

The Renaissance of the Cast Medal in Nineteenth Century France

by David and Constance Yates

THE MEDAL AS WE KNOW IT TODAY HAD ITS ORIGINS IN THE Italian Renaissance with the circular bronze commemorative portraits produced by Pisanello (c. 1395-1455) during the mid-fifteenth century. Medals are often viewed in a numismatic context because they share certain obvious characteristics with coins. Both are round, made of metal, and exhibit a portrait on the front (*obverse*) and an allegorical or narrative scene relating to that portrait on the back (*reverse*). In general, coins are produced in great numbers by a central political authority and are meant to circulate socially as a medium of exchange. Medals, however, have no intrinsic value. They are produced for many purposes: to celebrate famous people, to mark important social or political events, or to memorialize personal milestones, such as births, marriages and deaths. Until the 17th century, medals were often used as articles of personal adornment, attached to clothing or worn around the neck. As intimate sculpture in a double-sided relief format, medals have always been something to hold and turn in the hand – personal objects for aesthetic and intellectual contemplation.

A medal can either be struck or cast – techniques developed in the classical world and perfected during the Italian Renaissance. The process of striking consists first of the preparation of the desired images on two dies followed by the impression by force of these dies onto a prepared metal blank. In antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages this force was provided by the simple act of hammering. The invention of the screw press in early 16th century Italy enabled medals to be struck with greater speed and control. The result is an object sharply and precisely defined, but often rather dry and lacking in sculptural elegance. Not surprisingly, striking was, and is today, the method utilized for mass production of both coins and medals. Casting requires the preparation of two original uniface models – the obverse and reverse – in wax, plaster, or less commonly, wood or stone. These models are utilized to create negative molds in a soft material such as terracotta or gesso. Once the molds have dried, they are fitted together leaving channels into which the molten metal is poured. After cooling, the medal in its raw state is removed from the mold. At this

stage a careful hand finishing is required which includes filing, chasing, and often the application of chemically based patinations and thin coats of lacquer. The final result is a unique work of art, with examples of the same medal exhibiting subtle variations in color and surface detail.

The earliest medals in 16th century France were produced by goldsmiths working in a style which combined the native Gothic heraldic tradition with an obvious awareness of Italian Renaissance portraiture. From the outset, the production of medals in France was highly dependent on the patronage of the crown. This may be viewed in comparison to the early history of the medal in Italy, where artists relied more on the commands of private patrons, resulting in the possibility of greater artistic freedom. The invitations extended by François I (1494-1547) to Italian artists and craftsmen, among them Benvenuto Cellini and the aged Leonardo, to help embellish his court at Fontainebleau, demonstrate the lure that Italian aesthetic innovation had in France.

In 1572 during the reign of Charles IX, Germain Pilon (c. 1525-1590), the greatest sculptor of the French Renaissance was named to the newly created post of *Controleur général des effigies*.¹ Pilon, who created some of the most beautiful cast medallic portraits of this period, was given the responsibility for producing the models from which coins and officially commissioned medals were struck. This beginning of centralized control over the striking of coins and medals was further reinforced when, during the reign of Henri IV, Guillaume Dupré (c. 1576-1643) was appointed *Controleur des poinçons et effigies pour les monnaies* and allowed to establish his foundry and presses under Royal protection in the Gallery of the Louvre.² Dupré created some sixty cast medals during his career, aesthetically comparable to the finest works of the Italian Renaissance and technically unparalleled. It is significant to note that Dupré produced the last important corpus of cast medals in France until the 19th century. While Dupré elevated the status of the French medal, it was Jean Warin (1596-1672) who transformed this art form into one devoted almost entirely to the glory of the state. Warin, named *controleur général* in 1647, had accumulated by mid-century sufficient



Figure 1. Louis-François Jeannest, *Portrait of Dominique Vivant Denon*, 1812. Cast bronze. Diam. 151 mm. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 2. Pierre-Jean David D'Angers, *Pierre-François, Comte de Réal*. Original wax relief on slate. 135 x 122 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

political authority to effectively monopolize the striking of coins and medals at the French mint. In 1663 Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), the secretary of state for Louis XIV, formed the *Académies des inscriptions et belles lettres* to impose centralized control over the arts as a way of increasing the power of government.³ Under Warin's influence, the concerns of the Academy rapidly evolved into the supervision and production of the *The Medallic Histories of Louis XIV*; that is, to the creation of what was, in effect, medallic propaganda celebrating the glories of the reign of Louis XIV and the superiority of French culture and technology. This process was so strictly controlled that medallists lost the right to execute their own designs and instead, were reduced to copying Academy-approved drawings produced by artists, such as Antoine Coypel and Sebastian LeClerc.⁴ The *Medallic Histories of Louis XIV* was responsible for 85 separate obverse portraits of the Sun King and some three hundred allegorical reverses celebrating the achievements of his reign.

