

Damir Mataušić: – half a century of great artistic medal work

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Damir Mataušić was born in Zagreb in 1954. He graduated from the Department of Sculpture of the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, in the class of prof. Želimir Janež. He lectured there as a full professor – study program of small-scale sculpture and medal-making. He created his first medal in 1973, and ever since he has been intensely involved in creating medals and small-scale sculptures as a dominant visual expression.

He has created 46 Republic of Croatia commemorative coins, over 650 of mainly struck medals, 7 mayoral chains and chains of honour, several public prizes and a number of monuments and religious interior reliefs of large dimensions. He has won prizes at competitions in Austria and Japan. He has had 25 solo shows and taken part in more than 95 collective exhibitions at home and abroad.

Damir Mataušić has been an artist with five decades of medallist art in specific expression and defined artistic poetics successfully applied in several sculptural disciplines: from medals, coins, festive chains and honours to small sculptures, reliefs and public monuments; from intimacy, official, to public and sacral medals of deep perception with an exceptional consecration in the realization of the work. The feature of Mataušić's work is the use of several types of materials that dominate polished metals made with technical precision in inventive compositions. The value of his work synthesizes historical and cultural heritage without taking away the dignity of artistic creation. Mataušić's subtle personality equally anticipates the complex contemporary artistic challenges, and the result is a peculiar medallic oeuvre with established status in contemporary Croatian fine arts. The sculptor acquired the skill and intention for creating small formats in metal from early childhood in the workshop of his father, the distinguished engraver Vladimir Mataušić (1924–2011). In terms of subject matter and content, we can draw a direct line between Mataušić's diverse and abundant sculptural oeuvre and the great Croatian sculptor and medallist Ivo Kerdić (1891–1953). What they have in common is a dominant medal-making opus, the design of coins, ceremonial chains and the elevation

of church spaces with sculptural works. They both respect the historical ambience and spatial harmony in public monuments.

In terms of inventiveness and imagination, Mataušić is the successor of the unique sculptural oeuvre of his professor Želimir Janež (1916–1996).

Bogdan Mesinger has written, comprehensively, extensively and in detail about the artist, the genesis of the work and the complexity of his sculptural oeuvre in two monographs (Mesinger, 1998, 2010). They were preceded by the monograph *Damir Mataušić* by Feđa Vukić (1993). Milan Bešlić wrote about the sculptor's series *Credo* on the occasion of the exhibition in the Cultural Information Centre (KIC) in 2010. Mons. Nedjeljko Pintarić (2010) and Ivica Raguž, dean of the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo (2018) wrote inspired texts about the Christian aspect of Mataušić's work.

For his rich academic, creative and pedagogical work, Damir Mataušić is credited with the recent affirmation of medal-making and small-scale sculpture in Croatian visual arts. From his artistic beginnings to this day, he has been represented at the half-centennial Ivo Kerdić Memorials – Triennials of the Croatian Medal Making and Small-Scale Sculpture, as the largest national art



Fig 1. *Identity*, 2019
Polyptych, engraved plexiglass, Ø 90 mm



Fig 2. Dean's Chain of the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, 1979
Silver, enamel, 630 x 230 mm

event of these special sculptural disciplines, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts in Osijek. In 2013, as part of the *XI Ivo Kerdić Memorial* he staged a solo exhibition, titled *Artist of Miniature Sculpture*, conceived by Daniel Zec, a long-standing author of these sculpture events,¹ while in 2019 the artist was awarded the Grand Prix of the *XIII Ivo Kerdić Memorial* for his work *Identity* (fig. 1).²

From 1974 until today, his medallic works have been presented at the largest biennial exhibitions around the world, organized by the prestigious FIDEM International Art Medal Federation. With their motivational, organizational and professional engagement, professor Damir Mataušić and Ivan Mirnik, made a great contribution to the international affirmation of Croatian medallic art and local medallists within the framework of FIDEM manifestations.

With his selfless educational activity and advocacy for the establishment of small-scale sculpting and medal-making study program in the Department of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in 1996, professor Mataušić is credited with the continuity and revitalization of these two branches of sculpture, passing on his mastery, knowledge and experience to hundreds of students during the past quarter century.

From the medal to the honorary chain

In the beginning was the Medal. In the engraving

workshop of Mataušić's father Vlado, as the sculptor's early medallic works, the *Fountain of Life* (1973), portrait plaque *Colleague* and the portrait medal of *Tin Ujević* (1974). They were followed by more medals inspired by the Croatian Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance masters of architecture, sculpture and painting – namely, Radovan, Juraj Dalmatinac, L. Lauran, F. Lauran, Vincent of Kastav and J. Klović, that were united in the Dean's Chain of the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb with a medallion symbolizing the Academy, as Mataušić's final graduation work in 1979, which still has a utilitarian function to this day (fig. 2).

The seriousness of the work and the establishment of symbolic and representative criteria resulted in the artist being entrusted with the conceptual design of the *Chain of the International Mission for Science and Peace* in 1980, comprised of ten medals representing renowned Nobel laureates, based on the idea of the Croatian humanitarian Vladimir Palaček (1940–1990). Mataušić ingeniously assembled leading Croatian sculptors and medallists to execute the portrait medals (Zdravko Brkić, Krno Bošnjak, Ante Despot, Stanko Jančić, Želimir Janeš, Stipe Sikirica, Kosta Angeli Radovani, Marija Ujević), thus also showcasing recent Croatian medallic art. He personally designed the medal with the image of Marie Curie, while the final medallion symbolizing the *International Mission* was created by his father Vladimir. Bogdan Mesinger defined Mataušić's honorary chains as a special medal-making genre³ because of their basic structure from which a systematically conceived unit is formed.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Damir Mataušić continued to create an impressive series of honorary chains. The *Dean's Chain of the Faculty of Economics in Zagreb*, 2001, pictographically summarizes the presentation of economy through the symbols of goods and money in circular silver plates with copper Slavonian *banovac* inserted in-between. The two final larger medallions contain the emblematic inscription of the Faculty of Economics in Zagreb and its building façade as the conventional symbol of the University of Zagreb.

A parallel wavy chain with hand-crafted silver circles depicting the city's architectural symbols and the final semi-circular plate with an imprint and a historical crest represent the city founded on an island in the middle of the River Una, and form the *Mayoral Chain of the City of Hrvatska Kostajnica*, 2003.



Fig 3. Tin Ujević, 1974
Wrought silver, Ø 32 mm



Fig 4. *Lovro Matačić*, 1997
Engraved silver, gold appliqué, Ø 90 mm

The representative *Honorary Chain of the President of the Croatian Bar Association*, 2010, was formed as the only visual representation by multiplying and elaborating symbols on the chain-links, with a balanced rhythm of squares and circles cast in precious metals.

With a studious approach to contemporary premises and in all seriousness, the artist created the *Pectoral Cross for the Holy Father Benedict XVI* who visited Croatia in 2011, under the motto 'Together in Christ'. A gold cross with prominent polished wide arms hangs from a chain of chequered stylized links (hollow – silver and gold plates – red). The surface of the cross is rendered with dynamic reflections which adds a moving corporeality reminiscent of the *corpus Christi*, crowned with silver stars. On the right side of the cross there is an inscription in Glagolitic script, while on the silver reverse side is an inscription of a prayer in Croatian.

On the ceremonial *Chain of the Grand Master of the Brethren of the Croatian Dragon* from 2013, there is a silver gilded medallion with historical symbols of this prestigious association. On the obverse is the bejewelled Croatian coat of arms with a dragon, and on the reverse is the illustration of the association's seat in the Stone Gate, with inscriptions of its name and motto in Latin.

