

AN ANNIVERSARY MEDAL FOR THE FRIENDS OF BIRMINGHAM MUSEUMS & ART GALLERY

Jonathan Coulborn



1. Fountain: *The 75th anniversary of the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery*, 2006, bronze, 97 x 80mm.

In 2005 the board of trustees of the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery began to discuss ways of marking the organisation's approaching seventy-fifth anniversary. It was suggested that the Friends might consider commissioning an art medal, and, as someone who was feeling guilty about not contributing much to the organisation, I volunteered to take the project on. I did so, however, with a large amount of undisclosed scepticism. My closest experience of an art medal was a coin commemorating the Queen's silver jubilee, which had been given to me as a child, and the project hardly filled me with enthusiasm.

My initial lukewarm attitude was dispelled as soon as I met Marian Fountain for lunch in the museum's Edwardian tearooms. She brought with her a couple of examples of her work together with some ideas that she had already begun to formulate for the Friends' medal. It was fascinating to listen to her discussing the ways in which she might convey her various impressions of our museum in this small but tactile art form. The commissioning process was a most interesting one for

me and has proved highly educational. Having set off with a sense of it as a slightly irksome duty, I never expected to end up fondly handling an object that might better be described as hand-held sculpture (fig. 1).¹

The Friends owe a debt of gratitude to David Symons, curator of coins and medals at the museum, and also to Simmons Gallery in London, whom David recommended should be consulted about a suitable artist. We were delighted that Marian agreed to the commission.

As their seventy-fifth anniversary gift, the Friends have donated to the museum's collection the preliminary sketches (fig. 2) and final drawings (fig. 3), the working models and moulds, and the first medal to have been cast. Appropriately, the edition has been limited to seventy-five. Of these, fifteen have so far been cast. A limited number are being made available to the public.²

Marian Fountain kindly agreed to write an account of the process of designing the medal and of the thoughts that accompanied that process. This offers a



2. Fountain: Preliminary sketches for the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery medal.



3. Fountain: Final drawings for the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery medal.

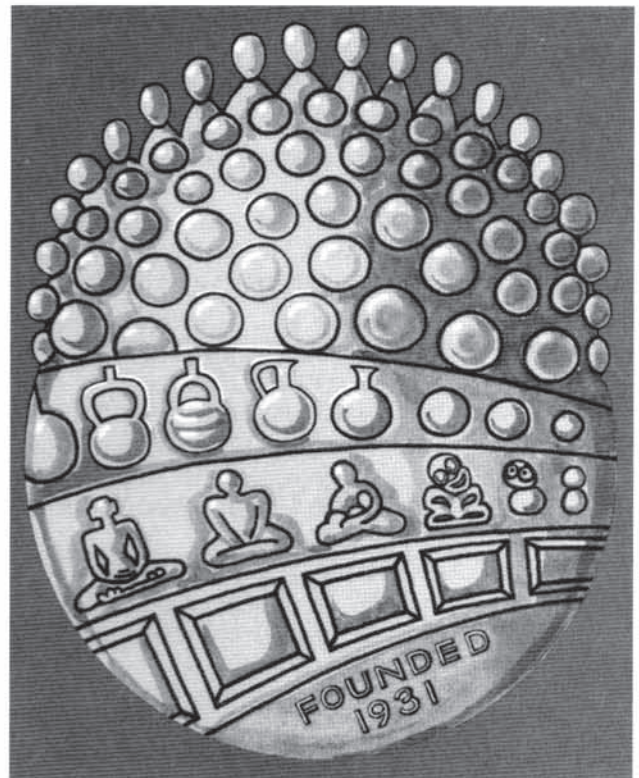
rare insight into some of the objects that inspired her (fig. 4) and into the workings of the creative process provided directly by the artist:

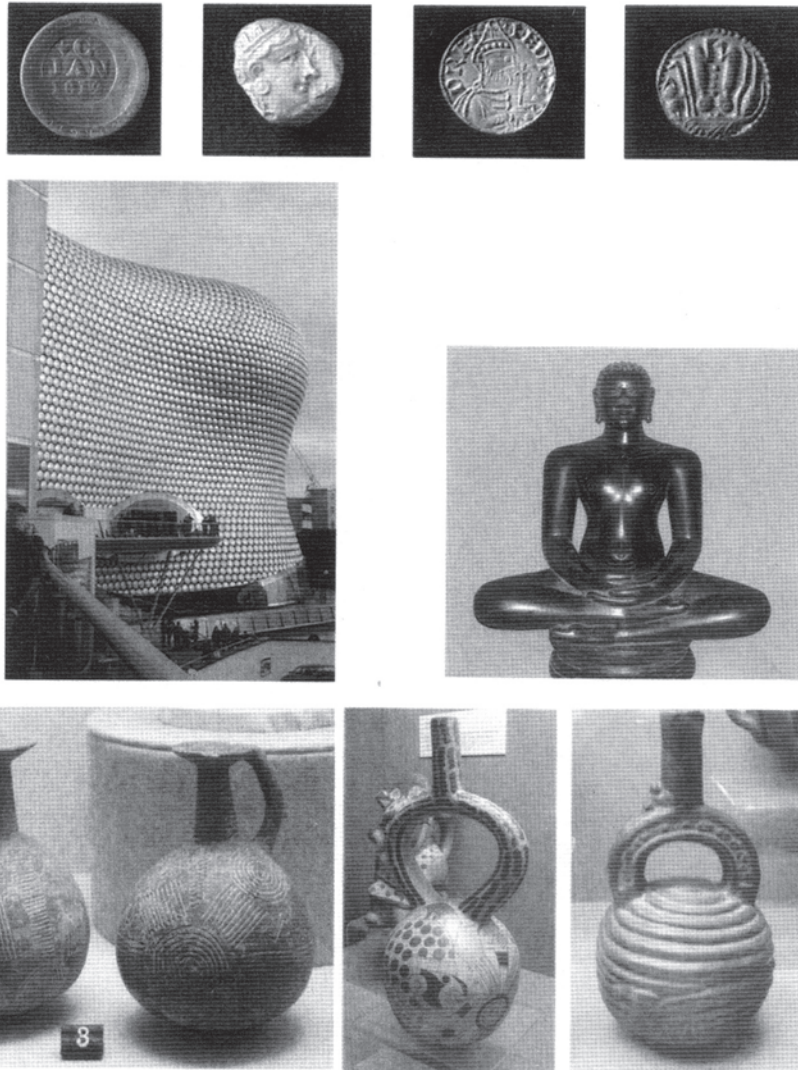
‘A medal is a very satisfying art form because the “two sides to the coin” create a complementary narrative on a subject. This commission was particularly enjoyable [...].

‘As soon as the commission to make [it] was confirmed, I browsed the museum’s website and was immediately struck by the beauty of the Anglo-Saxon, Greek and Scandinavian coin collection. I have always been intrigued by the way the beads (or bobbles) round the edge of some coins tend to go missing gradually, either because of the wearing down of age or because the coin was struck slightly off-centre, at which point the maker would have exclaimed an ancestral version of ‘Ooops’ – and there we have a mark of that single moment experienced by the artisan until this day. The ancient coins have an exciting freshness about them because one can see how they were made with the tools and materials available, not so different from today. Bobbles trailing off into nothingness, or vice versa, also speak to me visually of the concept of metamorphosis, of decline or of growth.

‘So the initial idea for the medal immediately became apparent: the circle of bobbles naturally metamorphosed to represent the circle of Friends who are supportive of and dependent on the knowledge and work of curators, depicted here as a muse observing an object within the shape of an eye.

‘One side of the medal was therefore worked out, I was then lucky to be shown around Birmingham and





4. Some of the objects that inspired Marian Fountain's Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery medal, including the Birmingham Selfridges building (centre left).

the museum by David Symons, curator. On our short walk from the station I perceived the new Selfridges building and thought, 'Aaah, bobbles!' – not only because of the old coins, but also because of a current personal sculptural quest of looking at the relief of remote controls, buttons, and such like. The connection with Selfridges as a Birmingham landmark seemed appropriate to represent the crowds of people that visit the museum (hopefully as many as go to Selfridges!). This side of the medal is slightly convex with flat discs. These discs transform into the plethora of objects in the museum, ranging from pottery to Buddhas and figurative objects, and from sculptures to paintings.

'Looking round the museum, I was very impressed by 'the interactivity of the place. David Symons communicated to me the enjoyment and passion of the curatorial team, which is palpable for the community. The statue of the Buddha from Sultanganj is used by the local Buddhist community for various festivals. During my short visit little girls were dressing up in Tudor gear, there were hurdy-gurdy players and a medieval doctor, and even a few Gothic teenagers

playing an old Anglo-Saxon board game.

'It was personally very satisfying to design and make this medal, because the museum was conceived in the nineteenth century as a place of inspiration for designers and craftspeople. I also am one of many thousands of people who have benefited enormously from museums over the years as places to draw, as a means of looking carefully at forms in three dimensions, comparing all cultures and eras.

'The general feel of the medal is that of a precious object like a jewel, reflecting the silverware industry in Birmingham, the decorative arts emphasis of the museum, and the richness of its collections. There is a subtle feel of Indian jewellery in the overall impression of the reverse side.'

NOTES

1. The medal was announced in *Artefacts. The Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery Magazine* (Summer 2007), pp. 4-5. The present article is adapted from that announcement.

2. For details, contact the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery by telephone (0121 3033129) or email (Marian_Dawes@birmingham.gov.uk). All proceeds from sales of the medal go towards the Friends' funds to assist acquisitions for the museum.