

The Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia of the Italian State Mint, a path between history and art — Laura Cretara and the reality of our times

Rosa Maria Villani

The Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia, with a great cultural vision, was established by Royal Decree No. 486 of 14 July 1907 with the aim of creating, within the Royal Mint, a highly specialised school on the particular techniques of engraving and bas-relief. It was founded in the wake of the impulse given at the beginning of the 20th century to schools related to industrial and applied arts.

Since the Unification of Italy, coins and medals have been objects of particular attention, as they convey the symbols and identity of a nation and, at the same time, they are an important means of artistic expression, which in our country has ancient origins and traditions.

In 1900 King Vittorio Emanuele III, a collector of coins, gave new impetus to coinage from an aesthetic and technical point of view. In 1905, the Technical Artistic and Numismatic Commission was established by the King at

the Ministry of Treasury, consisting of personalities from the worlds of art, numismatics and institutions, with the task of analysing every aspect of monetary art and technique.

At the same time, a competition was announced for Italian artists for new coin issues. The results of the competition were judged unsatisfactory and difficulties arose in selecting a new Chief Engraver for the Royal Mint. Thus, the Commission was given the task of organizing specific courses on the art of medals and minting for the rebirth of this art.

After a long analysis and extensive debate, in 1907 the Government decided to establish a specific art school within the 'coin factory', the Mint, not linked to any academic institutions.¹

Therefore, the School was conceived to be in close relationship with the Mint factory, as the production was not considered detached from 'artistic creation'. Furthermore, in those years, the Italian Mint building was under construction in Via Principe Umberto in Rome: the factory (the Mint), the school (the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia) and the museum (the Mint Museum) were all in the same building, to perpetuate and 'show' the tradition (fig. 1).²

To be admitted to the School, young artists had to complete a course in art studies and to pass the admission exams.

The course of study included two ordinary subjects: modelling and composition of coins, medals, plaques and seals, and steel engraving. The first teacher of modelling was Giuseppe Romagnoli (fig. 2), also first Director of the School, who remained in office until 1954. The teaching of steel engraving was assigned to the chief engraver of the Royal Mint, Luigi Giorgi, who deceased in 1912 and was succeeded in 1913 by Attilio Motti. The first Board of Directors included prominent personalities of art and culture, including Giulio Monteverde, Corrado Ricci,



Fig 1. Coin depicting the Mint Building, 1927

Attilio Motti

Struck, bronze, 80 mm

Historical and educational collection, Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia - IPZS

Photo: IPZS



Fig 2. *Adolfo Venturi*, 1920
Giuseppe Romagnoli
Cast, bronze, 100 mm

Historical and educational collection, Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia - IPZS
Photo: IPZS

Adolfo Venturi (fig. 2), Giulio Aristide Sartorio and Eugenio Maccagni.

From then, great masters have succeeded one another in teaching. In addition to the already mentioned Romagnoli, Giorgi and Motti, we remember Mario Baiardi, Ercole Drei, Pietro Giampaoli, Guerrino Mattia Monassi, Francesco Giannone, Guido Veroi and Laura Cretara. Over time, countless students left a tangible sign of their activity at the School, among them Aurelio Mistruzzi, Bernardo Morescalchi, Publio Morbiducci (fig. 3), Andrea Spadini, Orlando Paladino Orlandini and many others, including all the engravers of the State Mint until today.

In 1978, the Mint, the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia, and the Museum became part of the Istituto Poligrafico, which from that moment assumed the name of Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato (IPZS).

The new administration gave added impetus to the School through the work of Laura Cretara, who has been its Director from 1976 to 2004, the first woman engraver at the Italian Mint, as well as the first woman to sign coins. I'd like to focus on her work, since few coin and medal artists have had such a polyhedric path and, at the same time, a close link to an institution.

In 1961, at just 22 years old, Laura Cretara won the national competition for the role of Mint engraver, thus becoming the first woman to hold this position.

In 1913, another woman had entered a competition for engraver, the sculptor Marcelle Lancelot Croce. The sculptor, who held important positions, was a member of the Technical Artistic and Numismatic Commission and although she had taken the exam and performed the tests, was eliminated by the Council of State because she was



Fig 3. *Sapientia vita populi*, 1914
Publio Morbiducci

Punch made by direct cut engraving on steel, Ø 60 mm, h 48 mm
Historical and educational collection, Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia - IPZS
Photo: IPZS

a woman. The combative Lancelot Croce appealed this decision and the MP Alfonso Lucifero, Undersecretary for Public Education from 1909 to 1910, submitted a parliamentary interpellation on the matter, to which the Undersecretary to the Ministry of Treasury, the MP Pavia, replied in a vague and elusive way.

Despite times had changed, the opinion of the Council of State was also requested in the case of Laura Cretara because, as a woman, she had not fulfilled her military service obligations, required for the assignment of the position. Fortunately, the Council of State deemed the requirement irrelevant, and she was assigned the position.³

Laura Cretara had already crossed the threshold of the Mint building before the competition. In 1957, she was admitted to the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia and studied in the halls of the second floor of the building in Via Principe Umberto until 1959. Ercole Drei and Alfio Castelli were her modelling teachers and Mario Baiardi and Pietro Giampaoli were her engraving teachers. In the same years, she attended sculpture courses at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, with Pericle Fazzini and his assistant at the time, Goffredo Verginelli.⁴ The Academy led her to three-dimensional clay modelling.

