

# Baroque Influences in Central-European Medal Study

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## Introduction

Over the years the study of medals has been limited in most cases to numismatic directories or simple catalogues, with large gaps in the art history chapter. Although there have been quite a few works, most of them are designed on the same pattern, mainly structured on a laconic scheme of presenting the piece: metal, size, legend, briefly mentioning representations of the obverse/reverse. The large number of pieces impregnated with unpublished artistic valences makes necessary the review of the scope of the domain's historiography, which has to submit further views on medal study.

The purpose of this paper is to research aesthetic and symbolic issues of medal study and the influences exerted by major artistic currents on metal pieces, with reconstruction, if possible, of temporal segments that the medals refer to, considering the complex historical background. Result of research conducted during 2003-2010, this doctoral thesis aims depth study of an untapped field of art history, medal study. The research was done in several distinct phases: an exhaustive documentation on the historical period in question and on the Baroque artistic phenomenon, analysis and selection of the medal material, research, cataloguing and comparative analysis of high art medals of the period. The study is divided into chapters addressing the heraldic, artistic and technical matters aspects of medal study. The first chapter, *Historical Context*, is intended for general introduction to the historical era to which we reference to, summarizing the major events that marked the 17<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The large number of Land Rolls and coats of arms appearing on the medals required the presence of a chapter dedicated to deciphering them: *Central European Heraldry*. *Symbolism* is a chapter presenting a brief overview of the history and terminology associated to it and the detailed description of Land Rolls of the Central European area and of the Habsburg sovereigns. Hermeticism and specialized terminology required the thorough study of specialized language, codes and related meanings, but further benefits of assimilating the heraldic language skill proved extremely useful in analysing medals. Each of the coats of arms shown in the annexed illustrations were described individually, after a slow initial reading, but then a more fluent reading of the coats of arms. This helped me to gradually learn heraldry of the times. The symbolic perspective of some of the medals required some study of another encrypted language, the one of symbolic meanings assigned to the medals. The large artistic background of the Baroque era imposed a modest overview of the vastness of the

phenomenon: the Chapter *European Artistic Climate of 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. The "technical" side of the matter was analysed in the Chapter *Medal Study, Art and Craft*, chapter dedicated to getting familiarized with the medal study theme and to presenting briefly the biographical data of engravers who signed the medals, based on specialized bibliography. Medals made by each of the craftsmen were mentioned next to the author's biography. The study of the impact of the Baroque art on medals was the topic of the work's main chapter, *Baroque Influences in Central European Medal Study*, structured in four main directions subordinated to architecture, sculpture, painting and portrait. Labelling pieces was sometimes difficult, many medals suffering multiple influences, the balance tilting subjectively in favour of the predominantly thematic spectrum. To facilitate reading of the selected pieces, we have gradually put together *The Thematic Catalogue. Appendices*, indispensable for a consistent reading, *The Genealogical Tree of The Habsburg House (17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*, respectively *The Genealogical Tree of The Habsburg - Lorena House (18<sup>th</sup> Century)*, were designed by me based on biographies of the characters from the House of Habsburg we referred to. Appendices containing the graphic illustration for *Heraldic Shields* were taken from specialized pages on the Internet, specifying the exact source for each annex. The individual description of Land Rolls appertains exclusively to me. At the end of my thesis I have included the *Selective Bibliography* and the *Illustration* with images of the described medals.

Regarding the working method, we have selected for this study a total of nearly 1,000 medals from the pieces in the patrimony of National History Museum of Transylvania in Cluj-Napoca. Preliminary selection of these medals was made on a chronological criterion, choosing medals issued during the historical reference period. Of these, we kept the medals with special artistic or symbolic valences, eliminating as much as possible the duplicates. The selection criteria was subordinated to the topic; there was a fairly large number of medals inadequately engraved in terms of artistic success that were dropped, but in some cases theme prevailed on aesthetic. Finally, we opted for a total of 402 medals subject of this paper. Not being a numismatic study, the work, dedicated to the study of medals from an artistic point of view, has no numismatic catalogue itself. We considered necessary a technical reference index and thus we designed the *Thematic Catalogue* which presents the pieces through a technical standard box including the name, date or issuer (where they were known), the metal used to make the medal, size, origin collection and inventory number. I then reproduced, in order, the obverse (Av.) and the reverse (Rv.) of the coin, with legend and general thematic typology of the graphic elements, the detailed explanations of the images (that would constitute the core of this paper). The engraver was identified based on the signature, using

