

Currency of Fame



The portrait medal was one of the key sculptural forms of the Renaissance, a manifesto for the humanist cult of personal fame and a vehicle for some of the finest artists of the age. Yet this most subtle and delicate variety of relief sculpture has chiefly been the province of collectors and connoisseurs, viewed as an intriguing branch of numismatics, rather than an art form in its own right. This study explores the great formative period of the portrait medal, and accompanies an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Frick Collection, New York. It combines the expertise of 31 specialists with examples drawn from the finest collections in the world, both public and private. The medallions depict in detail the faces and figures of the famous - Lorenzo deMedici, Savonarola, Michelangelo, Erasmus, Dilrer, the monarchs of Europe - as well as those whose names live on purely through the splendour of the medals they commissioned. Over 170 specimens, dating from the 15th to the 17th centuries, are discussed and illustrated, assembling many of the most striking Renaissance portraits ever carved or cast, often in combination with allegories and scenes, or to commemorate particular events.

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