In addition, her education had other important inputs both from an artistic, cultural and even ethical point of view from her father Francesco Cretara (1901–1964), a painter, burin engraver, xylographer, graphic designer, partisan and post-war teacher at the Scuola di Rinascita in Rome. Her father had his studio at home and from her earliest years Laura had experienced art as an uninterrupted flow, in which technique and communication through images were a need and a way of being, as well as a job.⁵



Fig 4. Lire 1000, commemorative coin,
Centenary of Rome Capital, reverse,
1970
Laura Cretara
Struck, silver, Ø 31,4 mm
Photo: IPZS

At the time, the chief engraver was Pietro Giampaoli (who retired in 1963), whom she knew from her school days and family relationships. The senior engraver was Guerrino Mattia Monassi and her colleagues included Mario Vallucci, Moreno Moppi, Sergio Giandomenico and, later, Sergio Grossi.

Laura followed the technical phases of the minting, the burin retouching of dies and the different and fundamental steps from the pantographic reduction. She dealt with the appraisal of counterfeit coins and whatever else was entrusted to her. The first years at the Mint's engraving studio were of great impact for the first woman engraver and it has not been easy.

Later, the Mint Management called Laura Cretara to oversee the organization of numismatic and medal exhibitions promoted by the State Mint or any other activity in which it was involved.⁶ She was very active in exhibitions of AIAM – Associazione Italiana dell'Arte della Medaglia, of which she was a member since the early years of its foundation.⁷

These assignments have been an important training ground for Laura Cretara, both culturally and in terms of her organisational skills, but one must also consider that she was partially removed from the production workshops during the same period. The world of the Mint was not ready for the presence of a young and enterprising woman who did everything with passion and energy. In any case, in 1970 she finally managed to make her first coin: the reverse – not signed – of the thousand lire silver coin commemorating the centenary of *Roma Capitale* (fig. 4).

It must be taken into account that, as regards gender equality in Italy, the first law that sanctioned women's access to judiciary and to all public offices dates back to 1963 and the first law for equal pay was enacted in 1977. This gives us an idea of the reticence and difficulties Laura Cretara had to face in the Mint.

In the mid-1970s, the Mint, part of the Ministry of Treasury, was experiencing problems that had been present since the 1950s. The demand for coins and production was very high, therefore the technological structure had to be renewed. There were many trade union initiatives for working conditions and for the development of the Mint.

Laura Cretara, who always took an active part in everything surrounding her, was a member of the works



Fig 5. Coppia, 1972
Laura Cretara
Cast, bronze, 150 x 90 mm
Historical and educational collection, Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia - IPZS
Photo: IPZS

council of the Mint in the early 1970s and there too she was the only woman.

These were intense years for Laura, and she never abandoned her personal artistic research. She had left the Academy but continued in drawing and graphics, a constant practice and necessity, as well as in modelling, cast medals and bronze bas-reliefs. The cast medals of this period show her research in form and material. The relief becomes profound communication, not an exercise but a necessity of doing (fig. 5).

Her interest in doing and in the multiple possibilities of art and her extreme curiosity about the conditions of life led Laura Cretara to an important experience. From 1969 to 1975 two of her friends, both psychiatrists, involved her in a project of artistic activities with the patients of the Santa Maria della Pietà Psychiatric Hospital.⁸ The experience was intense and significant, leading her to further study and to contemplate how the language of drawing and figuration was an instrument of profound expression even in illness. Art as cure, art as dialogue.

In those years, she expressed her commitment also by joining the feminist movement, especially in making

