

# Antanas Olbutas

## – the flag bearer of medal art in Lithuania and beyond

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Fig 1. Antanas Olbutas

Antanas Olbutas is a creator of universal talent who works in the fields of medal, sculpture, graphics, painting and art critique (fig. 1). Furthermore, he is also a poet. But most of his creative energy is dedicated to public activities: organizing exhibitions, ongoing projects, symposiums, competitions, and so on...

Antanas was born in 1943 October 18<sup>th</sup> in Vilkija, Lithuania. In 1959 he graduated from Seredžius (Jurbarkas district) secondary school, continued his artistic studies at Telšiai and Kaunas Colleges of Applied Arts and the Vilnius Art Academy. Later, he worked at the Ministry of Culture and the State Philharmonic.

While studying at the S. Žukas School of Applied Arts in Kaunas, A. Olbutas acquired the skills of relief plastic, which helped him get involved in the creation of sculptures and medals. Although he was planning to study sculpture in Vilnius, for some reason he chose the specialty of art historian, which encouraged him to write articles about fine and applied arts.



Fig 2. *Dante Alighieri. Purgatorio*, 1998  
Antanas Olbutas  
Bronze, 157 mm

### I asked Antanas: how did medals appear in your life? (fig. 2)

'In 1974, when I finished my studies, I wrote an article about medals for the magazine *Dailė* (the first review about this field). While collecting material for the article, I had to delve deeper into the topic. I was familiar with the work of Petras Rimša at Stepas Žukas School, but the great impetus came from a meeting with the artist Erikas Varnas, who was very productive. He created many medals. I started visiting the Vilnius Art Manufactory – several commissions there invited me to work as an expert in various projects. Commemorative medals were cast from aluminium in the manufactory, and ceramic ones were also popular, which were mainly created by Bronislovas Baliulevičius. While studying at Stepas Žukas School in Kaunas, I carved wooden plaques, and that was my first acquaintance with the plasticity of this art. Later, I met an artist, Aloyzas Jonušauskas, who proposed the establishment of a department for medal



Fig 3. II Republic-Wide Medal Triennial, 1987  
Antanas Olbutas  
Copper, 62 mm

artists in the Artists' Union and encouraged me to write more articles about medals. So it happened that Erikas Varnas' wife encouraged me to start making medals myself and eventually they became inspiration for my writing.

After the establishment of the medallists' department, I began to organize exhibitions (fig. 3). In 1984, the first Republic-wide Triennial of Medals was opened, and in 1986 the first Triennial of Baltic Medals took place in the Exhibition Hall (now Contemporary Art Centre). Exhibition visitors and collectors saw that Lithuanian medals are not inferior to the medals of other countries in the quality.'

The first triennials caused a stir. It was a real innovation in the then Lithuanian art world. Many artists participated

in these exhibitions, mainly sculptors. As the interest in medals grew, competitions were held on the occasion of various anniversaries. Medals were also very successful economically – the Ministry of Culture was acquiring works from the exhibitions and handed them over to museums. A successful start provided fuel for continuity (fig. 4).

The Latvians and Estonians who participated in the first Baltic Medal Triennials were also very active, but in the long run only the Latvians under the leadership of Janis Strupulis maintained continuity. The friendship between Janis and Antanas was fuelling the development of similar medal art projects – to this day, the triennials of medal art are held in Latvia as well. Therefore, leadership and perseverance are the impetus that brings medallists of different generations together to create and participate in joint exhibitions.

Now Baltic Medal Triennials have a wider range of participants: Swedish artists led by Kerstin Östberg and a large group of Polish artists led by Sebastian Mikołajczak take part in this project as well.

#### Symposiums in Telšiai

Returning to the beginnings of the continuous medallic projects, Antanas tells how he came up with the idea of holding annual medal art symposiums, bringing together like-minded people in the beautiful town of Telšiai for intense creative work: 'Aloyzas Jonušauskas is from Telšiai. Since there was a casting base in Telšiai Craft School Department (near the present VDA Telšiai Faculty), the idea of organizing medal art symposiums was born. In 1984, the first symposium for medal artists took place. Medals were cast from zinc and aluminium.'

