The Art of the Medal
Making self-portrait medals
A creative project for schools

Inspired by the work of sculptor, medal maker and founding member of the British Art Medal Society, Ron Dutton
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“The earliest medals were made in Renaissance Italy in the first half of the fifteenth century. Thinking to emulate figures from the ancient world, princes and other cultured individuals had themselves portrayed on one side of their medals, whilst the other side was generally reserved for a personal device symbolising the particular virtues with which that particular individual wished to be associated”.

British Art Medals 1982-2002

Philip Attwood
Keeper of Coins and Medals
The British Museum
The Art of the Medal: Self-portrait project

Introduction

The self-portrait medal project uses clay and plaster to create small sculptural relief pieces. It is an economical way of working and introduces the students of all ages to sculpture and working in relief modelling.

The techniques used are very simple; working in soft clay in the negative (back to front), with the process introducing new vocabulary and concepts such as convex and concave, obverse and reverse, hard and soft.

The project also creates links with other subjects such as history and design and fulfils several National Curriculum Requirements. These include teaching of pattern and texture in natural and manmade forms, the use of shape, form and space in images and artefacts and knowledge of how artists, craftspeople and designers work.

The project

The length of the project is designed to be either a morning or full day session. The session would be led by an artist and the day allows time for each student to complete a self-portrait and have a plaster cast poured. The session can accommodate between 12 and 25 students, with staff assistance.

A typical day-long session would consist of, prior to lunch, an introduction to the project with images of medals, the design of the medal, modelling of the clay and casting. The castings are left to set over lunch, and then the afternoon session is for opening, cleaning and washing the casts. It is usually possible to also make a more abstract relief using pre-selected objects or fingers; these can be cast and left to be continued at a later date with the class teacher, or even to begin the design of the reverse of the medal (see the article ‘Starting Young’ by Ron Dutton on working with young students).
Materials list

Most of the materials are low cost and re-usable. The quantities depend on how many students will be making medals.

The school will be required to supply their own materials.

**MDF boards**, approximately 6mm thick and approx. 23cm x 23cm, these for modelling the clay on.

**Modelling clay**, a 25kg pack is enough for approximately 24 clay balls.

**Dental plaster** or any other quick setting plaster, a 25kg pack is enough for approximately 25 to 40 casts (depending on the size of the cast).

**Washing up bowls**

**Flexible strips** about 6cm x 55cm; these are for wrapping around the clay casts. Something like lino could be used.

**Modelling tools**, could buy traditional tools that are usually plastic or wooden, or collect objects to be used as tools such as tea spoons, twigs etc.

**Tracing paper**

**Soft pencils / sharp pencils**

**Scrapers**, the kind used for decorating, to clean the plaster off the boards.

**Small surform file and knives**, for cleaning the rough edges of the plaster.

**Clothes pegs or bulldog clips**

**1 inch paint brushes**, for washing and cleaning clay from plaster casts.

**Paper towels or cloths**, for cleaning and drying hands and spills.

**Small mirrors**

**Aprons**

**Bin bags / bins**
A step-by-step guide of how to make a self-portrait medal

(This is supplemented with a Power Point presentation)

Modelling stage

1. Divide the clay chunks between the students in the class. Instruct the class to roll the clay on their boards into balls of approximately 8-10 cm in diameter.

2. The ball is then to be squashed flat to around 2½-3cm. If it is too thin there will not be enough depth to work into. The clay must be as circular as possible, central on the board and with straight edges.

3. Using a spoon, demonstrate the concept of convex and concave. The basic profile that will be dug from the clay will be concave.

4. Encourage the students to look at their classmates and look at the different kinds of head shapes in the room. Round-heads, egg-heads and square-heads may come out. Introducing and looking at the shapes of heads will focus the class on the shape they will be working on. It is at this time the mirrors could be used so they can focus on the shape of their own heads.

5. Instruct the class to scratch a circular line into the clay around 1½cm from the edge. This space is for the inscription which will be added later.

6. The students now start working on their portrait by drawing the shape of their face. Remind them not to go over the border line.