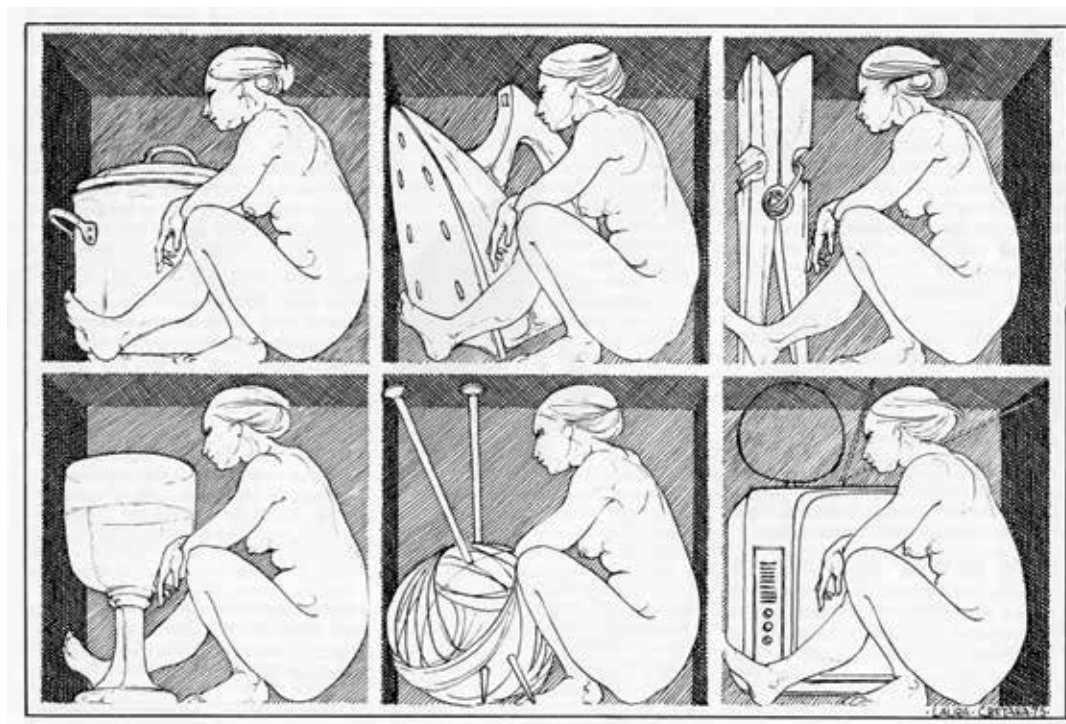


Fig 6. *Confesso sono una spia della CIA*, 1975
Laura Cretara
Illustration published on the magazine *Effe*, April 1975, year 3, no. 3

female art, as a political and social gesture. She created the graphics for posters, illustrations and covers for *Effe*, the magazine of the Women's Liberation Movement, from 1975 to 1977 (fig. 6); she signed illustrations for *Muzak*, a music culture magazine, and in 1977 for the magazine of the National Federation of the Italian Press.

She took part in the Donna-Immagine collective, pursuing the movement's themes in the fields of painting, graphics and comics, and participated in exhibitions with sculptural and graphic works that marked the path of female culture.⁹

Observing these works of political and social commitment is particularly interesting and it is a less-known aspect of Laura Cretara's work. Her works show a remarkable graphic communicative ability. An interest in different forms of communication has always been at the centre of her research, together with a civic passion. Here was a multifaceted and fertile creativity, not linked to the search for style but to complex figurative paths and in-depth study.¹⁰

In 1976 Francesco Giannone resigned from teaching modelling at the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia, a position he had held since 1962. A medallist and teacher of figurative arts, Giannone had trained at the School from 1926 to 1929.¹¹ The Mint management and the School's Board of Directors appointed Laura Cretara as Director of the School and modelling teacher. Again she blazed trail: she was the first woman to hold this position.

In the meantime, as we have seen, important administrative changes were taking place. In 1978, the Mint became part of the Istituto Poligrafico.

In the 70s, the School still offered the same course of study as at the beginning of the 20th Century, although the cultural and economic framework of artistic production

and the 'industrial arts' had changed. The particular reality of the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia needed to be updated in order to restore effectiveness to those innovative principles at the basis of the State 'law' that led to its institution.

As soon as Laura Cretara was appointed, she began to reorganize the historical heritage of the School and to study the reality she had experienced as a student. The main reflection was on the profession of the engraver and the artist who makes coins or medals, a complex and wide-ranging profession that cannot be contained in just two techniques, modelling and engraving. In order to develop the 'tradition', the activities had to be part of a broader education, in which the elements of history and art became tools of innovation.

The new administration was immediately urged to expand the activities of the School.

Her first requests were accepted. The Mint Management asked for the contribution of external professionals to enrich the work of the School and at the same time enhance the know-how by including internal professionals in the teaching staff.

In 1981, courses in embossing-chisel and wax modelling were introduced in the School. Aurelio Mortet, from the historic Roman Mortet workshop, was the first teacher. Concurrently, with Anna Bini from Florence, was activated a course dedicated to the rare technique of fire enamelling on metal, a technique linked to goldsmithing and high craftsmanship in which vitreous powders are transformed into colours, images and translucent surfaces on metal (fig. 7).¹²

Regular courses in materials and production technology were introduced in the School, to study the production



Fig 7. Decorative plate

Embossing and chiselling on copper and enamel plate with 'miniature' technique,
Ø 150 mm

Historical and educational collection, Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia - IPZS
Photo: IPZS, Rosa Maria Villani

processes and machinery of minting and casting, and regular courses in the History of the Art of Coins and Medals. This last course was taught from 1987 to 2020 by Silvana Balbi de Caro.

The direct cut engraving course, held in the 1980s by Franco Pioli, is still a very important activity of the School today, guiding students in the engraving of a minting die and punch directly on metal, an activity that even in the age of digital and CNC machines is of fundamental importance.

In teaching modelling, Laura Cretara transmitted the basics of plastic vision, the study of nude in bas-relief and the fundamental 'grammar' of modelling. This study supported the composition and design of medals and the related forms of communication.

I remember Laura Cretara entering the modelling room (the School's beautiful skylight hall on Via Principe Umberto) and, after going around the easels to give directions to the students, often sitting at the table to model her work with them.¹³

Sometimes she would even bring a tape recorder and we would talk about art, music, literature and whatever else was an opportunity for dialogue. Very often in her lectures, she urged the observation of nature as a generator of forms and symbols. Observing nature has always been important to her, as it is considered the art of the universe from which artists draw their inspiration and study: the human body, leaves and trees, everything that surrounds us.