The *Dean's Chain of the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo*, 2015, is composed of the dominant links of stylized forms of the Croatian interweaving ornament with two double-sided gold medallions. On the obverse of the medallion there are visual representations and symbols of Mary, Mother of the Church, and the reverse contains the name and emblem of the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo, joined into a whole and designed in a contemporary manner.

Portrait medals

One of Mataušić's earliest works portrays the distinctive

Croatian writer *Tin Ujević* (fig. 3). In the 1980s, the artist intensified his portrait activity and designed thirty-odd medals with prominent persons from older and more recent Croatian history. Each miniature work is originally concise and subtly executed, with individual characteristics and confident symbolic conceptual portraits. Mataušić finds new ways to present personality. He summarizes the physiognomies and softly renders the figure in a characteristic pose. The surrounding space of the medal or plaque is ideally proportioned to the portrayed person. It can also be an empty space, but most often it is a series of symbols and inscriptions that present a complete picture of the period and the reason why the portrayed person is shown on a medal. He is agile in adapting the style and expert in the way he chooses the manner in which he renders the content of the inscription and forms of letters as equal components of the honorary medal.

The artist constantly builds on, enriches, adapts and varies the code established in his first honorary medals, which becomes recognizable in all of his medallic works. The analysis of Mataušić's artistically formed miniature circle reveals exceptionally diverse national, historical, social, religious, artistic, scientific and cultural identities (fig. 4).

Medals of the Museum – Gallery Space



Fig 5. *Museum Space – Exhibition Zagreb Cathedral Treasury*, 1983
Silver, Ø 38 mm



Fig 6. *European Bocce Championship, 1994*
Wrought silver, part gilt, 65 x 55 mm

During the 1980s, a one-of-a-kind long-term cooperation was established between the medallist Damir Mataušić and the Museum – Gallery Space in Zagreb,⁴ when Mataušić's medals left a permanent mark on the intensive activity of organizing complex exhibitions in the gallery space. From 1983 onwards, in the given standard form of the thaler,⁵ he designed medals dedicated to demanding thematic units in a refined associative interaction with given topics, that were heterogeneously executed in terms of motif, symbolic and emblematic quality (fig. 5).

Sports medals

On the occasion of the *Universiade* international student multidisciplinary sports event held in Zagreb in 1987, the artist created 14 medals with individually presented sports disciplines executed in precious metals and in several versions. This extends and adds to his oeuvre of medals of public importance (fig. 6).

Dubrovnik medals



Fig 7. *Dubrovnik, 2005*
Wrought gold, Ø 38 mm

With an incredible ability to immerse himself in certain themes, Damir Mataušić created a comprehensive series of memorial and commemorative works for Dubrovnik – the cradle of Croatian medal-making,⁶ ranging from the gilded medal of *St Blaise* to several honorary medals dedicated to persons and events and executed on behalf of the Society of Friends of Dubrovnik Antiquities from 2002 onwards (fig. 7). In them, he interprets the cultural starting points in a contemporary manner and synthesizes the affluence of the Republic of Dubrovnik.⁷

Religious medals

With the same devotion, Mataušić creates medals with religious themes, whether they depict religious buildings, ceremonial objects, religious symbols, clergy or saints. They are dominated by the Christian iconography and Croatian Christian heritage as drivers of the richly and meticulously woven creative oeuvre rendered in precious metals (fig. 8).

Damir Mataušić, with sophistication and dynamism, intuitively immerses himself and reveals manifold values of fragmented identities. Since 1988, the artist has continuously and ingeniously designed numerous public awards and honorary medals, for various institutions and associations. The creativity of his work is in synergy with the implementation of a virtuoso combination of several precious metals in one medal work to which he, paradoxically, adds polychromatic value.⁸

Coins

Mataušić's competence as a medallist is inseparable from his production of coins. Thus, the form of medals cast for the Museum – Gallery Space were inspired by thalers, the valuable and popular modern silver money of high artistic value. In 1990, during crucial times for Croatian independence and Croatian recent history, he made a replica of the medieval Slavonian *banovac*, as his own media inspired initiative, in order to draw attention, with a symbolic gesture, to the Croatian tradition of coinage. Since 1994, the artist executed, with great sophistication, forty-two denominational and commemorative coins with a nominal value ranging from 5 to 1,000 kuna.