By the beginning of the 18th century, French medals had been exported throughout Europe and were enormously influential. These precisely struck images were not only extremely effective in promoting the glories of the French state, but also provided artistic models which were appropriated and altered for local consumption from Portugal to Russia. As Mark Jones has pointed out, the great transformation which Warin set in motion at the end of the seventeenth century changed the very meaning of the medal "both to those who made them and those who received them."⁵ This evolution from artist cast and finished celebrations of the individual to mechanically struck objects of political and cultural propaganda remained the norm in

France until the Revolution of 1789 brought an end to the *ancien régime*.

With the Revolution came new artistic possibilities. Napoleon viewed the continuation of the state controlled medal as important, even to the extent of having designs sent from Paris for his approval during foreign campaigns. Vivant Dominique, Baron Denon, called Vivant Denon (1747-1825) was named *directeur général des musées français* in 1804, and, as Bonaparte's advisor on all artistic affairs, was responsible for including medallists in the *Prix de Rome* competition. The medal thus officially took its place alongside painting, sculpture and architecture, occupying two seats at the French Academy in Rome. Denon, undoubtedly influenced by the earlier example of Colbert, supervised a comprehensive medallic production of Napoleon and the Empire period which was rigidly neoclassical in style. Denon's portrait (*fig. 1*) executed in 1812 by Louis-François Jeannest (French, active late 18th-early 19th century) captures the lively intelligence of this important figure in a manner which is realistic rather than classicizing. Although artistic freedom became a possibility as a result of the Revolution, not all artists chose to break with the style of the *ancien régime*. Indeed, the artistic vocabulary of most official medallic commissions remained neoclassical until just after the reign of Napoleon III. Artists inspired by the creative explosion of the Romantic movement during the 1820's and 30's, however, began searching for new modes of expression.

Pierre-Jean David d'Angers (1788-1856), arguably the



Figure 3. Pierre-Jean David D'Angers, *Les Quatres Sargents de La Rochelle*. Cast bronze. Diam.: 88 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.



Figure 4. Pierre-Jean David D'Angers, *Niccolò Paganini*, 1834. Cast bronze. Diam.: 150 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

most important sculptor France was to produce at the beginning of the 19th century, modeled his first portrait medallion in 1815, which depicted Ferdinand Hérold (1791-1833), the composer and fellow *pensionnaire* at the French Academy in Rome. David brought to the medal the full force of his power in three-dimensional form. During the remaining 40 years of his life his complex moral vision of the world, politics and human nature drove David to create a personal pantheon of great men in medallion form. In 1827 he began working in earnest on his *Galerie des Contemporains* which eventually numbered over 500 portraits. All of the medals created by David in this series are uniface, i.e. one-sided, and cast in bronze. Most of these portraits are modeled in profile, with a very few drawn in three-quarters view. As quoted by the critic Charles Blanc, David said: "I have always been profoundly stirred by a profile. The [full] face looks at us; the profile is in relation with other beings. The [full] face shows you several characteristics, and is more difficult to analyze. The profile is unity."⁶ His *Galerie* portrayed famous artists, writers, musicians and politicians both contemporary and historical, including many figures involved in the Romantic movement. David's interest was not limited to French subjects; in 1829 and again in 1834 he travelled to Weimar, where he met Goethe, Schiller, Humboldt, and Caspar David Friedrich. Medallion portraits in homage to each of these men were subsequently included in David's *Galerie*.

In executing the original models for his portrait medallions David worked primarily in wax on slate and less fre-

quently in terracotta. Due to the fragile nature of the materials, few wax models have survived. One of these remarkable images depicts Pierre-François, Comte de Réal (1757-1834) (fig. 2), who was a member during the Revolution of the *Amis de la Constitution* and of the Jacobin movement, and the chief accuser at the tribunal of the 17th of August. Imprisoned after the death of Georges Jacques Danton, Réal managed to survive the Reign of Terror. A counsel of state under Napoleon I, he was forced into exile in 1816. Finally at the age of 73, he became politically active once again during the Revolution of 1830. Réal's face, lines deeply etched, reflects the experience of this political survivor and the coiffure, freely drawn and modeled, is typical of David's Romantic sculptural style. David was a lifelong republican who strongly felt his art had, first and foremost, the moral obligation to "glorify great men, noble causes and inspiring accomplishments."⁷ His medal *Les Quatre Sargents de La Rochelle* (fig. 3) memorializes common soldiers, condemned to death for conspiring against the Restoration government of Louis XVIII. David had initially planned to execute a monument in their memory, but was forced to abandon his politically risky plans for lack of financial support. The obverse of this medal depicts the four sergeants in profile flanking the fasces, or emblem of state authority since Roman times, which has been crowned by the symbolic *bonnet de la liberté*. On the reverse, *La Liberté* herself places four laurel wreaths on the executioner's block. For David, it was *une dette sacré* to commemorate these martyrs to the cause of liberty.⁸



Figure 5. Pierre-Jean David D'Angers, *Alfred de Musset*, 1831. Cast bronze. Diam.: 172 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.



Figure 6. Jules Clement Chaplain, *Sarah Gustave Simon*, 1890. Cast bronze. 215 x 160 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

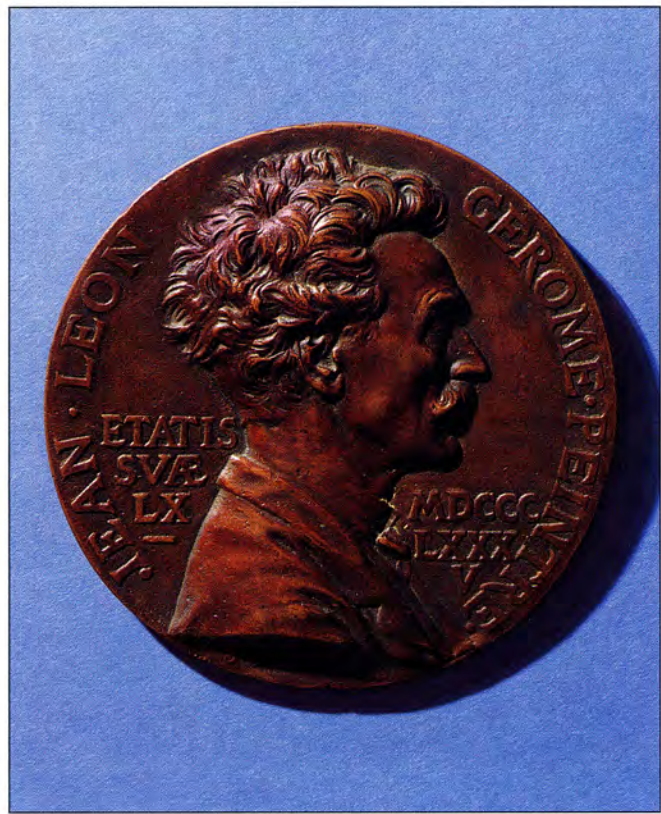


Figure 7. Jules Clement Chaplain, *Jean-Léon Gérôme*, 1885. Cast bronze. Diam.: 100 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

In 1833 David immortalized Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840) in a bust that is considered to be one of the finest sculpted portraits of the Romantic period, and his medal of 1834 is one of the icons of the *Galerie*. (fig. 4) For David, this musician was a man of unparalleled force and genius. The strong brow ridges and exaggerated cranial dome reflect David's interest in the expressive possibilities of the phrenological theories current in the early 19th century. In his journal David writes of the experience of depicting Paganini, "it seems to me that the soul has a tyrannical power over this too weak body – he never laughs, he has too much genius...When I told him that I wanted to depict him...with his head leaning forward, and to the side, like a man playing the violin, he told me, yes, because I take from my interior to impress my exterior."⁹ This medal is a prime example of David's ability to concretize the psychological characteristics of his subjects by subtly exaggerating their physiognomy. David was a friend of virtually every important writer and poet of the Romantic age – indeed, poems in praise of his sculpture were written by Victor Hugo and Charles Nodier, among many others.¹⁰ The poet Alfred de Musset (1810–1857) (fig. 5), the handsome, dissolute lover of George Sand and author of the autobiographical *Confessions d'un enfant du siècle* was modeled by David in 1831. The meticulously sculpted coiffure frames the face of this elegant and sensitive young man, barely out of his teens. Depicted in three-quarter view and high relief, the Musset medallion shares its unusual frontal composition

with David's portraits of Balzac, Géricault and the young Bonaparte. Though rare in his medallion oeuvre, these frontal depictions have the impact and monumentality of David's portrait busts in intimate form. In a very real sense David d'Angers reinvigorated, almost single-handedly, the Renaissance tradition of the artist cast medal in 19th century France.

The strong three-dimensionality of David d'Angers' medals and the personal heroic nature of their subject matter was enormously influential on a whole generation of young artists. This was especially so when viewed in contrast to the increasingly conservative nature of the official medal, which, "under Louis Philippe and the Second Empire reached appalling depths of banality."¹¹ The conservative program geared to glorification of king and state set in motion by Warin and Colbert in the 17th century had become increasingly irrelevant. The *Prix de Rome*, originally conceived by Vivant Denon to produce a steady supply of classically-grounded young medallion propagandists, instead insured that youthful medallists had the opportunity to broaden their sculptural horizons while working in the fertile environment of the Villa Medici in Rome. In fact, it became something of a tradition for sculptors and medallists at the French Academy to cast portraits of their fellow *pensionnaires*. Distinguished sculptors such as Antoine Preault, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Emmanuel Frémiet and Henri Chapu all produced and exhibited cast medallions, and the stylistic innovations of official medallists, especially those of



Hubert Ponscarne (1827-1903), gradually incorporated these aesthetic advances. Alphonse Legros, as professor at the Slade School in London (1876-1894) introduced English artists to the expressive possibilities of this art form.

The result of this creative ferment was a kind of “Golden Age” of the French medal during the last quarter of the 19th century. Louis-Oscar Roty (1846-1911), trained as a painter and certainly inspired by the Renaissance plaquette, revived the tradition of working in a rectangular format in 1880. It once again became fashionable in France for private patrons to mark significant events in their lives with medals. One of the most important of these patrons was the connoisseur and critic Claude Roger-Marx. A tireless advocate on behalf of the medal as art form, Roger-Marx authored numerous articles and catalogues on the subject, was instrumental in the hiring of contemporary artists to design new coinage for the French Mint, and at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900, organized a special exhibition devoted to the art of the medal. As founder of *Les Amis de la Medaille Française*, he was responsible for commissioning some of the most beautiful medallic images created at the end of the 19th century.

The career of Jules Clement Chaplain (1839-1909) is emblematic of this “Golden Age”. A winner of the *Prix de Rome* in 1863, Chaplain returned to Paris in 1869 where he found official success almost immediately, winning notice in the Salons of 1870 and 1872. In rapid succession, Chaplain was named in 1877 the official medallist of the French government, in 1878 a *chevalier* of the Legion of Honor and in 1881 to the seat at the *Académie des Beaux Arts* left vacant by the death of Jacques-Edouard Gatteaux. He was responsible for the official portraits of every presi-

Figure 8a. Jules Clement Chaplain, Reverse, Jean-Léon Gérôme: *Pittura*, 1885. Cast bronze. Diam.: 100 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

Figure 8b. Jules Clement Chaplain, Reverse, Henri d'Orléans, *duc d'Aumale*. Cast bronze. Diam.: 100 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

dent of the French Republic from Edme Patrice MacMahon in 1877 to Émile Loubet in 1899. Chaplain received the commission for engraving the gold coinage of France at the urging of Roger-Marx, and his official gold medal commemorating the visit of Czar Nicholas and Czarina Alexandra of Russia to Paris in 1896 was called, by no less a critic than Forrer “a masterpiece and one of the finest ever struck.”¹²

Indeed, the success and longevity of Chaplain's career as official medallist of the French Government alone would be sufficient to secure him a place of historical importance. It is, however, his series of cast portrait medals that constitutes his great achievement as an artist. Chaplain, by the late 1870's, had developed an intimate and realistic style of portraiture. Less concerned with the three-dimensionality of David's style, Chaplain allows his portraits to emerge from and interact with the surrounding field. He depicts his subjects in a manner vigorous yet refined, establishing his compositions with a series of free and sweeping lines. The politician Jules Simon commissioned Chaplain to model two relief portraits of his wife Sarah Gustave Simon in 1889 (fig. 6). This classically beautiful woman is portrayed in everyday dress, her hair pulled back in a chignon, with several wisps falling free along her neck. The folds in the sleeve of her blouse crinkle along the shoulder and arm drawing attention to her long neck and aquiline nose. Sarah's beautifully modeled face is accentuated by the coif-



Figure 9. Jules Clement Chaplain, Reverse *Charles Gounod*. Silvered galvanotype. Diam.: 230 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

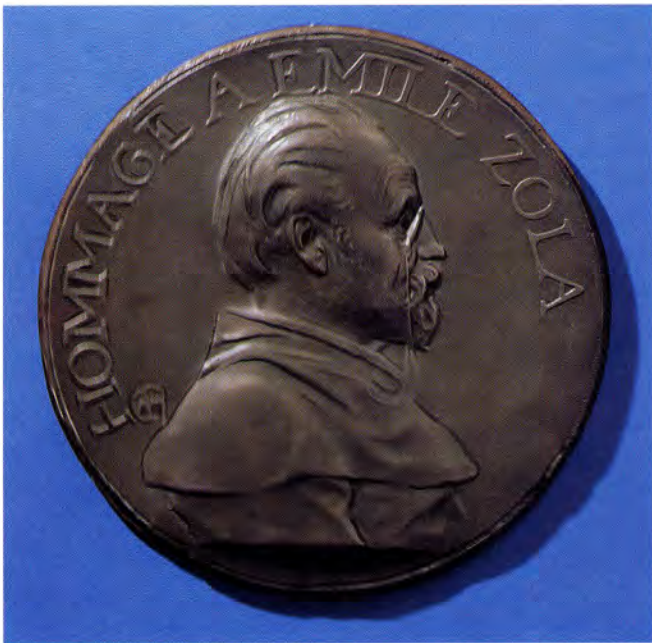


Figure 10. Alexandre Charpentier, *Hommage à Émile Zola*. Cast pewter. Diam.: 195 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

figure which appears to be drawn into the bronze.

Beginning with his portrait of the medallist Auguste Barre in 1879, Chaplain executed a marvelous series of some 20 cast medals representing prominent artists and architects of his day. This series, obviously inspired by the Romantic vision of David, ranges from the great academic painter Ernest Meissonier to the visionary architect of the Paris Opera Charles Garnier. His portrait of the great orientalist Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) (fig. 7) at the age of sixty is a tour-de-force example of Chaplain's technique in its depiction of the chiselled bone structure of the artist's face, and the freely drawn hair, extending in short wavy lines almost to the edge of the medal. The reverse, *Pittura*, (fig. 8a) surrounds the muse of painting with images drawn from Gérôme's celebrated works: the sphinx, the Blue Mosque and the gladiator's helmet. Chaplain, in fact, created some of the most masterful reverse designs in the history of the medal. His reverse celebrating the composer Charles Gounod (1818-1893) (fig. 9) is both elegant and complex. The figure of Inspiration sits deep in thought, her quill pen in hand, at a Gothic-Revival organ whose vertical elements extend and disappear into the upper left margin of the composition. The musical forms favored by the composer – *Drames Lyriques Messes Oratorios Symphonies* – are superimposed over a branch, the leaves of which entwine the letters and reach toward Inspiration's long and elegant braid. As was his custom, Chaplain lavishes particular attention on the coiffure, which is drawn in sinuous lines and crowned by a jewel-like floral wreath. Inspiration rests her hands on the edge of a composition book whose cover lists Gounod's most celebrated work, the opera *Faust*. Her delicately slippered foot rests on a stool, while the strap of the purse subtly reveals the form of her leg by gathering the material of