For Laura Cretara, technique is profoundly and necessarily inherent to art itself. It is an essential prerequisite and, in her words:



Fig 8. *Fortuna*, 1984

Laura Cretara
Xylography, 300 x 220 mm
Private Collection

The 'technical knowledge' and the ability to use it are the prerequisites of artistic expression and making. It is therefore the craft that allows the artistic creation, and it is the knowledge and mastery of its techniques that allows the medium of expression to be adapted to the needs of the idea or to modify the idea according to the tools available. The History of Art is also the history of the techniques, materials and tools that artists of all times have used with expertise and 'craft' skills to give form and life to their creativity.¹⁴

Teaching has not taken Laura Cretara away from her work as an engraver. She developed her work in a transversal way, involving the School in every activity and project entrusted to her.

In that period, she took up xylography, which she had learnt from her father, as a personal study and produced two or three-colour prints in series, usually in runs of 80 pieces. Those were works in which the graphics, the sign, became images that tell stories. Figurativity, as in the black and white drawings, is essential as the sign outlining the figures creates the forms that despite the absence of chiaroscuro are extremely plastic (fig. 8).

In the early '80s, while the School was expanding its interests, the Mint was renewing its production technology and circulation currency. During these years, the first 500 lire bimetallic coin was studied and produced.¹⁵ Laura Cretara followed all this work and carried out the studies



Fig 9. 500 lire, commemorative coin, Bimillenario Virgiliano, obverse and reverse, 1981
Laura Cretara
Struck, silver, Ø 29 mm
IPZS archive photo

for the images and modelling, until the final models of the bimetallic coin, issued in 1982, representing a young head-winged Italy on the obverse and the Quirinal Palace on the reverse.

Among the coins produced by Laura Cretara are the 500 lire commemorative coin of the *Bimillenario Virgiliano* (1981, fig. 9), the 500 and 1000 lire celebrating the XXIII Olympiad for the Republic of San Marino (1984), the divisional series of San Marino dedicated to Columbus on the 5th centenary of the discovery of America (1992), the 500 lire for the Italian Presidency of the European Community (1985), the 100 lire (1993) and 50 lire (1996) circulation coins and the series of six coins for the Italian Republic dedicated to the III Millennium (1998, 1999, 2000). Among these, the one dedicated to *La Comunicazione* (the Communication) was voted the most beautiful coin in the world in 2001 by *World Coin News*.

The coin is an object of art and at the same time an object of use and must express itself in a synthetic way due to the short reading time of the user, to the spatial and technical constraints and the requirements of the issuing authority.

In terms of medal production, many works from these years deserve mention. Through them Laura Cretara developed celebratory themes with creativity and study of the figure and metal material, calibrating language and technique in perfect coherence with the client and destination.

In addition to the many important commissioned works, Laura Cretara has also produced several medals for her personal research, strictly connected to her artistic work and graphics, in a single flow of forms and thoughts.

Going back to the Mint, its foundry was mainly dedicated to the creation of castings for pantographic reductions and small lost wax works. In 1985, the Mint was asked to create a sculpture for the United Nations' building for the International Year of Peace. Laura Cretara, commissioned by the management, was able to resume her 'job' as a sculptor in an institutional context.¹⁶ The sculpture *Pace* was modelled and formed in her studio at the School, like the other sculptures we will talk about later, showing the students and colleagues the design and realisation stages. Its forms are the results of her studies of plastic



Fig 10. Pace, 1985
Laura Cretara
Sketch of the sculpture, cast, silver, 10 x 34 x 40 cm
Historical and educational collection, Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia - IPZS
Photo: IPZS

representation of the human body, which here become forms in space, bodies as expression and signifying matter. The sculpture, made of lost wax cast silver, is 1.50 m high (fig. 10).

This sculpture led to the acquisition and development of technical skills for the Mint's technicians and, throughout the 1990s, the art foundry produced many fine works: lost wax and sand-casting works, art silverworks created in the School and numerous works by authors as Pericle Fazzini, Emilio Greco, Mario Ceroli, Giacomo Manzù, Aligi Sassu, as well as many others.

From 1987, Laura Cretara received other assignments adding the direction of the Mint's Engraving Studio and then of the artistic foundry and of all the artistic activities of the Mint (including exhibitions and visual communication), as well as the direction of the Museum,¹⁷ already part of the School.¹⁸ She gave up direct teaching but also supervised and coordinated all activities and special projects.

Sculpting experiences and the implementation of the art foundry stimulated the need to deepen and develop sculptural creation at the School, like the design and prototyping of three-dimensional objects of applied art and art sculpture, adding further innovations to tradition. In 1992, sculptor and ceramist Vincenzo Rosato was appointed by Poligrafico to teach three specific subjects: three-dimensional design, moulding and life drawing.¹⁹ The courses are currently held by Bruna Gasperini, a sculptor of sacred art and a former student of the School.

New projects and productions are realized in the School. As art director, Laura Cretara designs products for



Fig 11. *Do it yourself*, 1997
Laura Cretara
Three plaster bas-reliefs, 40 x 40 cm
Artist's private collection

commercial distribution, such as the series of artistic paperweights called *Alfabestiaro* and art silverware (sculptural paperknives and silver seal handles), enhancing the work of the School's students and scholarship holders. In this context, she designs and creates *Mani del sole* -*Hands of the Sun* and *Dioniso infante*, two goblets in crystal and lost-wax cast silver.

Cretara's managerial activity does not interrupt her institutional production of coins and medals, just as it does not interrupt her research work.