Later on, artists from foreign countries started being invited and now the symposiums are international. Since



Fig 4. IV Baltic Medal Triennial, 1998  
Antanas Olbutas  
Copper, 116 x 113 mm



Fig 5. International Medal Art Symposium in Telšiai  
Exhibition in Samogitian Museum 'Alka'



Fig 7. Medal Gallery, 1991



Fig 6. XXX Medal Art Symposium in Telšiai, 2014  
Antanas Olbutas  
Copper, 115 x 90 mm



Fig 8. Florence, 1987  
Antanas Olbutas  
Copper, 80 x 100 mm

the beginning, it was a tradition to give-away one medal to the nearby Samogitian Museum 'Alka' (fig. 5), and up to present day the museum has accumulated one of the largest collections of contemporary medals in Lithuania. Symposium participants now also have the opportunity to express their creativity in the field of small sculpture, and the main activity of the symposium is the bronze casting, using ceramic shell technique. The curators, who are also the professors at the VDA Telšiai Faculty, focus on introducing the younger generation to the art of medal. In 2024, the international medal and small sculpture symposium in Telšiai celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. During those four decades, Antanas did not miss a single symposium (fig. 6).

### Medal Gallery

After the first medal triennials, there was a need to establish a medal gallery. Through the mediation of the Union of Lithuanian Artists, the Vilnius City Municipality

allocated premises, and after a long renovation, in 1991, during the preparation of the III Republic-wide Medal Triennial, the Medal Gallery was opened (fig. 7). Before that, the first exhibition was exhibited in the current Presidential palace of the Republic of Lithuania, and the second in St. John's Church. It was the first and only gallery in the Baltic countries dedicated to this field of art, and Lithuania's neighbours looked on with admiration at this new space. The gallery displayed not only medals, but also other forms of art, mainly three-dimensional: sculpture, ceramics...

Foreign artists, mostly Latvians and Estonians, also exhibited their works in the Medal Gallery. And artists who came from other countries, like England, France, Germany, Bulgaria, the USA and Japan, especially emphasized the uniqueness and high artistic level of Lithuanian medals.



Fig 9. XXII FIDEM congress in Helsinki, 1990



Fig 10. XXII FIDEM Helsinki, 1990  
Masaharu Kakitsubo  
Copper, 80 x 84 mm

Antanas also had a dream to open a Medal Museum with the display of historical and contemporary medals. Unfortunately, this idea did not take physical form. And ten years later, when the gallery changed its director, unfortunately the name and exhibition direction was changed as well.



Fig 11. Kari Huhtamo, 1987  
Antanas Olbutas  
Copper, 90 mm

### FIDEM

Antanas Olbutas nostalgically remembers a trip to Italy in 1987: ‘With the artist Rimantas Dichavičius, we visited Milan, Rome, Florence... and after returning from the trip, full of inspiration, I created medals reflecting it’ (fig. 8). This trip gave Antanas an impulse not only for his creativity, but also to expand his exhibition activities internationally. During the wave of national revival, *Sąjūdis* Antanas was already looking for the pathways to the world, and not only to explore it, but also to introduce Lithuanian culture to the world.

Lithuania started participating in FIDEM activities while it was still a part of the Soviet Union: ‘In the year 1990, the Lithuanian boxing team took our double-sided medal collection to Finland to the XXII congress in Helsinki, and we were exhibiting already as an independent state’ (fig. 9). The works of five artists were exhibited: S. Žilienė, L. Raibstein, R. Inčirauskas, P. Repšys and A. Olbutas. Unfortunately, the medals of these Lithuanian artists were not recorded into the 1990 FIDEM catalogue, because the information about the exhibition was received late.

The relatively small exhibition of Lithuanian medals was of interest to the participants and visitors of the congress in two aspects: as the first Baltic country to regain independence (Estonia and Latvia did not submit works yet) and as a new promising member appearing in the general panorama of FIDEM. Russian delegates A. V. Kosareva, author of the book *The Art of the Medal*, and D. V. Robinson, a well-known collector and art critic, independently approved the collection of medals with the inscription ‘Lithuania’, although they assessed it as a great loss of Soviet medal production (fig. 10).