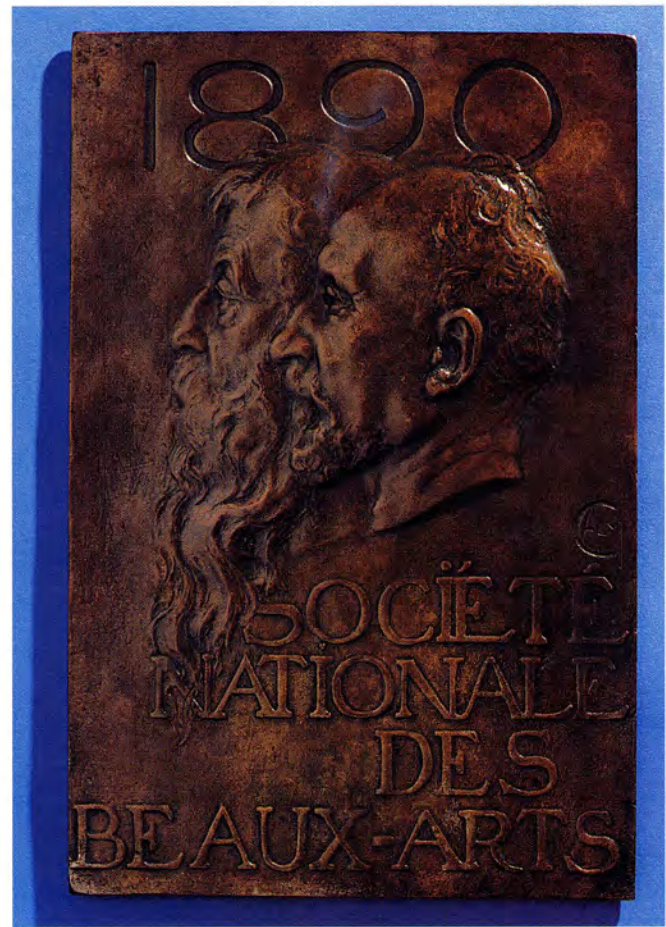


Figure 11. Alexandre Charpentier, *Société Nationale des Beaux Arts*, 1890. Cast bronze. 252 x 165 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

the gown. Another reverse worthy of note is that created to celebrate the gift of Chantilly (fig. 8b) and its extensive art collections in 1886 to the French Institute by Henri d'Orléans, duc d'Aumale. Chaplain, one of the few medallists to depict pure architecture, modeled the chateau, its walled gardens and celebrated stables in low relief against the landscape of the surrounding countryside. The Musée Condé, as the collection became known, flanks the Duke's coat of arms at the top of the composition while the date of the gift crops it horizontally at the bottom of the field. Chaplain was one of the first artists to produce models for cast medals which were equally effective when reduced in size and struck.¹³ This had the effect of blurring the traditional distinctions between these two techniques and opening, by the end of the 19th century, the field of medallic art to increased experimentation by artists who did not necessarily follow the conventional career path of Chaplain's generation.

Alexandre Charpentier (1856-1909) was perhaps the most significant figure of this late-century artistic vanguard. Apprenticed to an engraver as a young man, he became a studio assistant to the innovative medallist Hubert Ponscarne and began exhibiting in 1874 at the annual Paris Salons. After failing in his only attempt at the *Prix de Rome*,



Figure 12. Alexandre Charpentier, *L'Imprimeur*. Cast gilt bronze. 220 x 207 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.



Figure 14. Alexandre Charpentier, *Le Cri*, c. 1900. Cast gilt bronze. Diam.: 60 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.



Figure 13a. Alexandre Charpentier, *Le Bain*. Cast bronze. 153 x 132 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

Figure 13b. Alexandre Charpentier, *La Sculpture*, c. 1896. Cast Bronze. 82 x 150 mm. Private Collection, U.S.A.