Do it yourself of 1997 (fig. 11), a triptych of reliefs in plaster, a material she has always loved, depicts three isolated figures in the field of reliefs. The figures are closed in on themselves, modelled with a nervous and expressive material impetuously communicating to us the loneliness of the human being who closes himself in desperate self-referentiality. Laura has often dealt with the human condition in her work, reflecting on its violence and asperity, both personal and social. This is also the case in her drawings, as in *Come le bambole* (1985), *Finestra* (1981) and *Filo rosso* (1975, fig. 12).

Cretara has always calibrated the messages; in her works of personal research, she gives voice to the inner world and to personal reflections. In institutional works, her task is to give voice to the client's message in the best way, with measured balances and spatial relationships, respecting the technique and medium used.

Over time, the School has become a cultural centre for wide-ranging study and research. Many exhibitions have been held reflecting different points of view, those about the historical and artistic heritage of the School and the Mint Museum and those of an informative nature about the Mint's products and activities.²⁰

The School also did technical research work. One of these was the creation of a 1:10 scale reproduction (4.40 m high) of the Antonine Column, realized in the first half of the 1990s from an idea of Guido Veroi, the modelling teacher at the School. The directly 'sculpted' plaster column was later made in galvanic copper for the Roman energy company and is now in storage at the Mint Museum.

In 1992, Laura Cretara realized another sculpture for La Sapienza University in Rome called *Ricerca e Conoscenza*, a bronze sculpture dedicated to medical research, over three meters high, now located in the Umberto I Hospital in Rome (fig. 13).

The School was also involved in the creation of the copy of the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius, now in Campidoglio. A scientific copy made from a PVC model, created by the ICR, was the basis for the modelling work. The work involved young students from the School and the Mint. Laura Cretara carried out the general coordination of the entire project, with the artistic direction of Guido Veroi and the technical direction of Domenico Ponari, a Mint technician and teacher at the School.²¹

On the threshold of the 2000s, the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia experienced another interesting moment: in 1995, in fact, studies for a common currency began among all European mints, putting into practice important technical, productive and economic changes, as well as modifying the symbolic perception and fruition of the coin object. 'United in diversity' was being realised and the currency became a supranational factor of broad communication and cultural comparison.

Studies for the new Euro coinage began in 1995, first at a technical level and then, from 1996, on the iconography and modelling. In 1998, an internal working group was

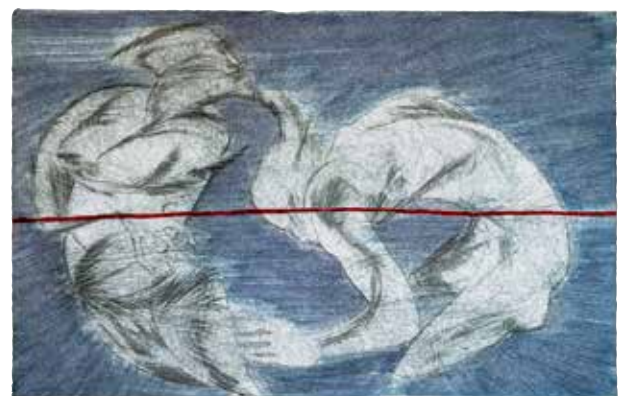


Fig 12. *Filo rosso*, 1975
Laura Cretara
Mixed technique on paper, 50 x 70 cm
Artist's private collection



Fig 13. Laura Cretara working on the model of the sculpture *Ricerca e Conoscenza* (bronze, 3 meter high), 1992
Historical photo

set up at the Mint, directed by Laura Cretara, to design the national obverse.²²

Laura presented many proposals on monuments and works that could represent Italy in Europe, according to the indications of the Ministry of Treasury. Subsequently, the eight subjects were defined and realized by the engravers of the Mint. Laura Cretara's design of the Vitruvian Man was chosen by Treasury Minister Carlo Azeglio Ciampi for the one Euro coin.

The common currency has changed many parameters and visions in European mints. In addition, digital technologies have brought a new revolution in coin technology. In 2001, a computer graphics course was introduced at the School for the acquisition of notions of two and three-dimensional graphics for the creation of sketches for medals and three-dimensional prototypes. In recent years, this work has continued by implementing it with new technical developments and new creative approaches by introducing 3D technologies.

Other subjects have also been introduced in the School: in every moment of technological and social transformation, 'tradition' acquires values of particular interest, and this is reflected to a greater extent in the factors and 'knowledge' that are part of the so-called intangible heritage. The increase of subjects aimed at completing the engraver's profession started in the early '80s and saw its completion in the 2000s, with the 'recovery' and study of techniques, now rare and at risk of extinction, which belong to the history of the professions of art. Engraving and intaglio art printing from engraved plates, which is particularly rare in the world of graphic art today, had been retained by Poligrafico for the printing of security papers. The recovery of this technique was a requirement that the School could not renounce.²³

Among the tasks and interests of the School is the study of historical heritage, and the natural declination of this activity has been restoration. Since 1995, the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia and the Chemical Laboratory of the Mint have been active in the study and conservation of dies and Benedetto Pistrucci's wax models. These important experiences led, in 2001, to the introduction of the restoration of numismatic works course, entrusted to me, given my experience acquired since 1997.²⁴

The semi-precious stone engraving course, directed by Marcello Ripa, was the last to be introduced, enriching the School with a further 'rare' art.²⁵ This technique is close to direct cut engraving on steel, which transforms semi-precious stones into small jewels, or micro-sculptures. Glyptics is an ancient art, in which the hand acts with simple tools in the direct transformation of the stone. But like any transformation of an inert material, such as a stone, the fascination and vitality of creation is perpetuated in the gesture and lives in the object.

