is the *Night Watch* from 1642. Personally I consider *The Jewish Bride* a highlight, besides his self-portraits. There are approximately hundred painted and twenty etched self-portraits, which gave an impression of his appearance. At a young age he is represented with much bravura and his final as a chastened human being. One of these portraits was used by Steyn as an example, which he modelled en-face. On one of his first designs the painter looks you straight in the eye (fig. 19). After that there are some eighty variations without reverse. The left side is almost empty and the eye is left out as well as a side that represents shadow. Here one is shown that does have a reverse (fig. 20). This design shows subtle differences and on the reverse next to the text REMBRANDT there is a small empty surface, that represents a painting (fig. 20a). With the final creation, which is made in silver, everything falls into place (fig. 21). On the reverse there is a small painting with a self-portrait, with as circumscription the name: REMBRANDT (fig. 21a).

Many people have seen, or at least heard about, the theatre play *Waiting for Godot*: it was written by the writer and poet Samuel Beckett<sup>(11)</sup>. Of this Irish Nobel laureate the medallist created a large design of 75 mm in diameter (fig. 22), and ends with a completely different smaller model of 60 mm (fig. 23). The portrait on the obverse is set in a square, which is placed in a circle. Protruding chin and a pointed nose. The patina and the use of the light and dark reinforce the composition. On the reverse the square shape can well be distinguished while the edge is imperfect. The image on the reverse refers to *The narrator*, a series of sculptures on which the medallist has been working for years, about which more will follow. Steyn says: '*I want to show that the shape of the narrator says something about the person Beckett. It refers to himself, his lifelong theme.*' With the smaller design the surfaces around the face are reinforced, which stresses the portrait. On both reverses there is a barstool, as metaphor for Beckett. A circle around the barstool reads: BECKETT 1906 1989 (fig. 22a and 23a).

Albert Einstein<sup>(12)</sup> appeals to everyone's imagination. The physicist and inventor became above all famous because of his two relativity theories: the special relativity-theory of 1905 and the general one of 1915. In subsequent years he expanded the relativity-theory by including gravity. He published more than 33 scientific and more than 150 non-scientific works. In his later years Einstein wrote extensively about

philosophical and political subjects. The medallist made three versions without specifying which one he prefers. A rather small square medal with the portrait of Einstein filling the effigy.

The first Einstein medal bears the title *Annus mirabilis* 1955 (fig. 24). The portrait can be seen facing right. The back of the head is large as if Steyn wants to stress the size of the cranium. His inseparable pipe and name in the smoke on the reverse (fig. 24a).

The second one features Einstein as scientist and the Nobel Prize in 1922: *Recognition as scientist and Nobel-laureate* (fig. 25). The surface appears to be cut in two by a sloping line, in which way the scholar is represented with clarity and strength. On the left bottom side the formula E-MC. Again his pipe and name are placed on the reverse (fig. 25a). Above and below four small incuses reveal 1879-1955, his birth date and year of his death.

On the third the older scholar can be seen as *The enlightened activist* (fig. 26). It's a friendly, resigned and chastened portrait. Again his pipe and name appear on the reverse (fig. 26a). It's an impressive series, in which Steyn used all his techniques relating to compositions with surfaces, balls, lines and unusual shapes.

When the interview took place Steyn was working on a portrait of Fellini<sup>(13)</sup>, an old man with a hat at the end of his life. It looks like the filmmaker is thinking with nostalgia about the women in his career. Steyn has portrayed him mildly. His best-known movie is probably *La dolce vita* (1969), featuring the famous sensual fountain scene, a sensuality recaptured on the reverse of the medal (fig. 27a). Personally I think *La Strada*, with his wife Giulietta Masina and Anthony Quinn in the lead roles, is his most gripping movie. Fellini is considered to be one of the most outstanding film directors of the twentieth century. Fellini's movies are usually psychological or social drama's in which a imaginative person, often based on Fellini himself, sets out on a search for the meaning of his/her life. This search is marked by frequent use of memories, dreams, fantasies and obsessions. In very much the same way Steyn too sets out in search of Fellini's character. Here only the last version of eighty variations is displayed. The development goes from round to square while also the lines in the profile get sharper, which is reinforced by the patina. The cheek has become softer as if Steyn wants to underline his mildness at an older age. The buttocks on the obverse are more angular, with on her back the movie screen cut out on which the name Fellini is placed. Around the word CINEMA is written on six loose surfaces.

