

A SERIES OF *RITUAL PROTO-MONEY* BY LÁSZLÓ SZLÁVICS JR

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Hungarian medallic art has been in the international vanguard for the past one hundred years, often being among the first to respond to new challenges and problems. Determined for a long time largely by tradition, in the latter half of the 1970s medallic art embarked on an innovative course, stretching the boundaries of the medium. In Hungary this process can be documented in the work of László Szlávics jr. Exploring the ever growing possibilities of medallic art, the artist, who had produced medals for a long time, began to convey his messages through utterly new means, and he has continued to experiment to this day.

His new work is now beginning to be known. One piece was displayed in the FIDEM exhibition in the Hague in 1998, and another was reproduced in *The Medal* in the same year;¹ more are illustrated here (figs. 1-5). The artist's affinities with the cultures of so-called 'primitive' peoples have guided him towards a type of ancient money that contains within it the germs of modern currency, and he has produced his own 'ancient coins' upon their model. These works are about one of the most pliable concepts of our age - value. Today, the concepts of money and value have been reinterpreted, and money, as developed by need and social agreement, is valueless in itself, whereas in the past the objects that have fulfilled the function of money have often been ritual pieces that have also had considerable practical value in themselves. These have included bracelets, strings of clay or glass beads, strings of polished shells, feathers fixed to a ground of wool or bark, animals' teeth, small bones, and snail shells, as well as pierced limestone discs ranging in size from a few centimetres to several metres. When making his works, Szlávics has complemented these materials with other objects.

The fact that these items have been presented to the public in a medallic context indicates that the artist locates them close to the medium of the medal. And, indeed, these works belong with other contemporary attempts to expand or disrupt the boundaries of the genre, departing far from customary formal norms. To use a recent label, they are 'border cases' in medallic art. They embody the claim that any organic element of nature or found object can constitute a medal. But the *Ritual Proto-Money* can also be subsumed under the heading of the medal on account of the constituent parts of the various pieces. The function of these

objects, which at one time held a barter value, evokes the sense of the medal, for the medal also has links with money, in the history it shares with coinage.

Precedents for the *Ritual Proto-Money* within the artist's oeuvre are his *Amerindian coins*, made in 1993.² These pieces of various sizes struck in brass and iron are very similar to real coins. Although objects like Szlávics' *Amerindians coins* never existed in Amerindian culture, the individual figures, signs, symbols and other elements all derive from original motifs. All the images emanate from the spirit of Amerindian art, whilst remaining not strictly attached to it. The combined use of two metals - seemingly a convincing original feature - is a favourite device of today's medallic art.

Prior to the development of the money of pastoral and agrarian peoples, ancient currencies or measures of value seem always to have had a ritual character. Magic rituals and sacrificial offerings evolved from a primitive attitude towards nature. In these prehistoric practices, carried out, for example, to bring about a successful hunt, to appease the spirits of the dead, or to invoke a fertility cult, objects played important roles. Rituals were generated by the struggle with the forces of nature, and elements such as those occurring in Szlávics' *Proto-Money* developed a ritual character, and also attracted value on account of their magic power. The two concepts were interwoven.

Szlávics' works may also be approached from a contemporary artistic point of view, and the ritualistic function of their various elements ignored. The artist, however, forces the viewer to find, for example, a hen's feather, once evidently a valuable object with magic power, valuable even today. The chicken leg and this ordinary feather unite into a composition as effectively as the other more 'artistic' elements.

The works of Szlávics resemble authentic ancient currencies, for each component part has in the past functioned as money. Of the material used in the compositions, feathers are the one that is involved in all. Feather money has been used by many peoples, with brilliantly colourful feathers of particular birds offered to deities and spirits. Their salient role in Amerindian cultures is well known. The rare and extraordinary feather has been seen as a symbol of celestial power, an emblem of death and rebirth. The colours of feathers have also had specific meanings ascribed to them. Apart from hens' feathers, the artist also uses more precious



I. Szlávics: Ritual Proto-Money, 1996, mixed media including feathers and a large cowrie, 310 x 85mm.



2. Szlávics: *Ritual Proto-Money*, 1996, mixed media including feathers and an onyx triangle, 245 x 160mm.

peacock and ostrich feathers.