In 2003, Laura Cretara made the 10 Euro coin for the Italian Republic dedicated to the Italian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, her last coin for the State.

In 2004, after more than forty years of work, Laura Cretara left the School and the Mint. The responsibility was then handed over to me, and I had to combine coordination with teaching, art direction of projects and artistic and historical studies.

Laura Cretara continued her work as a sculptor and medallist, producing various sculptural works and medals.

I learnt many things from her: the importance of technique as a grammar of creativity and continuous study as a fundamental element in all visual languages; experimentation; the need for transversal visions in the organisation of work.

Over the past 20 years, the School has continued on its path with great tenacity and is still unique in the world. Aspects of the art professions have been developed in relation to technology and production. Special projects have been realised in seemingly distant areas. Techniques for productions such as watermark, chiaroscuro and art printing, glyptics and hard stone, and even high-fire enamelling have been re-evaluated. Recently, we have just completed a sculpture for a church in Foggia, a social work for that community.

We consider projecting and designing as elements not separate from the realization phase. Each activity is inseparable from the design. The students carry out each phase of the work, from the project to the object. We are implementing activities of visual communication in relation to artistic professions and we are also having business management seminars to give students tools for a craft activity.

In essence, the medal now represents the starting and the arrival point of a long series of arts and activities that, connected by the red thread of history, represent an important 'intangible heritage', with developments and projections towards the future and with a single purpose: the excellence of 'know-how'.

In 2018, a multimedia and immersive exhibition was held in the former workshops of the historic Mint building, '*Ars Metallica – material, form and contemporary creativity*, 110 years of activity of the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia', which ended in October 2021, in which a section was dedicated to Laura Cretara. This was an opportunity to underline the history of the School, considering the culture of *savoir faire* as a factor of development, both social and economic.²⁶

The School is also overcoming the two-year period marked by COVID, which blocked many activities and prevented the participation of foreign students, and is now turning to the future.

To conclude, I would like to quote the considerations on the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia of today, not of an artist but of an economist, Stefano Micelli, Professor of Economics and Business Management – Ca' Foscari University:

What is amazing when you look at the students of the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia of the Poligrafico dello Stato is not so much the ability to master the trades that have made the Italian Mint famous throughout the world, but rather the discovery that this know-how is still the basis of experimentation and research in avant-garde production. [...]. The link between tradition and production, alive and explicit in the premises in Via Principe Umberto in Rome, is emblematic of a relationship that is not limited to niche productions, as many might imagine, but which characterises a large part of quality Italian manufacturing.

The School's activity demonstrates the importance of re-proposing with perseverance a knowledge that today represents a heritage for the community and reinforces the belief that this know-how can be effectively revisited in the light of the opportunities offered by new technologies.²⁷

To conclude, I offer few words about the medal dedicated to this congress. The official medal for the XXXVII Congress of the International Art Medal Federation was born from the collaboration between FIDEM and IPZS, which sponsors the medals for the Florentine event.

For this project we have created a working group comprising the third-year students of the ordinary course of the School and seven scholarship holders, students who have already completed the three-year course cycle and who have merited a specialization scholarship.



Fig 14. *Progetto Erasmus – CRUI Conferenza dei Rettori Università Italiane*, 1985

Laura Cretara

Plaster model for medal, Ø 180 mm

Historical and educational collection, Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia - IPZS

Photo: IPZS

We held an online meeting between Dr. Philip Attwood, President of FIDEM, and the students to address the themes and the cultural inputs that needed to flow into the creativity process.

The working group has then been guided into an analysis and research phase, a sort of brainstorming, to process all the information together into possible compositional and technical choices, before moving on to the individual project phase.

Each student and scholarship was allowed the utmost freedom of expression, the only 'fixed points' being the visual story of the essence of FIDEM, the Congress itself and the city of Florence.

The judging commission, composed of Dr. Philip Attwood, Dr. Valeria Vettorato, curator of the Bottacin Museum in Padua, and Dr. Rosa Maria Villani, evaluated 19 projects. The choice of the winning medal has not been an easy one, as all the works submitted expressed interesting levels of technique and creativity.

The winning medal was designed by Gabriele Carboni, a third-year student.

On the obverse, three intersecting circles depict medals, while on the right a straight line represents the timeline of History that has continuity in the present: on its left, vertically: XXXVII; on its right: FIDEM. On the reverse, on the right, an ideal medal is depicted in which an eye is evoking the gaze, while the intersecting planes and shapes represent the inseparable relationship between the historical and contemporary medal.

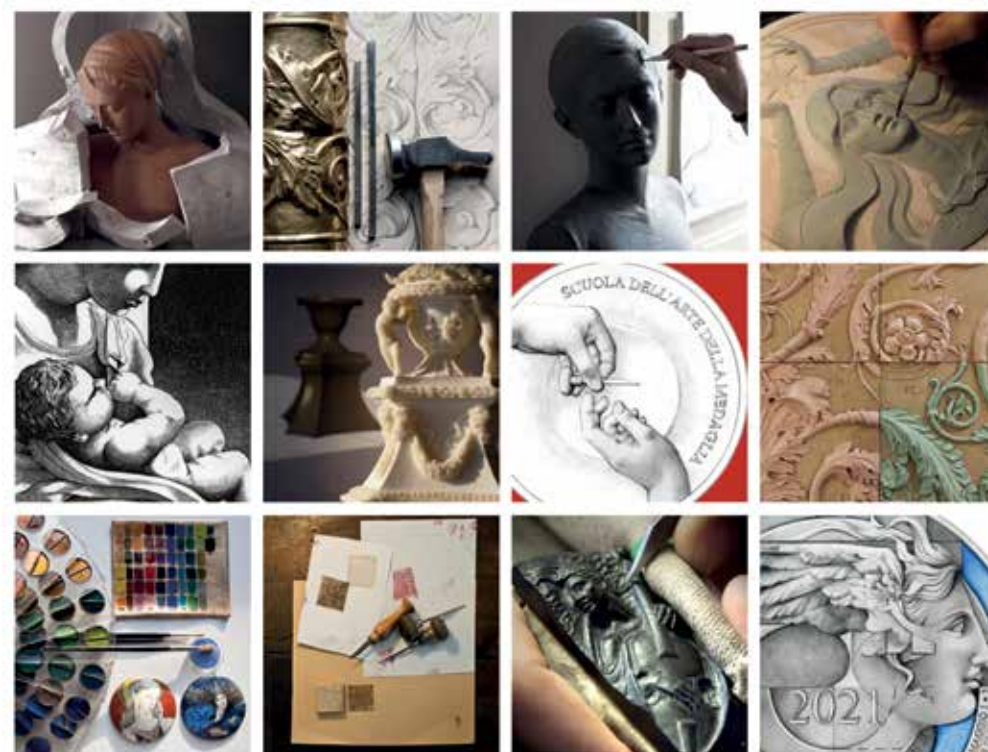


Fig 15. Activities of the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia
Photo: Rosa Maria Villani

The other three finalist projects also deserve a mention as, here too, technique and creativity reached high levels.

Scholarship holder Mark Owen Asinas presented a project where, on the centre of the obverse, a hand with a compass tracing the circle on a plaster model is depicted; behind, we see tools and models for medals. This to highlight the *savoir-faire* of the art of the medal making and to represent FIDEM as a union of artists and scholars. On the reverse is depicted an ideal view of monuments and buildings of the city of Florence.

Scholarship holder Arianna Persiani presented a plastic graphic composition of iconic monuments of the city of Florence having, as their unifying element, the representation of the golden section. Elements of balance, art, perfection and connection between tradition and contemporaneity are evident. The reverse depicts three female figures, ideally representing the union of several personalities and the connection between different cultures. The figures compose a movement to represent the dynamism of time, taking form in the circle of the medal. Behind, the golden section creates plastic graphic planes.

Scholarship holder Monica Ciucci focused on the female figure depicted on the obverse, representing the City of Florence. The figure is holding a medal with the legend FIDEM and wearing a headdress evoking the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore and medals. Below, a bridge to emphasize the connection between people and cultural exchange. At the bottom, planes recall the river Arno. The reverse depicts an octagon, evoking Filippo Brunelleschi's dome, with the legend FIDEM. In the centre, a medal with the legend is held by two hands.

The medal for the XXXVII Congress of the International Art Medal Federation therefore represents an opportunity for debate at the highest level. It is well known how much the Federation works to promote the art medal and the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia is honoured to contribute to this process of diffusion and development of a dateless and vital art and to have realized this partnership with FIDEM.

For this paper and the speech at the Conference held in Florence, I would like to thank Alessandra Carmenati for the translation and collaboration.

NOTES

1. For the history of the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia: Villani 2007a and Villani 2018a, with previous sources and bibliography.
2. For the history of the Mint building of United Italy: Villani 2007b and Villani 2018b, with previous sources and bibliography; Currà 2018 and Currà 2021.
3. On Marcelle Lancelot Croce and her activity in the Technical-Artistic Commission of the Ministry of Treasury and her attempt to become an engraver of the Mint: Villani 2018a, pp. 185 and 191-192.
4. Oral communication by the artist.
5. Francesco Cretara's studio was a place for artistic and political meetings; he was an illustrator, designer for the Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana-Treccani and advertising graphic designer. Cretara 1959, 1964, 1961.
6. Some exhibitions and related bibliography: *Esposizione internazionale della medaglia religiosa contemporanea*, exhibition cat. Rome, Palazzo Braschi, 14 September - 4 October 1963, Rome, 1963; *La médaille italienne a la Monnaie de Paris*, exhibition cat. Paris, Hotel de la Monnaie, November 1965 - January 1966, Rome, 1966; *Esposizione della medaglia, francese, italiana, spagnola*, exhibition cat. Rome, Palazzo Braschi, 31 March - 30 April 1967, Rome, 1967.
7. For AIAM's activities, direct testimony by Laura Cretara: Cretara 2013, pp. 147-156.
8. Oral communication by the artist and viewing of her study notes from that period. Most of the information on Laura Cretara's activity is verified by viewing the artist's personal archive, as well as by direct testimony.
9. In June 1976 the programmatic document and the exhibition of drawings and graphics *Riprendiamoci l'immagine* was presented at the Polytechnic, with works by Adriana Argentini, Alessia Fani, Cecilia Capuana, Giovanna De Sanctis, Laura Cretara, Renata Mulas, an exhibition that marked the path of female culture. Seravalli 2013, p. 93. Laura Cretara joined the Donna&Arte Association, founded in 1977 on the idea of the sculptor and choreographer Rosanne Sofia Moretti; in 1981 she exhibited at the Palazzo del Capitano in Todi with graphic works at the *Artiste per la Pace* exhibition, organized by the Comitato Unitario delle Donne of Todi: *D&A la donna per l'arte*, a brochure of the exhibition for which Laura Cretara also created the graphics.
10. De Nitto 2018, pp. 235-281.
11. As documented in the archive of the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia.
12. For the development of the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia and its special activities involving Laura Cretara cf. Villani 2018b, pp. 283-328: for fire enamelling technique cf. Bini 2018, pp. 345-351.
13. The writer, after being a student and scholarship holder at the School and hired for the Mint's artistic productions in 1992, began her long career in the mid-1990s working with Laura Cretara on the exhibition activity, dealing also with the study, set-up, design and realization phases of merchandizing products.
14. Cretara 2000, pp.139-142.
15. The production system was patented by Engineer Nicola Ielpo on behalf of the Ministry of Treasury in 1981.
16. The sculpture was made by the Mint on a commission from the Institut Africain de Droit International Privé in agreement with the government of Togo as a gift to the United Nations for the International Year of Peace 1986.
17. Cretara-Villani 2003, pp. 67-74.
18. The School was part of the CNAA (Numismatic and Applied Art Centre), directed by Laura Cretara. From 1987 to 1997 approximately, the CNAA included also the Mint Engraving Studio, the artistic foundry, the medal printing, the enamel workshop, the exhibition office and the Mint Museum. The Museum has been part of the School until 2014.
19. For the approach to sculpture and moulding techniques in the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia: Rosato 2018, pp. 361-365.
20. The exhibition *L'arte della medaglia e della moneta nelle opere della Zecca dello Stato dal 1946* and *L'Oro dei Papi nella collezione numismatica di Vittorio Emanuele di Savoia* (Rome, Palazzo Braschi, 16 May - 15 June 1980), curated by Laura Cretara for IPZS and by Silvana Balbi de Caro for the Archaeological Superintendency, has been the first collaboration between the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia and Silvana Balbi de Caro, and the beginning of a long-standing friendship between Laura and Silvana. For this exhibition, Laura Cretara began to reorganise the historical archive of the School and enhance the medallic works produced in the Mint since the beginning of the century. Of all the exhibition activity, we would like to mention just a few events. The exhibition organised by IPZS with the Mint Senyukai Foundation, Municipal Museum of Art, Osaka, 23 April - 26 May 1991, presented 1800 works from the numismatic collection of the Rome Archaeological Superintendency's Medagliere and medallic works from the Mint Museum and coins of contemporary production of the Mint. It is also worth mentioning the exhibition *Lo scrigno del Cremlino*, organized by the Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato with the contribution of Sicilcassa (Palermo, Palazzo Branciforte, 25 October - 15 December 1994). In the context of the Vicenza Numismatica Fair, themed exhibitions were held in the cultural section of the event. As regards the informative exhibitions, we would like to mention the iconographic and object section curated by the School in April 1997 in the context of the exhibition 'Building Europe together, from the Lira to the Euro', an initiative of the European Commission and the Euro Committee of the Ministry of Treasury, organized for the opening of the Euro currency information campaign and held at the Galleria Colonna (now Galleria Alberto Sordi). As regards the historical-artistic exhibitions we would just like to mention, among many others, the exhibition dedicated to Orlando Paladino Orlandini held at the Mint Museum in 1995, which led to the donation of this sculptor's works by the Orlandini heirs to the Mint Museum in 2004.
21. Cretara 1997, pp. 100-119.
22. The engravers of the Euro coins are Eugenio Driutti and former students of the School in the early 1980s: Maria Carmela Colaneri, Luciana de Simoni, Roberto Mauri, Maria Angela Cassol, Claudia Momoni and Ettore Lorenzo Frapiccini.
23. For the relationship between burin engraving, card engraving and creativity in the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia cf. Morena 2018, pp. 377-385.
24. The restoration course was entrusted to the writer following the experience acquired since 1997 in this field during the activities of the Museum and the Mint. It was the first approach to teaching related to various aspects of the School's activities. For the restoration activities and the technical approach in the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia cf. Villani 2005, pp. 303-318.
25. On the art of glyptics at the Scuola dell'Arte della Medaglia cf. Ripa 2018.
26. Organizing Committee: IPZS, Francesco Bigi, Antonella Carosi, Sabrina Romani, Simone Otero, Maurizio Schito. Scientific project: IPZS - Rosa Maria Villani. Exhibition design: OpenLab Company srl. Artistic direction of the exhibition project: Luca Ruzza OpenLab Company, Rosa Maria Villani IPZS.
27. Micelli 2018, p. 419.

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