Commemorative silver 150 kuna, i.e. 15 euro denominational coin from 2006, is a rare example of successful cooperation between two states (Ireland and Croatia) and the work of two artists (Ivan Meštrović and Damir Mataušić).⁹



Fig 8. *Saint Jerome, 2005*
Wrought silver, part gilt, enamel, Ø 75 mm



Fig 9. Denomination 25 kuna coin – Pelješac Bridge, 2022
Bimetallic, copper core, nickel ring, Ø 32 mm

Among the coinage it is worth mentioning the series of 25 kuna coins, which differs from other coins with its bimetallic composition and the shape of a regular dodecagon. All 25 kuna coins – from their first edition, issued in 1997 to commemorate the process of peaceful reintegration of the region of the Republic of Croatia under the temporary UNTAES administration, until the last coin Pelješac Bridge from 2022 (fig. 9) – have the same reverse side, while the obverse changes depending on the occasion. The author of the entire series of 25 kuna coins is Damir Mataušić.¹⁰

Small-scale sculpture and intimate medal

In the forms of medals, reliefs and small-scale sculpture, Mataušić animates his own perceptions of rich ideation and knowable associations, creating them enthusiastically like an alchemist of joy. From his earliest intimate reliefs of abstract figuration, the *Nude* and *Two People* from 1977, the compactly formed sculpture of the *Duck*, the series *Tree of Youth* with elaborate forms, *Space* and *Tactile* – from 1978, through the free-standing *Lotrščak Bell* from 1985, and *Sails* (1995, 1997) made from crystal glass and mixed metals. The artist further developed the



Fig 10. *Tree of Children's Dreams – Four Seasons: Summer*, 1998
Mixed media, 120 x 80 x 150 mm

tree motif with a short thick trunk and a lush, circular, branched and leafy canopy from 1978 executed in mixed media, two decades later, as a new series of trees from 1998 poetically titled the *Tree of Children's Dreams*, where each distinctive tree represents a particular season, with an appearance of a new motif, the cloud (fig. 10), applied for the first time in the small-scale sculpture *Waterfall* from 1997 (fig. 11) and multiplied on the small *Heavenly Gate* from 1998. The artist completely sets the cloud motif free in monumental sculpture form, in the chapel space of the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo, 2018.

They were followed by inventive free figural compositions with a synergy of silver-plated and copper-plated bronze, namely *Skydiver*, *Like an Aeroplane*, *Swimmer*, *Diver*, *Pegasus* (1998), stylistically also joined by the *Baccanalia* (2010).

The series *Times* from 2001 inventively presents 15 atmospheric phenomena rendered in the form of free-standing objects made from coloured wood, copper, epoxy and glass. Two medals *Bread*, *Cheese and Olives* and *Cake* from 2004 are classical in form, technique and material, however their themes are somewhat surprising.¹¹ From 1992 to 2020, Mataušić created a series of prized chromatic relief works for the Zagreb event *Floraart*, in mixed media with playful perforated and applied floral compositions and in correlation with lively forms of his small-scale sculpture.



Fig 11. *Waterfall*, 1997
Mixed media, 130 x 130 x 180 mm



Fig 12. *Home*, 2014
Mixed media, Ø 100 mm

The series *Credo* (2008–2010)¹² with religious themes and an intimate understanding of faith is rendered in sophisticated, stylized and esoteric forms by casting polished aluminium, while spirituality is accented with gilded applications.

