

Collecting, studying and display

Medals and plaquettes from the Mario Scaglia collection at the Accademia Carrara

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After more than fifty years of collecting and after the publication of two important scientific catalogues,¹ the Mario Scaglia's medals and plaquettes collection has been donated to the Accademia Carrara, the art museum of the city of Bergamo. The renovated display of the museum, opened in January 2023, now includes part of this incomparable collection of small metallic works of art and Accademia Carrara has already begun its activities to promote and communicate these peculiar objects.

Mario Scaglia began to collect medals and plaquettes many decades ago, acquiring in the most diverse ways, from antique dealers, market stands, fairs, auctions, restorers, and private collectors. He always bought medals following his instinct, his good taste for works of art combined with the technical skills gained in his

engineering studies and his job in the field of precision mechanics industries. The first criterion for purchases has always been the quality of the objects, the quality of the casting process, which above all guarantees authenticity, in the field of small works of art produced in series. After having verified these technical aspects both with autoptic analysis and with books, to compare the different known specimens, the other parameter was, and still certainly is, the provenance.

The Scaglia collection, in fact, includes hundreds of medals that previously were in different important collections of the past. The studies carried out to prepare the catalogue, which was published in 2020, allowed to put together almost fifty names of collectors who owned the medals before Scaglia, and the story that starts from



Fig 1. *Beatriz de Rojas y Castro*, 1611-1615
 Rutilio Gaci
 Bronze, cast, Ø 57 mm
 Bergamo, Accademia Carrara (formerly Mario Scaglia collection, cat. 194)
 Photo: Stefano Di Virgilio



Fig 2. *Matteo Barresi*, 1531
Antonello Gagini (attr.)
Bronze, cast, Ø 99,5 mm

Bergamo, Accademia Carrara (formerly Mario Scaglia collection, cat. 113)
Photo: Stefano Di Virgilio

18th century in Piazza Navona, in Rome, where the medal by Rutilio Gaci for his own wife, Beatriz de Rojas y Castro (fig. 1), was sold.²

One of the most important collections of the 19th century was that of Adalbert von Lanna, who lived in Prague, and in 1911 his Italian and German Renaissance medals were sold through a well printed catalogue, with very good plates illustrating all the objects. The plates

allow to recognize several Lanna medals in the Scaglia collection, such as a small and signed Tegnizza from Cremona. Other remarkable collections are certainly the Hermann Vogel, sold in 1924, the Henry Oppenheimer, sold in 1936 (mostly acquired by the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of New York), the Charles Alexander Loeser, purchased by Scaglia through the restorer Franco Steffanoni in Bergamo, or the Karl Alfred Walcher Ritter von Moltheim.

Certainly, the most important collection from which many of Scaglia's medals come is the Chigi one. Documented with the inventory of the *Guardaroba*, the room where the medals were displayed in the Palazzetto dell'Ariccia, not far from Rome, the Chigi collection counted more or less two-hundred pieces in the year 1674. Part of the collection was sold at Sotheby's auctions in 1974 and 1975, and on that occasion, Scaglia purchased only one piece, the minted medal with the face of the Venetian Tommaso Mocenigo. In the following decades, he traced many other Chigi medals on the market, objects that demonstrate a brilliant quality of casting. The most important Chigi object is a micro-sculpture (it is difficult to call it 'medal'), which depicted *Matteo Barresi* from Pietraperzia, a Sicilian nobleman linked to the emperor Charles V, modelled by the sculptor Antonello Gagini (fig. 2). This small frontal bust was found by Scaglia on the market, purchased in 2014 and, finally, published in the *Burlington Magazine* by Francesco Rossi, former director of the Accademia Carrara.

The role of Rossi, and the role of the museum of Bergamo in Scaglia's history as collector, was already clear in 2011,



Fig 3. Room 4. Venetian Renaissance
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Paolo Da Re

when the director published the catalogue of Scaglia plaquettes.

Accademia Carrara is the only Italian museum entirely comprised of donations from private collectors. Starting with the founder, count Giacomo Carrara donated hundreds of paintings to the city of Bergamo in 1796, with the idea of creating not only a museum, but also an art school, and thus giving to students of the Accademia many excellent examples to copy. Then there were Guglielmo Lochis, the connoisseur Giovanni Morelli and more than two-hundred donors from the beginning of 19th century until today (fig. 3).

Most of the works of art received are paintings. The reasons are the simplest: paintings are more collected than sculptures and they are easier to display in the palaces of the rich and the middle classes. The collection of the Accademia Carrara includes, above all, small paintings, appropriate for a domestic dimension and many portraits, the most typical form of art commissioned by private clients starting from the Renaissance to today.

The first important collection of sculptures came in 1999, when the art historian Federico Zeri donated to the museum his group of fifty sculptures, from the 15th to the 19th century (fig. 4). It was in that precise moment that the museum began to change from a painting gallery (*pinacoteca*) to a museum that possessed both paintings, sculptures, and decorative arts. Federico Zeri's donation reached the museum thanks to Mario Scaglia. They were good friends and Scaglia introduced Zeri to the Accademia Carrara in the eighties, when he wrote part



Fig 4. Room 6. The Zeri collection of sculptures
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Paolo Da Re

of the catalogue of the collection with director Francesco Rossi.

In 2020 Scaglia decided to donate his collection of medals and plaquettes to the museum, becoming the Accademia Carrara's last donor (for now!). He chose the museum of Bergamo for several reasons: first, because it is the museum of collectors; secondly because it is a museum with a notable number of portraits (painted and sculpted) and therefore perfect for Scaglia's collection of medals; thirdly because this new group of small metallic works of art could bring fresh air and write a new page in the history of the museum.



Fig 5. Room 2. Pisanello's portrait of Leonello d'Este and medals
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Paolo Da Re



Fig 6. Room 4. The niche with Saint Jerome's paintings and plaquettes
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Paolo Da Re

In 2021 when we started meetings to discuss the new display of the entire museum, we faced many different questions about the Scaglia collection. How many pieces should we display? Should we separate them from paintings and sculptures? Or should we mix them to make it clear to visitors that they were produced in the same context as larger works of art?

So, after months of meetings, proposals, and ideas, we decided to display 10% of the Scaglia collection and set the objects between paintings and sculptures because the presence of decorative arts in the display is fundamental to restore a chapter of art history that is often not illustrated as that of the major arts.

The first group of medals the visitor encounters in the permanent collection display is the Pisanello group (fig. 5). The Accademia Carrara owns the iconic portrait of *Leonello d'Este*, count of Ferrara, painted by Pisanello. So, the room 2 of the museum thus becomes the only place in the world where it is possible to compare the medallic portraits of Leonello, modelled by Pisanello,



Fig 7. Room 4. The niche with Venetian portraits in paintings and medals
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Paolo Da Re

with the painting. Both were made in the same years and in the same place, by the same extraordinary artist.

In room 4 (fig. 3), the one with some masterpieces of the Venice Renaissance, two niches in the wall display two different groups of objects. In the first, the metaphysical *Saint Jerome* by Alvise Vivarini tells the story of the private devotion that arose around the Croatian saint during the end of 15th and the beginning of 16th century (fig. 6). Not only painted images were used to pray the saint, but also metallic plaquettes, often more common and appreciated in Renaissance homes.

The second niche focus on Venetian Renaissance portraiture, both in painting and medals (fig. 7). A very small portrait of an unknown gentlemen in red and black, attributed to Vittore Carpaccio, is compared with five Venetian medals such as the one with the self portrait of the medallist and die engraver Vittore Gambello (Camelio), an *all'antica* struck medal, and the portrait of the *dogaressa* (the wife of the doge) Giovanna Dandolo.



Fig 8. Room 10. 16th century medals in Venetian Terraferma
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Giulia Zaccariotto

The next room is where Raphael and Botticelli are exhibited. In addition to these undeniable painted masterpieces, we also have sculptures. The terracotta *Angel* by Benedetto da Maiano, recently restored, is displayed next to four medals made in the second half of the Quattrocento: Francesco di Giorgio depicting *Borghese Borghesi* or Adriano Fiorentino portraying *Giuseppe Colombini* from Naples, a good friend of

Lorenzo de Medici, whose brother, Giuliano, is himself in the room, in the iconic painting by Sandro Botticelli.

This idea of comparing paintings and medals is also displayed in room 10 (fig. 8), the Lorenzo Lotto room. Next to each other, you can see some medals modeled in 16th century and some portraits painted by the most important artist of the Venetian *Terraferma*, the land between Venice and Milan. Lotto's *Lucina Brembati's capigliara*, the rich hat around her head, is compared with the *Argentina Rangoni Pallavicini's* one in the medallic portrait made by Antonio Vicentino. However medals and paintings not only have a stylistic bond, but also some historical relationships. *Niccolò Tempesta*, who's medal was cast by Fra Antonio da Brescia, for instance, was the notary of Lorenzo Lotto when the painter was living in Treviso, near Venice. On the reverse, a wonderful allegory of Justice is represented. The bishop *Altobello Averoldi*, who is depicted in a large and beautiful medal by Maffeo Olivieri, was also the Brescian patron of one of the most important altarpieces made by Titian, who is represented in the room with two small paintings. But also, *Mattia Ugoni*, another bishop from Brescia, modelled by a still unknown sculptor: Ugoni was the patron of Alessandro Bonvicino known as Moretto, who painted a *Christ holding the cross* in a gloomy landscape hung near the medal.

In addition to these groups of medals and plaquettes placed between the paintings, there is a room entirely dedicated to metallic works of art from the Scaglia collection (figs. 9-10).

Entering the 'treasure room' means to pass through the *propilei*, two display cases where medals, plaquettes, a sculpture and a painting are mounted (fig. 11). All the objects are referred to the second half of the Quattrocento



Fig 9. Room 5. The Mario Scaglia's collection room
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Paolo Da Re



Fig 10. Room 5. The Mario Scaglia's collection room
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Paolo Da Re

in Ferrara and in Bologna and, above all, the visitor can see medals modelled by the Mantuan Sperandio Savelli, with mysterious reverses, often not yet fully understood.

Then there is a focus dedicated to men's beards in the 16th century. We have thought that a focus on such a curious, and such common topic could also be interesting for less experienced visitors, but, if you go deeper into the captions, you will discover that this is a focus on Venetian mannerism, illustrated through reliefs of different sizes and different materials (fig. 12). The ivory with the portrait of the writer *Ludovico Dolce* and the medal by Danese Cattaneo with the cardinal *Pietro Bembo* are displayed next to the terracotta by Alessandro Vittoria, in which the beard of the sitter, whose name was *Apollonio Massa*, is the main part of the sculpture. The precious terracotta was donated to the Accademia Carrara by Federico Zeri and therefore this group of objects (from Zeri and from Scaglia collections) could also celebrate the friendship between the two donors.

Immediately on the right, there is a selection of plaquettes. If the domestic devotion function is displayed in the niche outside the room (with the focus on Saint Jerome), this selection includes only mythologic subjects, such as the *Labors of Hercules* by Moderno, with his *all'antica* details, but also the larger reliefs by Riccio, such as *Venus and Cupid* or the *Death of Dido*, which we compare with a small panel painted by Vittore Carpaccio, probably part of a wardrobe. This is exactly the type of furniture to which the plaquettes were often attached.



Fig 11. Room 5. 15th century Ferrarese works of art
The Mario Scaglia's collection room, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Paolo Da Re



Fig 12. Room 5. Beards, plaquettes and Baroque medal
The Mario Scaglia's collection room, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Paolo Da Re

Four medals modelled and cast by the French Guillaume Dupré are displayed: the smallest were made during his trip to Italy, when he visited Venice and portrayed the doge *Marcantonio Memmo*. We also see medals from his French years, at the service of the King Henry IV, portrayed with his wife, the Italian Maria de' Medici, in this iconic double portrait in such a large medal (fig. 13).

Another part of the showcase is dedicated to a couple of important popes of the 17th century: *Alexander VII*, who was part of the Chigi family and who was represented in a medal designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini and cast by Gioacchino Francesco Travani. Next is a beautiful cast and gilded medallion for Pope *Innocent XII*: modelled by the young Beatrice Hamerani when she was only 17 years old. This medal, together with the *Holy Family* painted and signed by Sofonisba Anguissola, are the only artworks made by women artists owned by the Accademia Carrara.



Fig 13. *Henry IV and Maria de' Medici*, 1605
Guillaume Dupré
Bronze, cast, Ø 189 mm
Bergamo, Accademia Carrara (formerly Mario Scaglia collection, cat. 459)
Photo: Stefano Di Virgilio



Fig 14. Room 5. Crucifixion: from plaque to painting
The Mario Scaglia's collection room, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Andrea Rossato

A small selection of paxes (*instrumenta pacis* or *osculatoria*) made of different materials including wood, ivory, crystal, glass, bronze, silver, and gold, is shown in a dedicated section. These small and precious works of art were used during the mass, when the priest used to lift them in front of the participants who kissed the surface of the object, as a moment of deep contact with God. A rare Lombard niello of the 15th century and an engraved crystal mounted in a Venetian frame in enamel silver are exhibited. To understand how these objects were used, we chose to display a gilded bronze relief derived from Michelangelo's drawing for his friend Vittoria Colonna (now preserved in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston). By observing the surface of the relief, it is possible to clearly distinguish the point where the pax was kissed, right at the center of the plaquette, where Christ's chest is located.

The Milanese medals produced when the Duchy of Milan was a possession of the Spanish Imperial Court are probably the most remarkable of the Scaglia collection and we are only displaying a part of them.



Fig 15. The Scaglia specialized Library
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Andrea Rossatonm

We have the medallist's portraits: the self-portrait of *Leone Leoni* in a small struck medal (very well known) and that of *Jacopo Nizzola da Trezzo*, a larger one, modeled by Antonio Abondio. Then, we see the effigies of *Charles V* as emperor, by Leone Leoni, with the laurel wreath on his head, the armor and the Golden Fleece hanging on his chest. His son *Philip II* is portrayed, by Trezzo, in a sophisticated silver medal, which reverse shows the chariot of Apollo flying across the lands and the seas. Right in front of him his second wife, *Mary I Tudor*, known also as Catholic Mary or Bloody Mary is depicted, also by Trezzo, wearing the same clothes she wore when Anthonis Mor painted her portrait. On the reverse is the personification of Peace, who is raising a palm and a branch of olive, and burning a pile of arms: such a curious iconography for a woman called Bloody Mary.

We also show an interesting comparison between a plaque by Galeazzo Mondella called *Moderno*, with a crowded scene of *Crucifixion*, and a very small painting with the same scene (fig. 14). The plaque was modelled by Mondella at the end of 15th century, but the precious oil on paper, perhaps cut from an illuminated manuscript, was painted around 1530. This means that the plaque served as a model for the artist who painted (miniate) the paper. This presents another way to explain to the public how plaquettes were used in the Renaissance.

At the end of the visit, the visitor will find a comparison with medals and books, demonstrating how these small metal objects soon become interesting testimonies of the past and were illustrated in printed books. We display two volumes of the *Numismata Pontificum Romanorum* by Filippo Buonanni, printed in Rome in 1699. The first tome is opened on the page that tells the story of the erection by the architect Domenico Fontana of the four obelisks on the four main squares of Rome, a work completed in 1589 for Pope Sixtus V and illustrated on the reverse of a famous medal by Domenico Poggini. A larger and gilded

medal of Innocent XII, modelled by Peter Paul Börner, shows the *Dogana di mare a Ripa Grande*, a huge river port for the goods, built on the Tiber River at the end of the 17th century and destroyed in 1919, in order to make some space for the Sublicius bridge. The medal, the book, and a later engraving by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, are the only images we have of this impressive baroque Roman building.

The books on display also offer visitors a small preview of the Scaglia specialized library that has been placed on the first floor of the museum where the storage of medals and plaquettes is located (fig. 15). Rich of precious volumes, the library is open to the scholars who want to work and study both with objects and books, in a place where they can find all the auction catalogues since the 19th century until today, museum's repertoires, exhibition catalogues, specialized magazines and an entire collection of monographies about sculptors.

The library is only one part of our dedication to promote and to communicate this new collection in Accademia Carrara. As requested by the donor, once a year we will organize an event that focuses on medals, plaquettes and small serial bronzes. With the prestigious partnership of *The Burlington magazine*, we hosted a *Study Day* (14th of November 2023) which kicked-off of this new project. We had in Bergamo scholars, curators and restorers from the whole of Europe, we talked about sculpture and books, future collaborations and exhibitions, to trace new possible paths for developing the research.

NOTES

1. Rossi, F.: *La collezione Mario Scaglia. Placchette*, 3 vols., Bergamo, 2011; Zaccariotto, G.: *La collezione di medaglie Mario Scaglia. II. Catalogo*, Bologna / Cinisello Balsamo, 2020.

2. All these information are in the introductory essay of the 2020 catalogue (*Il collezionismo di medaglie dai primi del Novecento ad oggi attraverso la raccolta Mario Scaglia*, pp. 7-16).