7. Using the tools available, the students now begin to dig out the clay.

8. Working on the face step-by-step for the facial features, nose, cheeks, eyes, eyebrows, mouth, ears and hair. This sequence enables the vocabulary and references to be adapted according to the level of the class. Hit your forehead to show how hard it is, wobbling your cheeks to show the softness, touching your hair for the texture style, its growth, spikiness, curl etc. helps with the observation. Pupils with glasses, headdress or even a few whiskers should add these additional characteristics.

9. Once the portrait is completed, work on the inscription begins. Slogans, names, nicknames, quotes, likes and birthdays are all things that could be added into the border of the clay mould. The writing needs to be added in the negative. This is completed by writing the correct way on a sheet of tracing paper, then turning it over and copying the reversed inscription onto the border with a sharp pencil. Capital letters are best as lower case can be too fiddly.
Casting Stage

1. Once the portrait and inscription are completed, wrap the flexible strip carefully round the clay and secure, this can be done with clothes pegs or bull dog clips. Make sure the pegs/clips are not placed too far down on the edge, there needs to be enough depth left for the plaster to be poured without trapping the pegs/clips. If the edges of the clay are not particularly straight, a strip of clay can be applied around the base of the lino to ensure no plaster seeps out.

2. The mixed plaster is then poured into the mould to a depth of around 2 or 3 cm. Tap the board gently to release any trapped air bubbles in the plaster.

3. If the medal is to be hung up, a piece of string can be pressed into the wet plaster at this point.

4. The plaster takes around 30 minutes to set, after which the pegs/clips can be released and the strip removed.

5. The cast can now be carefully released from the board and the clay separated from the plaster. There may be some rough edges on the plaster, these can be smoothed with a surform file, and the plaster can then be washed to clean it. If coloured paints are to be added, this can be carried out later.
INTRODUCTION
Earlier this year I spent a day working with very young children creating self-portrait medals. My interest was to introduce the children to the world of medals that is enjoyed by members of BAMS and FIDEM, and also to give them clues as to the pleasure of using clay.

As the teacher, Mrs. Brigstock, indicates below some of the concepts that we touched on were quite complex for the age group, but it was all presented as something to enjoy. You can never be sure what seeds you are sowing, but you can gain a sense that ideas are being introduced and that ‘things’ not thought of previously are being grasped.

Asking the children to tap their foreheads, to pinch and wobble their cheeks, given a little guidance, leads them to think of hard and soft. Whiskers (mine) and hair is an introduction to texture. These are some of the tactile experiences which, when utilised in medals, contribute to their particular sculptural qualities.

The ‘sausage’ referred to came about not totally as an afterthought, but with small fingers the children worked right to the edges of the discs of clay rather more than I had intended. So the ‘sausage’ or border was added to enable the names to be engraved. Mrs. Brigstock refers to this in her writing, along with the concept of ‘inside out’. Professionals take this idea of ‘inside out’ in their stride, forgetting that this is not an every-day thought of ‘ordinary folk’, let alone children of this age.

This ‘forgetting’ touches us all, and when I returned to the school I was thrilled by the efforts that the children had made in following up the day’s work. Clearly the skill and enthusiasm of the class teacher had been paramount in developing the scope of the project, but when I saw the self-portrait drawings and read Mrs. Brigstock’s report I began to think that perhaps the medal could have a more central role in the teaching of art than has been realised. The list of experiences in the National Curriculum Requirements Key Stage 1 surprised me and suggests that we may have an opportunity to publicise our interest in a wider arena than we had thought.

As for myself, there was immense pleasure in seeing the children so absorbed and enthusiastic, creating in an art form that too frequently is marginalised in the world of art.

Ron Dutton

MEDALS IN THE CLASSROOM
When Ron Dutton came into my classroom to give a workshop on medal making on 20 March this year, the children he came to visit belonged to a class of thirty with an age range from four to seven years. To carry out practical work with such a large number of young children is a daunting task for anyone, but there were several adult helpers on hand.

Ron had asked me in advance to collect materials for mark making and modelling, and so we put together a selection of fir cones, shells, twigs, pieces of fur, sponges, stones, old pencils and modelling tools on each group of tables.

He began the workshop by letting children handle some of his medals, telling them stories about them, and explaining how he had to work ‘inside out’ to get the right effects. This was very successful and the children appreciated being allowed to touch and feel the features on the medals. In trying to explain how the marks had been made, he asked them to ‘blow up’ their faces and try to imagine what they would look like inside out. This was a difficult concept!