## THE SECRET OF CREATING

Since his academy-days Steyn has created a style all his own. In his series annual medals, which his friends are fortunate enough to receive from him every year, this development can clearly be distinguished. The tactile aspect is paramount. He has a preference for famous artists, writers, painters, musicians and scientists. This is obvious from his series *People who defined the twentieth century*, some of which have been described in this article. Steyn has been able to add an extra dimension by posing the question: what is resemblance? Having worked and developed as an artist for 50 years makes that possible. The portraits that the medallist models are always recognizable. He makes medal creations that everyone in the world can understand. It's the result of a lifelong experience.

By reducing the size of a medal, by changing its edge and omitting things, Steyn's creations become more intense and gain in expressiveness. Mahler being one of his favourites, he knows all his symphonies. He has studied the work of Picasso and Matisse, of the writers whose portraits he modelled, always seeking to highlight a specific aspect of the person, such as a hat, cigarette smoke or the small poodle of Maria Calla on an almost empty surface. All these are examples of visual thinking.

He has also been working for years on a sculptural series *The narrator*. Initially realistic (fig. 28) the series became more abstract as he went along (fig. 29). While Steyn's medal art developed towards strong stylized forms, his sculptural art eventually became completely abstract. Steyn forces you to observe and listen. If you don't do that, you don't get the story. In fact Steyn is himself a narrator; that is his particular strength. According to the sculptor the abstract form refers to itself based on figuration.

In this article the way the artist goes from one subject to the next has been described. It is an insight that very few artists are willing to share; it is the secret of creating. In the latter versions of his medals a deeper layer has been added, which cannot easily be distinguished by the superficial viewer. By comparing text and images their secret is revealed. This holds true for other artists as well, provided that they have something to say and don't just make pretty medals, like so many others who miss this extra dimension in their work. Steyn, as well as some other medallist, distinguish themselves in this respect.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Ellen van Heijningen for translating the article into English. My thanks also go to Geer Steyn and Coen Linnekamp for their valuable advice. Photographs taken by Arnold Nieuwendam; nr 11, 12, 13 and 15 by Tom Haartsen. The copyright rests with Geer Steyn.