specialized bibliography. Where, for various reasons, the author was uncertain, we preferred to cite the list of craftsmen who could have signed these pieces. Main ranking of the medals followed a thematic criterion. Only among the medals with the same typology was used a slight chronological ordering, but always giving primacy to iconography. Since aesthetic criterion was the most important one, the fact that the coin's obverse could be included in a specific artistic category such as *portrait* and the reverse belonged to representations of *architectural* type made impossible the traditional method of description, that is consecutively presenting obverse / reverse. I have preferred a gradual analysis according to which a medal's obverse is described in a thematic category and the reverse in another thematic category, corresponding typologically. For this reason I have thought of the *Thematic Catalogue* where I have fully described each medal. Numbers that show in this catalogue next to each medal are mentioned in the descriptive analysis of the images in this paper and are reproduced in the illustration part, which marks separately the obverse (a) and reverse (r). Many of the selected medals were published, but under the classic formula of numismatic catalogues, without being useful information, bibliography itself in what concerns us, because, again, I sought a different kind of study. Therefore, these works are mentioned only at the end of the paper, as a general reference in *Selective Bibliography*. Regarding the illustration, the medals have been scanned, the images processed graphically and arranged in the page with the same size, significantly increased in most cases. I preferred this kind of illustration to the scale reproduction because of the specific of this paper, as in this way reading the images is considerably easier.

### I. *Historical Context*

Introductory chapter highlights the main landmarks in the compilation of a chronological and factual framework of the 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries and the historical evolution of the era. Key events of the period are extremely diverse, ranging from the burning of Giordano Bruno for heresy in Rome in 1600 and completing by guillotine of Louis XVI in 1793. History of occurrence presents a time history under the sign of extreme developments: if at the end of the Seventeenth Century France was a dominant Catholic power, by the end of the Eighteenth Century will witness a radical change, moving from a centralized state to an absolutist monarchy prototype and then to republic, with a Church weakened by revolution. Spain was at the beginning of the Seventeenth Century the most important world power, commanding huge expanses of the American continent, but after 1640 will peremptory loose the political hegemony and the profound crisis it will face would lead to the decline of the

Spanish kingdom. The centre of gravity of Europe that moved in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries from the Mediterranean coast to the North Sea shores would make the Netherlands the world's most developed area in the mid Seventeenth Century. But exhaustive wars of the Seventeenth Century will lead to the decline of the area, moving the continent's economic hub to London. England walked in the Seventeenth Century as an absolutist state, centralized, with a strengthened monarchical power; *Civil War* (1642-1649) and the *Glorious Revolution* (1688-1689) will turn England into a constitutional monarchy. The Polish-Lithuanian Union, one of the largest countries in Europe will also see the transition from a flourishing status to a downward one, where noble anarchy will cause the country's political decline till it reaches the division of Poland between Prussia, Russia and Habsburg Austria (1772 -1795), marking the removal of Poland from the map as a state for 123 years. Russia also has a dramatic evolution that will turn it from an isolated area of the continent into one of the major European powers. The same contrasting situation holds true for to the development of the Ottoman Empire which in the early Seventeenth Century is at its peak. The *Great Turkish War* (1662-1699) marked the beginning of the end by losing control of significant areas and the flourishing of the Ottoman Empire in the early Seventeenth Century is offset by the decline at the end of the Century.

### **I.2. *The Habsburgs: Image and Glorification***

Taken together, the history of the Central European territory from the 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries is closely linked to the fascinating development of the Habsburg family, who strongly influenced the area during these 200 years. With territorial expansion, the Habsburgs had imposed also the Baroque civilization in all its aspects: religion, culture, art and a certain degree of prosperity.

## **II. *Central European Heraldry***

The chapter briefly presents a documented overview of the European heraldic phenomenon highlighting the technical features such as heraldic mottoes of the House of Austria and the emperors' own mottoes by presenting medals that have as legend these mottoes.

**II.2. *Heraldic Shields*** describe the variety of forms and the thematic content of the shields from the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation and from the areas controlled by the House

of Austria, and also the sovereigns' coat of arms, through their specific descriptions based on direct observation, in a specific technical language.

### **II.3. *Heraldic Representation in Medal Study***

Heraldic representations of the medals I studied fall into two categories: depictions of shields displaying associated coat of arms or representations of heraldic elements directly in the medal's field. In the first category we have medals with the image of individual shields, acolyte shields or groups comprising several shields. In the latter case, the image of a central shield frequently shows up, usually the Imperial Shield or the Shield of Austria, surrounded by the shields of the hereditary provinces, electing states or other territorial possessions. Often these groups of shields refer to military alliances, political agreements or peace treaties.