The first practical activity was experimental. Each child was given a small piece of clay to squash, knead and pattern with fingers and pencils, to see how soft and pliable the clay was and how easily it marked. Next, larger pieces of clay were distributed. The task, to make a three-dimensional self-portrait, was explained and each stage of the procedure was orchestrated by Ron. He made the children feel their chins, noses, eyes, and cheeks, their eyebrows and their hair. After each feature was explored and discussed and comments and ideas were elicited from the children, they made indentations and marks using the tools provided. The Reception children (aged 4 to 5) initially needed quite a lot of help, but the older infants worked enthusiastically and with rapidly increasing independence, comparing the efficacy of different tools, standing back and considering what they had done and making changes.

Ron, meanwhile, was continuing to stress the ‘inside out’ aspect of the work, and gradually even the youngest children began to grasp this idea, feeling features on their faces and comparing them to the marks they were making on the clay.

The adults in the room, meanwhile, circulated around the groups of children, helping and encouraging small, not very strong fingers, whilst frantically working on their own medals! Ron continually toured the room,
Some of the self-portrait medals produced by the children of St John's School, Swindon.
praising work, commenting on certain features and
making suggestions.

The next stage was to roll out a ‘sausage’ of clay to
wrap around the faces. Ron asked the children to flatten
it before writing their names back to front on the clay.
This was not easy! Every Key Stage 1 teacher will tell
you how easily children reverse their letters, and how
much time they spend correcting them, but when asked
to write backwards the children experienced enormous
difficulty and had to receive a considerable amount of
help. However, paterning the remaining surround with
cases and shells and so on was very successful.

During lunchtime, Ron mixed plaster of Paris and
cast the medals, which dried in time for the afternoon
session. The faces of the children as they pulled and dug
the clay from the plaster of Paris and saw their work for
the first time was a joy to behold.

The following day the children scrubbed their plaster
faces with toothbrushes and chose whether to leave
them white or paint them silver or gold. We only had
deposit paint in those colours, but after applying it we
discovered that it clogged the finer facial features and
the children, disappointed, scrubbed it off again.
Instead, I bought some metallic spray paint which a
parent helper used with the children, and the results
were much better, although some children preferred to
leave their medals white.

The Year 1 and Year 2 children wrote quite detailed
accounts of the activity, using words and phrases they
had heard from Ron, and they pored over a copy of The
Medal that he had let us borrow and wondered out
loud how so much detail had been put into the medals
they saw there. When Ron returned to take
photographs, I think he was surprised at how much
they had remembered from the day.

This sort of first-hand experience of working with an
artist is invaluable in a primary school to teachers who
have generally had little training in the arts. It has to be
remembered that we are required to teach ten
curriculum subjects plus religious education, and as far
back as 1972 the UNESCO international survey of art
education clarified the nature of the situation in
England when it said, ‘... Art is usually taught by
general teachers without special qualifications in art.’
This is a view supported by the Gulbenkian Report of
1982, which identified a lack of (artistic) confidence
among primary teachers.

The imposition of the National Curriculum has led
to a reappraisal of our skills in the ten curriculum
subjects, and money, time and training has gone into
increasing teacher expertise in identified areas.
However, training in the arts has lagged behind that of
the core subjects of Maths, Science and English, and it
was not until eighteen months ago that I was able to
attend a practical ten day course funded by Staffordshire County Council and run by the Faculty of Education of the University of Central England in Birmingham. This course stressed the need to pursue aspects of three-dimensional modelling, as recent Office for Standards in Education reports had highlighted this area as being in need of development in the primary sector. It also strongly recommended the use of artists in the classroom.

Ron mentions his surprise at the way children followed up the medal making activity, but as teachers we are required to keep records of the work that individual children have covered. These works have to be matched against National Curriculum Requirements. After this single intensive day I was able to record that the children in my class experienced the following parts of the programmes of study:

**Key Stage 1 Programmes of Study**

1. Pupils should be given opportunities to experience different approaches to art, craft and design, including those that involve working individually, in groups and as a whole class.