Another frequently appearing motif is the painted and modelled clay ring, a distant relation of the limestone ring coin. Clay rings were used mainly in ancient Chinese and Amerindian cultures, but they were not unknown in Europe. Their scratched or painted decoration consists of rhythmically repeated simple geometric patterns, often formed from zigzags, curving lines and triangles, with sometimes some animal ornament with a symbolic meaning that is no longer decipherable. The limestone rings, some of which bear

patterns, were used for ritual ceremonies. These rings may perhaps signify tranquillity and constancy amid incessant motion and change, or power and might. Their meaning may not have been universally valid, but may rather have changed from culture to culture.

The feathers and rings and other objects are held together by colourful pieces of string or rope, which also had their own meanings. In Amerindian cultures, for example, they were related to motion, denoting the orbit of celestial bodies or the road between heaven and earth, one manifestation of which is rain.



3. Szlávics: *Ritual Proto-Money*, 1997, mixed media including feathers and wild boars' tusks, 240 x 200mm.

One of the finest items of the series by Szlávics shows a large cowrie accompanied by various small snail and mussel shells. Many peoples have used such shells as money, their spiral lines having a magic power that contributed to their value. Significance may also be ascribed to the glass beads that often occur, and also to the order in which they are strung, which may have been determined by their function as symbols of procreation and immortality, the cosmic order, the progression of time, or the changing weather.

A precious element, the polished onyx triangle, was an embodiment of cosmic and religious forces, and its mysterious triangular shape had magic power. This symbol is one of the oldest ways by which incessant motion was represented. In the lives of early peoples, moving on and changing were fundamentally determining factors. In the works by Szlávics it is suggested that motion and change are also active qualities in the value systems represented by the 'coins'.

From time immemorial bones have been a basic



4. Szlávics: *Ritual Proto-Money*, 1997, mixed media including feathers and slices of orange, 250 x 150mm.



5. Szlárics: *Ritual Proto-Money*, 1997, mixed media including feathers and a chicken's skull, 350 x 180mm.

element in cults of the dead. Some cultures have identified the soul with the bones or endowed the bones with special powers. As a frequent item in sacrifices they were also cult objects. Of human bones the skull was identified as the most important: the possessor of a skull might also possess the powers of the deceased. Wishing to add this shade of meaning to his compositions, Szlávics has incorporated skulls into his works, using those of small animals so as to retain a just proportion. In other pieces in the series he has evoked this idea by means of a stag's antler or a boar's fang. Both were symbols of power, their owners having strength and might; the antler also symbolised revival and rebirth. Significance and value were also attributed to small twigs, which were endowed with magic powers. Representing the tree of life, they referred to immortality, and magic rituals carried out with them were aimed at enhancing fertility.

Though food sacrifices were known, the painted chicken leg and the slices of orange in Szlávics' work can be related only indirectly to ancient practices, but they provide the compositions with colour and mood, and at the same time shift the series towards paraphrase. In the overall impression produced by the series colour plays an important role, especially through the reds and blacks of the strings. Like the objects themselves, their

colours have dynamism and meaning: red, the colour of blood, is a symbol of life; black is that of the other world. The choice of bright pure colours also tends towards those used by early cultures.

In general the construction and overall appearance of Szlávics' *Proto-Money* derive from those of objects familiar to the anthropologist. The sizes and shapes and the surface texture and colour of the rings, feathers and other elements combine to produce varied artistic effects, and at the same time to suggest different moods. They give, now a more elegant and polished, now a rougher and cruder effect, but each piece is a unified, balanced, harmonious composition.

The series resonates with the art of ancient cultures, and reference is made to both the ritual and the monetary aspects of their currencies. The pieces are authentic in their details, whilst in their overall form they realise the artistic aspirations of our own times. In them László Szlávics jr has succeeded in resolving some of the contradictions between past and present, and has at the same time created a group of objects of high artistic quality.

NOTES

1. *The Medal*, 32 (1998), p. 93.

2. For these, see L. Kovásznai, *L. Szlávics Jr* (Budapest, 1997).