

Cherished beauty Art Medals by Tetsuji Seta

In general, medals have no payment value like coins. They are often used to commemorate a person or happenings like a battle or a wedding. In the past, medals were mainly coin-shaped. This changed at the end of the nineteenth century, under influence of the Art Nouveau. Medals became an expression of art on their own. Still they are hand-size art objects; delicate and small. The evolution of the art medal is well visible in the works by the Japanese artist Tetsuji Seta (1960). With his medals, Seta excels at the boundaries of medallic art. No longer the shapes are closed round objects. They are intriguing, light, open and three dimensional in shape.

With his first medal he shows ants. It also can be seen as a metaphor. These little insects are repeating one's act forever; isn't it also something that counts for human beings? The medal was produced in 2006, for the British Art Medal Society BAMS. It was a big hit; Seta's name was directly established. Since that moment, Seta is amidst other creating a diary in metal. Sometimes in bronze, sometimes in silver. He wonders what makes events special. Is it a wedding, the nomination of a prize or the death of a goldfish? Therefore, he combines both events in human live, combined with happenings in nature – mainly his garden. Although both events are not linked together at first glance, on his medals he gives them a deeper meaning by merging them harmoniously.

A good example of his work is a medal he created in 2011. Seta was one of the five participants of the first Jaap van der Veen/Teylers Museum Prize for the Contemporary Art Medal. As part of the jury, I was my task to inform all participants about the decision of the jury. In the end Seta did not win the prize. He received the rejection by e-mail. Seta's medal on this occasion combines receiving the e-mail with the death of the goldfish in his garden. Are those moments really coincidence? This is most likely, but ever since that moment I feel guilty of killing the poor goldfish. Luckily, in 2017 he was nominated again and this time he won this prestigious prize. It is meant as a mid-career prize to pay tribute to someone who has produced excellent quality works of art for a number of years and with a promising and productive future.

Seta not only works on his diary in metal. Some medals are linked by theme. On one medal for instance, a green caterpillar eats leaves. On a second medal, a mantis eats the green caterpillar. He made series like 'Seasons in my garden', 'short poems' with the waka, tanka and haiku of several Japanese poets, 'finger size medals' with beauty in vegetable detail and 'greeting medals', to exchange with other artists or to sell to collectors. On his work, Seta says: 'The world is as parallel as a medal with two faces. I noticed that there is not just one world, it is plural. That is the same as a medal with two faces. We can't see both sides of a medal at the same time. We have to turn it every time. Therefore, we have an illusion that the world is one, it continues.'

Seta combines different shapes, like open circles or rectangles, with small elements he picked-up in nature. The medals are both thin and refined, the natural elements are of life-size and stunning in detail. He casts the medals by himself, in a process of which only he knows the details. In general, he creates a wax model and covers it in plaster. Afterwards, the object is heated until the wax melts and flows out. The remaining plaster is used as a mould, in which melted metal is poured. After cooling down, the plaster is removed and the raw medal remains. After refining and polishing it is ready. Seta would love to make one medal a day, but the finishing consumes too much of his time. Still, the series of medals he created is stunning and one after the other beautiful both in subject and finishing touch.

Seta is born in 1960 in Nagoya, Japan. In 1986 he graduated at Tokyo University of the Arts. Nowadays he is associate professor at Nagoya University of Arts. He is a specialist in the technique of casting. In his spare time, he is an internationally well-known artist. He created series of pictures, he painted and in 2006 he discovered the world of the medal. Over the years he won several prizes, like in 2012 the important Grand Prix of FIDEM, the international Art Medal Federation. Nature is an important element in his works. As he states himself: 'Nature is omnipresent and eternal, and to me it represents great beauty. Beauty; that' s what it comes down to in the end' .

*Teylers Museum, Haarlem. This oldest museum in the Netherlands opened its doors for the public in 1784 and shows a variety of fossils, minerals, scientific instruments and works of art, like drawings by Michelangelo. Several of Seta' s medals are included in the extended medal collection.

Jan Pelsdonk, curator of the numismatic collection of Teylers Museum, Haarlem