

Medals by committee – the *Histoire Métallique* of Louis XIV

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Fig 1. Ceiling of the Salon de l'Abondance, Versailles

While some medals are the result of the initiative of individual artists, many are by commission and often based on a theme or design created by a committee; the medals of Louis XIV present an extreme case of such medallic creation.

In 1660, Gaston, duke of Orléans, bequeathed a large collection of ancient coins to his nephew Louis XIV. By all accounts, Louis had a passionate interest in these coins, and in 1684 made their housing a major feature of Versailles, as this former hunting lodge was being transformed into a grand palace.¹ The home of the numismatic collection was to be the Cabinet des Médailles, a room strategically placed for visits both by the king between chapel and bedtime and for visitors making the grand tour of the palace.² On the way, they would pass through the antechamber to the Cabinet des Médailles, called the Salon de l'Abondance for its magnificent trompe-l'oeil ceiling with its mythological depictions of deities concerned with wealth, minting, and architecture (fig. 1).³

The few who were lucky enough to be invited to the inner sanctum holding the royal collections would progress through a rich door, flanked by paintings and busts into



Fig 2. Entrance to the Cabinet des Médailles, Versailles

the Cabinet itself (fig. 2). As the Cabinet was rebuilt in 1750 to house a gaming room, we must rely on the descriptions of contemporaries and a drawing made by a Swedish visitor to reconstruct its interior.⁴ The original cabinets that housed the collection, however, survive, as do the inlays for the drawers that held the coins, and the sheets of illustrations and descriptions that described the collections within the cabinets.⁵

The collection was under the direction of Jean Foy-Vaillant, who before the move had published a catalogue of bronze coins of the Roman emperors.⁶ Such bronze coins, especially the large ones called *sestertii*, were highly prized by Renaissance collectors and scholars, many of whom believed that they were not monetary and constituted a *Historia Augusta*, a medallic history of the reign of an emperor. This concept was taken up by some Renaissance rulers who sought to convey the high points of their reigns by having bronze medals struck of about the same size and format as the Roman coins.⁷

French medals of the early modern period, on the other hand, were usually cast and significantly larger than the *sestertius*, though following in many cases their general format, as in the case of the 1603 medal by Guillaume



Fig 3. Medal for the birth of the dauphin, 1603
Guillaume Dupré
Cast bronze, 65 mm
London, British Museum, G3,FrM.21



Fig 4. Medal of Louis XIV and his mother Anne of Austria, 1643
Abraham Dupré
Cast bronze, 50 mm
London, British Museum, M.2275

Dupré celebrating the royal dauphin, son of Henri IV and Marie de Medici (fig. 3).⁸ Some of the early medals of the reign of Louis XIV were cast like those of his predecessors, as in the 1643 medal of 52 mm diameter by Abraham Dupré depicting Louis and his mother Anne of Austria (fig. 4).⁹ Technical innovations such as the screw press allowed the French mint of the seventeenth century to strike larger medals than had formerly been possible, as seen in the medal of Jean Warin of 1643 for the same event, struck with a diameter of 57 mm (fig. 5).¹⁰

Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis's first Minister of State, worked on many fronts to systematize the reign of Louis

XIV. One of these was to create a Small Academy in 1663, small by reference to the larger Académie Française, created three decades earlier to define the French language by the elaboration of a dictionary.¹¹ The Small Academy was charged with the production of a history of the reign by the creation of a uniform series of medals: these were to be along the lines of the Imperial Histories believed to be conveyed by Roman coins. Its members were highly respected literary figures, but at first it had no one with a background either in ancient coins or in the creation of medals. This body was soon renamed the Académie des Médailles, and eventually its meetings were moved to Versailles. With the death of Colbert came a new overseer,



Fig 5. Medal of Louis XIV and his mother Anne of Austria, 1643

Jean Warin

Struck silver, 55 mm

London, British Museum, G3,FrM.26



Fig 6. Medal for the Siege of Tortosa, post-1648

Hercule le Breton

Struck bronze, 56 mm, restrike

From Jacquot, 1968

and four new members, one of whom was a numismatist, and two, Racine and Boileau, among the major writers of seventeenth century France.

With few medals produced in the three decades since their founding, the members of the Academy were confronted in 1693 by the publication of a book by an unauthorized outsider, a Jesuit named Ménestrier, who published images of the medals produced sporadically over the previous five decades to form a history of the reign.¹² The Academy sprang into action and charged Racine to make a list of important events of the reign and Michel Molart, engraver

at the Mint, to make new designs – or to copy them in the cases in which there had already been a medal.¹³

In 1695, the Academy took on the name of Académie des Inscriptions, the name it bears today as Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. However, its members received a major setback when the royal supervisor informed them that the size of the medals to be produced would have to be 41 mm rather than the planned 70.¹⁴ All of the designs they had made from existing medals and for new ones would have to be reduced to the new module. This decision had the perhaps unintended result



Fig 7. Medal for the Siege of Tortosa, post-1648
Jacques Roettiers and Michel Molart
Struck bronze, 71 mm, restrike
From Jacquot, 1968

of making the resultant medals, struck mainly in bronze, into a series similar in size as well as format to the *sestertii* of the Roman Empire. In all, the Academy created and approved more than 300 reverse designs, of which 286 would eventually be produced.

The planning and production of obverses were relatively simple, as the mint engraver Jean Mauger was given the task of creating 8 obverse dies of the king at various ages that could be paired with the appropriate reverses.¹⁵ Though there are no official records of the discussions of the Academy as to the creation of legends and scenes for the reverses, an unofficial manuscript, now in the British Museum, carries much information about the process. Its publication and explication by Josèphe Jacquot remains the closest guide to the series of medals of Louis XIV.¹⁶

The creation of medals for the victorious siege of the Catalan city of Tortosa in 1648 allows us to see the Academy's process as it was worked out.¹⁷ Medals for the conquest were struck by the mint in the years after the event in two versions, one of 56 mm diameter by Hercule le Breton (fig. 6) and one of 71 mm diameter by Michel Molart (fig. 7).¹⁸ Though they shared the same general iconography and inscriptions, these medals differed in such features as the decorations of the prow of the ship and the rendering of the sea beneath the rock on which the personification of the besieged city sits. On the basis of these two earlier issues, the Academy had produced a design for a 70 mm medal that simplified the prow of the ship and the rendering of the sea (fig. 8).¹⁹ The motion



Fig 8. Project for 70 mm medal for the Siege of Tortosa, pre-1694
From Jacquot, 1968



Fig 9. Design for the reduced size 41 mm medal for the Siege of Tortosa
Sébastien Leclerc
From Jacquot, 1968



Fig 10. *Médailles sur les principaux événements du règne de Louis le Grand, avec des explications historiques par l'Académie Royale des Médailles et des Inscriptions*, Paris, 1702, p. 26

brought before the Academy to accept the sketch in 1694 contained the explanation of the depiction of the city as a turreted maiden, as was the convention on ancient coinage. In the face of the necessity to redo the design from 70 mm to 41, the Academy had the mint designer Sébastien Leclerc draw a new sketch, which followed the earlier versions in most respects (fig. 9).²⁰

The members of the Academy were charged not only with creating and approving the designs for the reverses of 286



Fig 11. Engraving of the medal for the Siege of Tortosa, 70 mm, *Médailles* (1702), p. 26

medals, they were also expected to produce an elegant book setting the medals in their historical context. Small wonder that it took another seven years to achieve both goals. In the end, their book would be the only official history of Louis's reign published during his lifetime. The book, published in 1702 was issued in the grandest of royal bindings, with one medal per page, facing a blank page.²¹ At the top of each page is an image of the medal in question – engraved and printed in the originally envisioned 70 mm diameter rather than the 41 mm module that the medal was to be struck in (fig. 10).

The personified city for the Tortosa medal as it appears in the book is facing in the opposite direction from all earlier versions and the ship's stern is depicted rather than its prow (fig. 11).²² We have no information as to the timing of this change nor the rationale for it. The medal as it was issued in 1702 has an obverse with the earliest bust of



Fig 12. Medal for the Siege of Tortosa, as issued in 1702
Struck bronze, 41 mm, restrike
From Jacquot, 1968



Fig 13. Medal for the Siege of Tortosa, as issued in 1723
Struck bronze, 41 mm, restrike
From Jacquot, 1968

Louis by Mauger, and a reverse similar to the engraving in the book (fig. 12).²³ The differences between the engraving in the book and the struck medal are best explained by the contraction of the design to the smaller module required for the series. As the Academy took credit for the reverse images and inscriptions, the engravers of the dies for the reverses were not identified on the medals.

The monumental work of the Académie des Inscriptions in the production of the almost 400 uniform medals and the deluxe book was poorly received; immediate complaints of historical, linguistic and artistic flaws led to the issue of a new edition twenty years later, incorporating the final acts of the king, who died in 1715. In the 1723 version of the medal for the capture of Tortosa, the entire ship has been removed, perhaps in recognition of how crowded the image had become with the reduction in size (fig. 13).²⁴

In the two centuries since the issues of the 1702 and 1723 series of 41 mm medals of Louis XIV, the dies and punches have remained in the French mint and have been used for the creation of restrikes with little attention to the series represented or the original pairings of obverse and reverse. It remains to students of the medal to reconstruct the work that the Académie des Inscriptions worked so hard to produce.

NOTES

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