2. In order to develop visual perception, pupils should be taught the creative, imaginative and practical skills needed to:
   a. record observations
   b. design and make images and artefacts
   c. use a range of media
   d. record and communicate ideas
   e. describe shapes, forms and space in images and artefacts
   f. record their work
   g. identify the school and the locality the work of artists, craftpeople and designers, applying knowledge to their own work;
   h. respond to and evaluate art, craft and design, including their own and others’ work.

**Investigating and Making**

8. Pupils should be taught to:
   a. record what has been experienced, observed and imagined;
   b. experiment with tools and techniques for sculpture, exploring a range of materials;
   c. experiment with visual elements, to make images and artefacts ...
   d. record and communicate ideas

9. Pupils should be taught to:
   a. identify in the school and the locality the work of artists, craftpeople and designers;
   b. recognise visual elements in images and artefacts
   c. describe works of art, craft and design in simple terms, and explain what they think and feel about these.

It is a long list and one reason for including it is to demonstrate the extent of what the non-specialist teacher has to deliver. If appreciation of the arts and the will to experiment with media unself-consciously is what we want to promote, then more artists could offer their skills to classes of young children. They may be surprised by the warmth of their welcome, not only from the class teachers but also from their children who have not yet acquired that lack of self-confidence that we see in older pupils. They never say ‘I can’t do that!’ or ‘I’m not any good.’ They do not anticipate failure. Instead they say ‘When can I start?’ or ‘Can we do it again?’ It is an enthusiasm which is catching.

The over-riding memory that I shall keep of this workshop is not of children reaching prescribed attainment in three-dimensional work but of their enthusiasm and pride, and the way they responded to Ron’s original works, his explanations and instructions.

Dec Brigstocke
FROM PLASTER TO BRONZE
A TWO-DAY SCHOOL PROJECT IN BIRMINGHAM
Ron Dutton

The medal world is truly international. Early this year I received a call from the headmaster of Hamstead Hall School, Birmingham, who during the course of discussions on an exchange programme had been informed by Ilkka Voimosa, the general secretary of FIDEM, about my work as a medal-maker. The outline that I put to him led to an invitation to work on a two-day project, making medals with a group of some twenty five pupils who were taking part in a course of three-dimensional design studies.

Initially the programme was to lead to the pupils producing plaster images, but their enthusiasm and application produced work that I felt merited the final step of being cast in bronze. The ready transformation of ideas from clay or wax to plaster and then to bronze is one of the attractions of the medal, and this is made very apparent by the growth in the BAMS Student Medal Project now entering its eleventh year. Within the international discussions of FIDEM the need to encourage artists to take up the medium is ongoing, and the nature of this project reinforces the potential that is available to artist-teachers.

The project began with the usual introduction to the act of handling clay. Squeezing, stretching and squashing, as ever, created a range of responses. ‘Please sir, I can’t roll mine into a ball.’ ‘Please sir, my clay is too squishy.’ ‘If you throw another piece of clay, you are out.’ But the attention of most was quickly obtained and a routine of examining the class for roundheads, squareheads or ovalheads, along with checking out the place of the nose on the face, the number of ears and the texture of hair, led to a concentration of effort that soon led to self-portrait images being worked in the negative and then filled with plaster. These were completed by the addition of an inscription and date, also inscribed in the negative (figs 1, 2). At fourteen to fifteen years, the age group was older than I had previously worked with, excepting, of course, graduate students and the medallists of BAMS conferencehide-outs, and I was surprised at the speed at which they achieved their results.

It was important to retain the pupils’ attention while the plaster was being poured and during the time it took for this to set. So impressing objects in clay, a process used by many artists, Paolozzi immediately coming to mind, was the next technique that we launched into. A range of objects had been collected by the departmental technician, with nuts, bolts and keys proving very popular. An instinctive awareness of symmetry became immediately obvious, revealing an inclination towards the ordering of objects that is perhaps not usually taken as a characteristic of this age group, but clearly is a strong element in the design process (fig. 3).

The two days had been planned to introduce the class to the art of engraving in the negative, a technique familiar to all those interested in medals but which for many others remains a mystery. Previous classes to introduce the techniques had been restricted to one day, which gave too little time for anything other than working on simple inscriptions. Now, though, there was time to make everyone aware of the nature of working back-to-front and to work on slightly more complex ideas.