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## NOTES

1. Steyn, G., Voigtmann C., *Over the Edge*, 2006. Vereniging voor Penningkunst. Uitg: Waanders: ISBN 90 400 8193 x NUR 640. Also various notes over the years in *De MUNTkoerier* and *De Beeldenaar*. Nieuwendam, A. Geer Steyn and his *Over the Edge*. *THE MEDAL*, 51, AUTUMN 2007, page 38 t/m 46. Also various notes over the years about Steyn by Nieuwendam in *De MUNTkoerier*, see bibliography.
2. Gustave Flaubert (Rouen, 12 December 1821 - Canteleu, 8 May 1880) was a French author. His best-known work is *Madame Bovary*.
3. Sigmund Schlomo Freud (Freiberg (Moravië), 6 mei 1856 - Londen, 23 September 1939) was a neurologist from Austria-Hungary and the founder of psychoanalyses.
4. Henri Matisse (Le Cateau-Cambrésis, 31 December 1869 – Cimiez, near Nice, 3 November 1954) was a French painter and sculptor. He belonged to the French fauves.
5. James Augustine Aloysius Joyce (Dublin, 2 February 1882 – Zürich, 13 January 1941) was an Irish writer who is considered as one of the most important authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His main work is the novel *Ulysses*.
6. Gustav Mahler (Kaliště (then the village Kalischt near the town Iglau (Jihlava, where there is a museum dedicated to him), 7 July 1860 – Vienna, 18 May 1911) was Jewish composer and conductor born in Bohemia and raised in Austria.
7. Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini (Lucca, 22 December 1858 – Brussels, 29 November 1924) was an Italian composer.
8. Herman Musaph, psychodermatologist. Born in Amsterdam, Nederland, 07-01-1915. Died in Amsterdam, 18-11-1992.
9. Maria Anna Sofia Cecilia Kalogeropoulos (Greek: Μαρία Άννα Σοφία Καικιλία Καλογεροπούλου), better known under her artist name Maria Callas (Greek: Μαρία Κάλλας) (Brooklyn (New York), 2 December 1923 – Paris, 16 September 1977) was one of the most famous opera singers after the war. See also the website [www.callasintclub.com](http://www.callasintclub.com).
10. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (Leiden, 15 July 1606 – Amsterdam, 4 October 1669) was a Dutch painter, etcher and drawer.
11. Samuel Barclay Beckett (Foxrock, Dublin, 13 April 1906 - Paris, 22 December 1989) was An Irish playwright and poet.
12. Albert Einstein (Ulm, 14 March 1879 – Princeton (New Jersey), 18 April 1955) was a German-Swiss-American theoretical physicist and inventor. He is generally considered one of the most important scientist of all times, along with Isaac Newton en James Clerk Maxwell.
13. Federico Fellini (Rimini, 20 January 1920 – Rome, 31 October 1993) was an Italian filmmaker and director.

Some facts from Wikipedia.

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## SUMMARY

The sculptor Geer Steyn (b.1945) has created over 125 medals and many bronze statues. Apart from being a sculptor, he is a medallist and a former teacher at the Royal Academy of Arts in The Hague. He is the organizer in 2006 of the master class *Over the Edge*.

Arnold Nieuwendam (b.1946), a professional artist (Arnaldo), volunteers as a numismatist and is considered an expert in the field of medals, especially concerning contemporary trends. Nieuwendam organizes medal exhibitions in The Netherlands and abroad. He has written over 275 articles about art

medals. Nieuwendam is also the webmaster of an important site about medals in The Netherlands, <http://penningkunst.startpagina.nl>, which has information links all over the world.

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- 2a. *Steyn: Gustave Flaubert, 1981, rev, bronze, 70mm.*
3. *Steyn: Gustave Flaubert, 1981, obv, terracotta, 70mm.*
4. *Steyn: Sigmund Freud, 1983, obv, terracotta, 70mm.*
- 4a. *Steyn: Sigmund Freud, 1983, rev, terracotta, 70mm.*
5. *Steyn: Sigmund Freud, 1983, obv, bronze, 65mm.*
- 5a. *Steyn: Sigmund Freud, 1983, rev, bronze, 65mm.*
6. *Steyn: Henri Matisse, 1984, obv, terracotta, 50x70mm.*
- 6a. *Steyn: Henri Matisse, 1984, rev, terracotta, 50x70mm.*
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- 10a. *James Joyce (with hat), 1986, rev, terracotta, 45x90mm.*
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- 11a. *Steyn: Mahler, 1991, rev, terracotta, 75mm.*
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- 22a. *Steyn: Samuel Beckett, 1998, rev, terracotta, 75mm.*

23. Steyn: Samuel Beckett, 1998, obv, terracotta, 60mm.  
23a. Steyn: Samuel Beckett, 1998, rev, terracotta, 60mm.

24. Steyn: Einstein, 2013, obv, terracotta, 80x50 mm.  
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27. Steyn: Fellini, 2015, obv, terracotta, 80x85mm.  
27a. Steyn: Fellini, 2015, rev, terracotta, 80x85mm.

28 Steyn: De verteller (The narrator), 1984, terracotta, 120mm x 120mm x 90mm.  
29. Steyn: De verteller (The narrator), 2008, terracotta, 135 mm x 150mm x 100mm.

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