Realizing the difficult economic situation of Lithuanian artists of that period, FIDEM allowed participation in exhibitions without paying a membership fee in the first



Fig 12. *Hiroshima Nagasaki*, 1986  
Antanas Olbutas  
Copper, 135 mm



Fig 13. *Artist H. Natalevičius*, 1998  
Antanas Olbutas  
Copper, 80 mm

year. On the other hand, the works exhibited in Finland and also XXIII FIDEM in London (1992) were donated to the organizers. The British Museum sent a letter of thanks for the 14 medals that told about such Lithuanian historical light bearers as Kristijonas Donelaitis, Pranciškus Smuglevičius, Vydūnas, etc. The given collection was a sign of national upsurge.

In 1998, as many as 14 Lithuanian artists participated in the FIDEM congress in The Hague (Netherlands), where a film about the Lithuanian medal art was shown and the monumental publication *Lithuania in Medals* by Vincas Ruzas was presented, which attracted a lot of attention from collectors and museums.

Antanas has been FIDEM delegate for Lithuania from 1990 till now – 34 years (fig. 11).

### Work

Antanas Olbutas is a monumental minimalist with a distinctive character. His work is best described by the art critic Eglė Dean:

His easily recognizable stylized figures of elongated proportions are usually composed in an empty space, excluding all unnecessary details. Olbutas works seem to transport the viewer to an abstracted world, far from the perception of realistic art [fig. 12]. This method of creation is usually based on intuition, which, as the art theorist Rudolf Arnheim has alleged, is like a gift from nowhere and can sometimes be attributed to superhuman inspiration. Intuitive insights, compared to the intellect that looks for lines and mathematical formulas, do not lend themselves to analysis and do not require it. But to grasp the implications and propositions, some effort is required – an object discovered after a struggle is always more pleasant than the one that is obvious. Olbutas works also, by



Fig 14. *Theater*, 2009  
Antanas Olbutas  
Bronze, 80 x 113 mm

applying intuitive knowledge, allow us to perceive the entirety of the object, giving them an additional dimension of reality. The artist transforms reality by searching for the essential characteristics of the object [fig. 13].

The stylization of form in Olbutas works is not a self purpose. In stylized forms, he depicts the essential features of the object, creating a whole that embodies the multi-layeredness, contradictions and fluctuations. The German sociologist and philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote that only when separated from empirical reality can a work of art become a presence of a higher level. Does this mean that art has to be simple? Indeed, Antanas Olbutas work is typical of the era of postmodernism, when art returns to its primordial roots. (Dean, 2014).

During Antanas Olbutas 50 years of creative work, most of his time was dedicated to public activities: organizing exhibitions, projects, expertise, gallerist activities, and so on. By doing so, he made a huge contribution to the development of not only Lithuanian, but also foreign



Fig 15. *Motherhood*, 2005  
Antanas Olbutas  
Copper, 110 x 65 mm

medal art. Therefore, sincerely thanking Antanas Olbutas for his titanic work, and on the occasion of two anniversaries, colleagues wish him good health and to continue walking joyfully along the creative paths of the great Muse (fig. 14).

In conclusion, I would like to quote Antanas' thoughts from the catalogue of the 6<sup>th</sup> Republic-wide Medal Triennial held in the year 2000:

Life engraves itself again and again into the soul. As if into a medal – painfully, gently. The echo of this process is the birth of a medal. A medal whose shape and material unwillingly, but sometimes spontaneously, changes: flat, sleek, angular, repeating the signs of nature; the delicate shine of bronze, brass, aluminium, copper, silver, gold; talking glass, wood, paint, stone.

An avalanche of ideas. Only some of them take forms that touch you, talk to you, move away, but return, confirming their acceptance. Maybe when Day and Night fit in a small medal – the mirror of the whole world and soul. Or vice versa. Or both together [fig. 15]. Much like the metal and feeling that express the life of the medal. We get

lost in everyday life, poetry, God's words, nature, labyrinths of thoughts, we enter the paradise of the medal and we do not realize if it is what we were looking for, because no one tells the truth about the medal. Nobody knows it. A medal is a magnet – attracting, following or leading, and a sign of the soul for the creator. No one knows the truth about the medal. It speaks the truth itself.

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