For the second day small plaster blocks had been prepared that had a circular recess approximately sixty millimetres in diameter and four millimetres deep. It had been agreed that preparatory design classes would be held by the pupils’ regular teachers. These had taken the form of an introduction into Japanese art, which was a most apposite approach due to the relationship of medals to the art of tsuba and the prints of Hokusai. Each pupil had several designs, and advice was given as to the most appropriate for the process. The previous day’s experience now stood the group in good stead, and they quickly grasped the techniques. The tools used were simple carpentry nails ground to a fine point at one end and a chisel form at the other. Scratching and gouging went on, and plasticine was used to check results. The nature of the task certainly absorbed most of them, but, yes, small balls of plasticine do make useful projectiles to annoy your best friend and some did take up the opportunity, but, as ever, the firm hand of the staff restored order if not tranquility.

The work progressed very satisfactorily, with some pupils proceeding well enough to complete two ideas. In one case the potential of obverse and reverse was particularly clearly understood, resulting in a medal entitled Shark Wave (fig. 4). Other medals demonstrated how valuable the preparation of both concept and design had been, with a good grasp of the use of relief being shown (figs 5-8). The original plan had been to take plaster positives from the negatives, but I sensed that we could make more of the opportunity, and with the aid of my good foundry friend, was able later to make resin positives that were suitable for casting into bronze, using the sand-casting process.

It was now near the end of the second day, but time and energy were still available, along with clay and plaster, and yet another allied technique could be used.
Poking and probing, yet again using the hands as a tool in the creative process, can result in eerie images of one's own body. The pupils were invited to seize on the notion of exploration - how often do we look at art objects and see them as explorations that give back to us a new awareness of ourselves? Antony Gormley's recent works are surely touching on this path. For the pupils, it was an intriguing idea not previously considered, so with what energy was left they pushed and probed into the clay, establishing another range of ideas that hopefully may make them look at medals in the future with a more probing eye (fig. 9).

An unexpected aspect of the project was the standard of the work produced. One of the pupils' medals, Justine Waugh's Shark Wave (see fig. 4), was of such high quality that it is now being made available to members of the British Art Medal Society. The medal is cast in bronze and costs £35. The edition will be limited to one hundred. Anyone who would like to acquire an example should contact me at 22 Paget Road, Wolverhampton WV6 0DX; telephone 01902 429168; e-mail r.dutton@blueyonder.co.uk. Any profits from sales will go to the school.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
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NOTE
1. The pupils, aged between fourteen and fifteen, were in year ten and were studying a three-dimensional GCSE module that is part of a two-year course for a Middle Education Group. This is designed to give pupils a chance to experience a range of different media and working methods.
5. Ranjit Singh: Cherry Tree Mono, 2003, bronze, 65mm.
PowerPoint presentation – slides
Ron Dutton

Ron Dutton has been at the forefront of the revival of the art of the medal since 1982 as a founding member of the British Art Medal Society. Since his first exhibition of medals at Wolverhampton Art Gallery he has gained international recognition and his work is now in many national collections.

Ron taught sculpture at Wolverhampton Polytechnic and was Head of Sculpture from 1964-1982 and then Head of Fine Art from 1983-1985.

Ron was awarded Honorary Fellow of the University of Wolverhampton in 2006 and was the recipient of the 2008 J. Sanford Saltus Award of the American Numismatic Association for Distinguished Achievement in the Art of the Medal and the 2008 Vicenza Numismatica International Career prize.

Currently, Ron is the Vice President of the British Art Medal Society (BAMS) and the International Art Medal Federation (FIDEM).
**British Art Medal Society (BAMS)**

BAMS was founded in 1982 to promote the art of the medal through commissions from a wide range of artists, including internationally recognised sculptors and recent art college graduates.

The medals produced reflect aspects of contemporary life through a range of genres, from portraiture and abstraction, neo-classical, conceptual and satirical.

The medals are for sale to its members and the general public and are illustrated in *The Medal*, the Society’s internationally acclaimed journal published twice yearly by the British Art Medal Trust.

BAMS and its members also present exhibitions, lectures, conferences and workshops.

The British Art Medal Society is a non profit making organisation, run by its members through an elected committee and linked to a charity, the British Art Medal Trust.
Acknowledgements

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Useful websites

www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk
www.bams.org.uk
www.rondutton.co.uk
www.blackcountryhistory.org