For his medallic polyptych *Identity*, made in 2019 from engraved plexiglass, Damir Mataušić won the Grand Prix of the XIII Ivo Kerdić Memorial – Triennial of the Croatian Medal Making and Small-Scale Sculpture. The artist created his contemporary portrait key in the form of a chained medal.¹³

How much true brilliance there is in Damir Mataušić's small universe. He sculpturally articulates ordinary phenomena, conditions and themes and interprets them in a captivating and unexpected manner. The artist's intimate works are playful and imaginative, exciting and dynamic, creative and innovative (fig. 12).

Religious sculpture

Deep immersion in fundamental Christian values and the sculptor's many years of experience in creating religious themes in medallic art, as well as the paradigm of his own understanding of faith that has sculpturally been brought to life in the series *Credo*, are the mainstays of Mataušić's works with religious subject matter.

In the innovative work *Crucified, Tortured and Resurrected* from 2009, the artist fundamentally transformed himself and his sculptural oeuvre. The body of Christ, in the middle of a wide cross, is rendered as a carved silhouette in a polished parallelogram of the upright arm of the white cross. The embodiment of Christ is formed by the background light. On what is tentatively called relief, the reduced symbols of nails and the crown of thorns are placed over and next to the illusion of the *corpus*. This self-referential work is characterized by a distinctive sculptural structure. With minimalistic procedures and forms, Mataušić executed an extraordinary monumental sculpture that attracts ambiguous attention and different perspectives.

Church of St Augustin Kažotić in Zagreb (2009–2013)

The sculptor furnished the Church of St Augustin Kažotić with a unique altar crucifix, 14 reliefs of the Way of



Fig 13. Church of St Augustin Kažotić in Zagreb, interior

the Cross, a processional cross, an altar and candelabra (fig. 13). The works are made from cast, polished and illuminated bronze and are partly silver-plated. They are characterized by refined form, dignified symbolism and a subtle overflowing of light and shadows. They are in harmony with the postulates of the building architect, academician Boris Magaš (1930–2013),¹⁴ who intended light to play a dominant role in the interior. The works are designed in a contemporary manner respecting strict liturgical rules, which supplies additional affirmation to Mataušić's monumental work in the given environment.

Chapel of the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo, 2018¹⁵

In 2018, Mataušić undertook the large sculptural project of furnishing the whole interior¹⁶ of Mary, Mother of the Church, the Chapel of the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo (fig. 14). Sculptures with free artistic concepts, noble in execution and context of application, are made from the artist's favourite bimetallic illuminated polished and patinated metals. Parts of the altar and the pulpit are made from the polished travertine and bleached ash, and ash is also found on the seats, benches and window frames. In the white minimalist space of the chapel, we find the balanced, elegant and modest forms of the altar, the processional cross, the pulpit, seats, the four Evangelists, the sanctuary, the eternal light, the burning bush, aspergillum, liturgical candelabra and clouds. The dominant cloud motifs are an original sculptural solution employed in the capacity of God's cloud with symbols of the Evangelists applied thereon. There is a cloud-shaped backrest on the seat, and the aspergillum is also in the cloud. The cloud also casts a soft shadow over the entire space high above. Between the representations of the Evangelists there is a circular relief of the *Burning Bush*, with frontally positioned busts of the Mother of God with Baby Jesus wrapped in Mary's mantel. The motif of stylized leafy branches as the symbol of the presence of God is applied to the *Eternal Light*, the relief of the cloud on the seat, and as perforations on the ceremonial candelabra. In the square Sanctuary, with a symbolically presented purpose, there is a soft relief of a figurative pelican with spread wings wounding its heart in order to feed its offspring.¹⁷ Rounded shapes and stylized figurative forms dynamize the space and associate it with the joy of creation and experience of God's presence, while the



Fig 14. Chapel of the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo, interior

elegant geometric rectangular forms of the cross, the altar, the pulpit, as well as Solomon's knots on the pulpit and stained glass windows, and on the Dean's Chain point to wisdom, spiritual and material connection and dignity. The entirety of Mataušić's concept and sculptural works in the interior of the Chapel of the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo represent a culmination of the mature manifestation of artistic articulation, indisputable skill and an ability to adapt personal expression in a given space with a defined purpose.

Public monuments

Damir Mataušić's first public monument was erected on the occasion of the visit of Pope John Paul II to Omišalj in 2004. *Mooring* is a compact public memorial cast in bronze, with a dual formal meaning – the Glagolitic letter l and the mushroom form of the port bollard. In 2006, in the same spirit, the artist made the Ciborium for Omišalj from precious metals with commemorative symbols and an inscription.

Tribute to Zagreb from 2013 is a sculpture – model of the City of Zagreb situated in the city centre with a detailed urban raster cast in bronze and positioned on travertine stone blocks.

The City of Zagreb is adorned with another Mataušić sculpture, and that is *Bumbina Meadow*, the sculpture erected in 2016 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the flower fair at the Bunde lake (fig. 15). The sculpture is realized as a result of the artist's long-term collaboration with the organizers of the Floraart event, for which the sculptor created several playful floral award plaques in the form of small-scale sculptures.

The public monument *Grain of Salt* (2020) is intended for Ston, the town of salt. The location's identity is illustrated by varying the quadrilateral and circular forms of the pedestal, the cube with a commemorative inscription, the coloured symbols of the salt molecule and the relief plan of the town inscribed in an irregular circle.



Fig 15. *Bumbina Meadow*, 2016
Forex, patinated bronze and aluminium, 354 x 320 cm
Zagreb, Bunde park

Conclusion

Mataušić's complex oeuvre inspires lamentation about the universal, heritage, religious and visual multi-layered meanings. About the frequently present symbolism of the motifs of the trees, clouds, the cross, the circle, the rectangle and usage of light in his medal-making and sculpture. About the subconscious and the associative, the code, genesis and structure of the sculptural expression.

Monumental sculptures mark the latest decade of the artist's creative work in which he sublimated his original medal-making and sculptural poetics and confidently stepped from the chamber world of medal-making and small-scale sculpture into public and religious space. From the meadow to clouds and sky, from the ludic to the spiritual world of this versatile sculptor and medallist.¹⁸

By combining seemingly incompatible materials, techniques, visual solutions and motifs Damir Mataušić is inspired to expand the possibilities of sculptural expression. With independent structured activity, the artist created an enviable sculptural oeuvre and occupied an unassailable position in recent Croatian visual art.

Photos: Archives of the National Museum of Modern Art, Zagreb
English translation: Robertina Tomić

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NOTES

1. Zec, 2013, p. 120.
2. Zec, 2019, p. 7.
3. Mesinger, 2010, p. 36.
4. Today Klovićevi Dvori Gallery.
5. Mesinger, 1998, pp. 58-63.
6. Pavao Dubrovčanin (Dubrovnik, c. 1420 – after 1478) and Franjo Vranjanin (c. 1420 – 1502) were the first Croatian medallists. The first medal cast in the territory of Croatia was made in the Dubrovnik mint and was dedicated to the renovation of the Church of St Blaise in 1707.
7. Lasić and Lokas, 2016, pp. 100, 103, 112, 116, 124, 126-135.
8. Mesinger, 1998, pp. 63, 65.
9. Mesinger, 2010, p. 141.
10. Bilić, 2019, p. 47.
11. Mesinger, 2010, pp. 164-173.
12. Bešlić, 2010.
13. Zec, 2019, p. 7.
14. The complex of the Dominican monastery and the church of the Blessed Augustin Kažotić (1995–2004) grows in height with freer forms, and receives light only from an opening at the top of the tower, illuminating the entire space of the floriform semi-floating church interior.
15. This unique church interior is the result of an ardent collaboration between prof. Ivica Raguž, dean of the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo (2014–2018) and academic sculptor Damir Mataušić.
16. Mataušić, 2018, p. 13.
17. Raguž, 2018, pp. 31-74.
18. Gareljić, 2020, p. 38.