### **II.4. *Symbolic Iconography***

Analysing the symbolism of the chosen figures, we face an extremely complex dimension, offering analogies more or less obvious between representation and meaning; elements showing the way ancient symbols cleverly translated on the medals were received and interpreted.

## **III. *European Artistic Climate of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries***

The spectacular Baroque reality caused an artistic movement sustained throughout Europe. Unity between arts became a defining fact for a period in which all branches of art - painting, sculpture and architecture - vied to obtain the desired effect.

The fascinating immensity of the Baroque phenomenon manifested national specifics that have impregnated the style with the fundamental characteristics for each geographic area. An important role in spreading the Baroque current was played by Jesuit religious order.

Presenting the controversies related to the Baroque term, the original negative meaning and slow change that will eventually entail the Baroque as an universal concept and aesthetic phenomenon, thanks to decisive contributions of renowned art historians such as H. Wölfflin or J. Burckhardt.

The architecture of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries manifests two tendencies: the *Baroque* one and *Classic-type*, based on classical Renaissance forms in France or on the Palladian ones in England and the Netherlands. Baroque's footprint is visible even

today in the European urban planning through the architectural elements harmoniously conceived that comprise the urban assembly.

In Baroque sculpture the emphasis is shifted from the classic reproduction towards theme and motif exaggeration; plastic works are designed for panoramic views.

Baroque painting had a great development in the European culture between the late Sixteenth Century and first half of the Eighteenth Century. Preference for grand themes was spectacularly transfigured into eloquent works that manage to communicate with the audience fascinated by the creativity, splendour and pomp not seen before.

Interior decoration changes massively due to the influence of the Baroque style, which is deeply reflected in the minor arts development.

#### *IV. Medal Study, Art and Craft*

In the Italian Fifteenth Century medal study emerged as a new art form in Europe when, with the Renaissance, were rediscovered Roman antiquities and with them the Roman coins. Notable is the example of the French kingdom which quickly adopted the new art and gave an increased attention, inferring the potential of medal study. The French example of handling the medal study art in the service of the state's interests will contaminate European courts who will rush to imitate them, even if they will not show the same meticulous work in ordering and recording this activity.

##### *IV.2. Engravers*

This subsection presents a brief series of biographies of engravers who sign pieces. Identifying authors of the medals included in our catalogue, signed only by the initials used by several engravers, was made by overlapping time intervals of work of the artisans with the period when the medals were issued. Originally anonymous, in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries the pieces begin to bear the signature of engravers, mainly their initials, which doesn't ensure the engraver's identification in all cases. Medals selected for this paper are signed by a host of engravers who have worked over time with the House of Austria. Their biographies provide valuable information on the status of these masters in the epoch.

## V. *Baroque Influences in Central-European Medal Study*

The impact of major plastic creations of Baroque art influences achievements in the field. Aesthetic trends of the era can be found on the obverse and reverse of the medals that show in their own language the creative effervescence characteristic to this period. Each artistic class enjoys medal representation reflecting high art. Stylistic prototypes, compositional schemes and Baroque thematic can be observed on the medals analysed and presented from a comparative point of view, with frequent references to obvious sources of inspiration. Thematic directory of the work benefits gradually from the presentation of a series of medal illustrative representations.

### V.1. *Architectural Elements in Medal Study*

Baroque architectural elements in medal study are presented either in the form of vintage buildings, or of panoramic *Veduta* of some settlements, or even in the form of architectural backgrounds designed to give the texture to the image.

### V.2. *Influences of Sculpture in Medal Study*

The most common sculptural references that appear in medal study generally have load-bearing role, shrines or pedestals on which are usually placed imperial symbols.

From the medal study repertoire are not missing the *heroic bust statues*, particularly conclusive example is the series of medals issued as a consequence to military successes achieved in the era of Leopold I. Another group of frequent sculptural representation is *sculptural portraits*.

Powerful sculptural influences also suffer the medals engraved with images depicting *allegorical chariots* celebrating military triumphs.

Another important chapter of the influence of sculpture on medal study are the sculptural monuments, dominated by *obelisks* and also by the image of unique funeral monuments, highly in vogue in the Baroque era, *sarcophagi*.