Charpentier became increasingly involved in the decorative arts, often collaborating with other artists in the production of furniture, elements of *boiserie*, boxes, and other objects ornamented with finely cast bronze reliefs. Experimenting widely with materials and techniques, he created decorative objects in silver, pewter, ceramic and even molded paper. In 1892, Charpentier was instrumental in founding *Les Cinq*, a group of like-minded artists dedicated to the integration of the fine and applied arts. In the late 1880's Charpentier, like David and Chaplain, began a series of portraits of the notable personalities in his avant-garde circle. He developed his loosely composed low-relief style while attending performances at the *Théâtre Libre* in Paris, where he rapidly modeled the actors in damp terracotta. These *impressions* were later transformed into medals and plaquettes which were essentially spontaneous drawings in metal. The *Hommage à Émile Zola* (fig. 10) is an excellent example of Charpentier's skill at capturing the essential elements of an individual's features and personality. This portrait, cast in pewter, was an act of homage by Charpentier to the moral leadership exercised by Zola during the Dreyfus affair. Drawn in sober profile, the wrinkled brow and swept-back coiffure, the pince-nez with its curvilinear chain dropping down to the cowl of the monk-like cloak, all combine to present a dignified – even grave – portrait of the great novelist and critic. Charpentier depicted Pierre-Puvis de Chavannes and Ernest Meissonier in double-profile in celebration of their efforts in establishing the *Société Nationale des Beaux Arts* in 1890. (fig. 11) The inscription, partially tangled in Meissonier's luxuriant beard and blocked by Puvis's balding dome, is cleverly integrated into the composition, resulting in a virtual poster design in bronze.

Because of his friendship with Auguste Rodin and Constantin Meunier, Charpentier had an intimate understanding of the Realist sculptural idiom of his day, as the



Figure 15. Ovide Yencesse, *Serbia*, c. 1916. Cast bronze. Diam.: 195 mm. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

gilt bronze relief of a young man (fig. 12) operating a printing press amply demonstrates. The straining muscular beauty of the young laborer, at this time when the industrial revolution was in full swing, is juxtaposed to the precisionist lines of the press – man and machine are locked in a dance that anticipates the modernist vocabulary of the 1920's. In his projects as a member of *Les Cinq*, Charpentier modeled plaquettes and reliefs which he meant to be integrated into furniture and other decorative objects. Most of these works have, naturally, since been separated from their intended contexts. *La Sculpture* (fig. 13b), part of a series of plaquettes on the arts which Charpentier conceived as furniture mounts, depicts a woman in the act of carving a block of stone. Her back and arms extend over the edge of the plaquette's frame, elegantly cropping the composition. The wisps of hair falling to the model's neck and drawn into the field in front of her forehead show Charpentier's skill at capturing his impression of a moment. In fact, *Le Bain* (fig. 13a) is a sculptural equivalent to the famous Degas etching *Sortie du bain*, c. 1882. Charpentier captures the model in the fleeting instant that she steps into the bath and his indication of the tiles behind the tub, to which he has applied a painterly patina, gives a subtle surface texture to the background.

The new century was celebrated with great optimism at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1900, whose theme was that the arts and sciences together would unleash the Genius of Progress. The exhibition and catalogue *Les Médailleurs Modernes* prepared by Roger-Marx for this event recapitulated the achievements of the French medal during the 19th century and predicted a glorious future. The first decade of the twentieth century, however, brought the deaths of many of the leaders of the French School, including Chaplain and Charpentier, and Art Nouveau forms became the entrenched stylistic status-quo. *Le Cri* (fig. 14),

one of Charpentier's most moving and disturbing images, blends the prevailing Art Nouveau style with the emerging expressionist motifs of the eastern European avant-garde. It also eerily foreshadows the approaching crisis in Europe. All too quickly political nightmares became reality. The gentle symbolist Ovide Yencesse (1869–1947), whose favored themes had been motherhood and the family, eloquently expresses the horrors of the events of 1914–1918 in *Serbia* (fig. 15), cast after a design by Théophile Steinlen. As was the case in all walks of life, many talented young medallist artists never returned from the Great War. Paris retained its position as the vital center of modern painting and sculpture after the war, and although the French medal enjoyed a moment of renown during the Art Deco movement, this moment was brief. European culture had changed irrevocably, and the artistic achievements of the French medallist renaissance had become history.

NOTES

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1. Jones, 1979, p. 55.
2. Jones, 1994, p. 330.
3. Jones, 1979, p. 81.
4. Jones, 1979, p. 83.
5. Jones, 1994, p. 339.
6. Holderbaum, p. 218.
7. Holderbaum, p. 211.
8. Huchard, p. 130.
9. De Caso, p. 172.
10. Holderbaum, p. 217.
11. Jones, 1979, p. 110.
12. Forrer, vol. I, p. 399.
13. Jones, 1979, p. 120.

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