

Theo van de Vathorst (1934-2022)

– A celebration of life and art

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Smile inducing art

On the 21st of January 2022, the Dutch sculptor and medallist Theo van de Vathorst passed away in his hometown Utrecht. During the 88 years of his life, he developed extraordinary skills and true craftsmanship. He had the ability to present the result of his work as something likable and seemingly simple. Because he had the gift to combine artistic quality with a wink of an eye, his artworks always have a certain level of accessibility for the onlooker. He evoked in the viewer a mixture of enjoyment and admiration for the original approach to the subject. The intimate and narrative character of his designs were always linked to a pleasant feeling in the hand, which resulted in ‘gemstones’ of medals.

I like to characterize his style as a combination of the art of Peter Paul Rubens – showing somewhat corpulent human figures – with the view of life visible in the satirical and imaginative art of Jheronimus Bosch, and a little zest for life à la *Henri Matisse*. In recent years, various articles about Theo and his work have been published, including in *The Medal* and in Dutch numismatic magazine *De*

Beeldenaar (see a short list at the end of this text). I gratefully made use of these texts for this article.

The first depicted medal (fig. 1) resembles the shape of a Japanese netsuke. The title is *King of Shackles*. The king of shackles – or handcuffs – is known through his appearance in the circus or at the fair as someone who has a special skill in freeing himself. According to Theo, ‘this strong medal could symbolize the struggle that man must fight to free himself from limitations before he can deliver a performance.’ And seeing this medal, it also shows the ability of the artist to make optimal use of the limited space a medal offers. ‘Thinking in space’ stimulated him, because he was forced to find his form within the circle. For him, form compulsion lead to form discovery. Looking at Theo’s work, is – over and over again – looking at rounded shapes and at lots and lots of little humans, moulded and deformed into small, always recognisable caricatures.

Theo not only depicted humans and he not only created medals. He made several monumental sculptures and



Fig 1. *King of Shackles*, 1994
Theo van de Vathorst
Bronze, 70 mm
Photo: www.laurensschulman.nl



Fig 2. *The Snail*, 1973
Theo van de Vathorst
Bronze

Photo: Willem Nabuurs, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0

numerous drawings and paintings. Size didn't really matter. It could be anything from a small doodle on a chicken egg to an enormous snail (fig. 2) of approximately 2 meters high, on a roundabout in the quarter Vathorst, part of the Dutch town of Amersfoort. In this same quarter, next to the train station Vathorst, the big vaults of the Rijksmuseum are situated. You can imagine that I visit the vaults frequently and – even frequently – think of Theo.

Creating unity

A couple of weeks before Theo died, a small exhibition was organized in a shop at the Oudegracht 341 in Utrecht. The exhibition was opened on the first of January 2022. Throughout his life, Theo remained true to the basic sculptural values. At the same time, he bent the rules to be able to tell his own story. He believed that literal imitation of nature would only lead to dullness. About the anatomical deformation he said: 'I look for compactness as much as possible.' This is well visible on the *Saint Martin's Medal of Honour* (fig. 3), with an equestrian. The head and neck of the horse are shrunken. It is unmistakable a human sitting on the back of the horse, although also here, Theo bent the rules to make it easier to place the human on the medal. The legs are shortened and the head is no thicker than the upper arm. But this absolutely does not impact on the final result as a powerful medal. It was a commission from the municipality of Utrecht. The city government wanted a medal of merit for people who have been active in promoting cultural activities for several years. Whoever thinks that there is no link between



Fig 3. *Saint Martin's Medal of Honour of the city of Utrecht*, 1986
Theo van de Vathorst
Bronze, 63 mm
Photo: www.laurensschulman.nl



Fig 4. Coat of arms of the city of Utrecht on a gable stone
Photo: www.gevelstenen.net

obverse and reverse, has to look again. The equestrian on the obverse – on the left – is Saint Martin, the patron saint of the city of Utrecht. Saint Martin was known for helping other humans. What he is doing becomes clear on the reverse, where you see him in the same pose, with a sword cutting his robe in two to give half of it away to a beggar. The result resembles the shape of the coat of arms of the town of Utrecht (fig. 4). There is yet another layer of information on this medal. The saint symbolises the receiver of the medal. The medal is donated by a small figure – a member of the community council – on the left side of the reverse.

Theo van de Vathorst liked the challenge of the limited space of the medal and above all, to combine obverse and reverse in a unity. Theo said for an article in *The Medal*: 'I can't find a solution every time I make a medal, that would be too good to be true.' But if it works out, it's a surprise for the onlooker. It provides a shift of expectations, from one reality to another. Obverse and reverse are also in balance on the *Welcome medal* (fig. 5). The P and K on the depicted medal refer to *PenningKunst*, Dutch for Medal Art. The lady holding the medal on the obverse, appears to be sitting next to a man holding the K on the reverse. They are holding each other with their free hands. Theo designed this medal for free as a welcome-medal for new members of the Dutch Art Medal Association. For Theo, it was important that the medal, like a well-bound book, fits comfortably in the hand and, as it were, requires you to turn it over. Together, the composition, size and weight make it a nice medal with a happy atmosphere.



Fig 5. *Welcome medal for new members of the Dutch Art Medal Association, 1987*

Theo van de Vathorst

Bronze, 35 mm

Photo: www.laurensschulman.nl

On the medal *Ten Years Numismatic Circle Utrecht* (fig. 6), the obverse and reverse are linked by the arm of the man, his hand holding yet another medal with the text [translated] ‘10-year anniversary 1982’ and again the coat of Arms of Utrecht. Intriguingly, the intimate face on the obverse – chubby as usual on his medals – resembles his own face. And this is hardly a surprise, since Theo once said, ‘you always make yourself.’

Unique style

The sculptor and medallist studied at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten – the State Academy of Visual Arts – in Amsterdam from 1957 to 1962. These were important years for him because he was taught by Piet

Esser. As Redeker wrote in 1986, probably Esser stimulated his great love and his special skills for bronze and, as it would later become apparent, his outspoken talent for the art of medals. After Theo left the academy, he lived and worked in the Dutch town of Utrecht. His oeuvre spans approximately 60 years. Through the continuous flow of his works of art, Theo has left an important mark on the arts over the Netherlands in the past decades.

Medals were often on top of his mind. Some 25 years ago for instance, Theo made new bronze doors (figs. 7 and 8) for the Domkerk (Cathedral) in his hometown. Remarkable is the round image on top, where Saint Martin is sharing his robe with a beggar. With a diameter of over



Fig 6. *Ten Years of the Numismatic Circle Utrecht, 1982*

Theo van de Vathorst

Bronze, 38 mm

Photo: www.laurensschulman.nl



Fig 7. Theo van de Vathorst in front of the doors he created for the Utrecht Domkerk (cathedral)
Photo: www.oud-utrecht.nl

2 meters, Theo referred to this as ‘my biggest medal.’ The other way around, the movement of the arm on his medal about a silver wedding anniversary (fig. 9), symbolises intimacy and confidentiality. Moreover, it makes the scene lively. It now seems as if the couple is not posing: they are caught by the artist while they are happily talking to each other. Theo said about this: ‘I tried to give the atmosphere I found, a happy twist.’ After creating a medal about his 60th wedding anniversary (fig. 10), the artist was asked if he somewhat was guided by other medal examples

when designing his own medal. Theo replied briefly and concisely: ‘The ideas for the approximately 150 medals I made, are all pulled from my own hat.’

J. Sanford Saltus Medal

The medal about *Cornelis Crone* (fig. 11) is the last medal design by Theo. It was his 151st medal. It is about a poet and writer who lived and worked in Utrecht. The text on the reverse is from Crone: ‘... and the further he went,



Fig 8. Doors of the Utrecht Domkerk, 1996, and detail picture of the round medallion
Theo van de Vathorst
Bronze
Photos: www.oud-utrecht.nl



Fig 9. 25th Wedding Anniversary of Bert van Beek and Ria de Lange, 1992

Theo van de Vathorst

Bronze, 90 mm

Amsterdam Museum, inv. 1751

Photo: Amsterdam Museum



Fig 10. 60th Wedding Anniversary of Theo and Marja, 2020

Theo van de Vathorst

Bronze, 60 mm

Photo: De Beeldenaar

the longer was his return journey ...' Theo had problems shaping this subject in a round medal. On his deathbed, he chose a square medal. Under his supervision, the medal was completed by his son and granddaughter.

Theo was always busy. He used to say 'my wealth is in my hands.' He was also busy for FIDEM. In 1992 for instance, when he – together with the Dutch artist Jos Reniers – made a big search through London, looking for a plank for their stand at the medal fair. And in 1998 he was one of the persons involved creating the FIDEM exhibition in the Netherlands. And all his work was well received. In 1997, during a meeting of the Dutch Art Medal Association, he

received the royal decoration Knight in the Order of the Dutch Lion for his work. Eight years later, in 2005, he also received the J. Sanford Saltus Medal.

After his death, several obituaries were published. In one of the local newspapers was stated amongst others: 'After decorating the city with often smile-inducing, special statues (fig. 12), reliefs and medals, Theo van de Vathorst, at the age of 88, exchanged Utrecht for eternity in peace and quiet. Theo was a friendly man with a great sense of humor – his signature through all his works. Theo was an infectious optimist who knew no greater pleasure than drinking a glass of wine with friends. He is now enjoying



Fig 11. *Cornelis Crone* (poet and writer from Utrecht), 2022
Theo van de Vathorst
Terracotta, 65 x 65 mm
Photo: De Beeldenaar

a well-deserved rest and leaves behind his loved ones, friends and admirers, generously showered by him with fond memories and thoughts.’

More information

www.vandevathorst.nl



Fig 12. *Under Mother's Umbrella*, 1966
Theo van de Vathorst
Bronze
Swimming pool Den Hommel, Utrecht
Photo: photographer Gemeentearchief Utrecht,
collection Het Utrechts Archief, inv. 60169

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