### V.3. *Pictorial Themes Reflected in Medal Study*

The impact of canvases made in the era upon engravers of medals is notable: most of them have used them as inspiration in rendering some similar moments on the issued pieces displaying the celebration of military victories or the registration of solemn moments. Among the most popular painting themes in medal art are the *scenes of battle*, especially those



depicting the Great War with the Turks in the second half of the Seventeenth Century. The propaganda impact of the official painting caused a large number of medal issuing programs dedicated to *historical celebration themes*. *Mythological themes*, extremely popular with Baroque painting, are enjoying popularity in the medal study vocabulary, inspired, pigmented with allegories or with fantastic characters trapped in complex narrations that bring into the space of medals geniuses, angels, victories or gods. In medal study, *allegories and personifications* appear in metaphorical compositions that allude particularly to military or political events, wars or peace treaties, but they can also be found in the announcement of measures intended for the public good or embodying different territorial entities. Baroque passion for allegory generates a varied string of medal representations which convey easy to interpret messages through established iconography and symbols.

The joining of typical objects characteristic to *vanitas* appear in medal study too, evidenced by counting the spoils of war, real inventories or classical synthesized military triumphs.

*Religiously inspired scenes* and biblical episodes are rarer in medal representations where certain symbolic elements (*divine all-seeing eye, Manus Dei, cross, sacred heart, etc.*) are preferred or quotations from the Bible. Rarely, sacred subjects that reach the Christian sensibility can be found on some medals.

*Genre scenes*, an area so well represented in the Baroque era are not missing also from the tiny space of the medals. Full exploitation of the space of the medal could not ignore the advantages given by the concept of *picture in picture*, which allowed rendering several sequences on the same tiny area. *Hunting scenes*, very popular and well represented in the canvasses of the era find their place in the medal issuing. *Landscape* painting is also represented either as background for various medals, or through independent images, especially in urban views or wet panoramic *Vedutas*.

A special place among analysed medals is occupied by *medal-box* and its representations reach most categories of pictorial representations: the group portrait, historical-celebration scenes, battle scenes, mythological representations, architectural Vedutas etc., but I preferred to analyse it as a whole, without dispersing the representations according to the theme. Inside the medal-box are placed twenty paper discs resembling pen made miniatures out of which eleven contain figurative representations and nine were printed bilingual explicative texts in German (with Gothic characters) and French. The miniatures have one face except M<sub>20</sub> which provides information on both sides, obverse / reverse type.

The sequence of reading the images is carefully ordered by the texts numbered from 1 to 9, the images are coloured, rendering is neat and the details are meticulous.

#### **V.4. *The Habsburg Family Portraiture***

The large number of effigies makes me allocate a special chapter dedicated to metal portraits of emperors of the House of Austria. Beginning with the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the Habsburg's interest for numismatic portraits evolves greatly. The line of emperors and empresses have left behind a considerable number of imperial effigies; regardless of the typology of the portraits, the representational realism is evident, even if preferences for how a particular sovereign wanted to be perceived by the posterity was very different, varying on a range between modesty and megalomania. Our attention was directed primarily towards the rule of Emperors Mathias, Ferdinand II, Ferdinand III, Leopold I, Joseph I, Charles VI, Maria Theresa, Joseph II and Leopold II, sovereigns who ruled Central Europe over the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Medal study offers a series of *individual portraits* representing the members of the imperial family, especially the Empresses and the imperial title heirs, a number of physiognomies illustrating representative human types for the aristocracy of the Seventeenth and the Eighteenth Centuries. Important personalities of the time, people who left their mark on society benefited, in their turn, of a number of celebration medals that evoke princes, military commanders, senior officials and prelates. There is no shortage in the collections studied by us of the medals that evoke the enemies of the House of Habsburg.

Regarding the *double portrait*, in medal study there is a variety of dynastic portraits dedicated to the emperor and heir prince, portraits rendering members of the imperial family portraits or sovereigns with mutual interests. Most effigies are issued in honour of the imperial couples, the record being reached by Empress Maria Theresa who issued medals during the marriage of all her children, not just the one of the heir to the throne.

Baroque interest for the concept of *group portrait* is fully illustrated by the medals which have on the obverse face Leopold I surrounded by ancestors or group portraits of elector princes surrounding the central medallion with the imperial effigy, a sign of support for the leader of the House of Habsburg.

## **VI. Conclusions**

Medals are a reflection of the era that produced them, of the artistic tastes of the period. Although relatively small size, many of the medals present artistic achievements and

could compare, within certain limits, with other artistic fields such as sculpture or painting. Aware of their mission as leaders in Central and South-East Europe, Habsburgs have tried to use the medal study as means of imperial propaganda, giving it special attention. All important events were also reflected in the monetary production which through the nature of things was the most effective means of propaganda of the time. The models presented in this paper have a diverse inspiration, but the tangential and fragmented references allows one to see the influence of the major art of the time, the patterns long admired by the public, but also the specific baroque expressiveness of medal study of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries.