

TIME AND SPACE IN RECENT WORKS BY LÁSZLÓ SZLÁVICS JR

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European medallic art has undergone great changes since the mid 1970s. Its sculptural character has become stronger, new materials and techniques have appeared, and the boundaries of the genre have been massively extended. This powerful renewal has particularly affected Hungarian medals.

Although the studies of László Szlávics (b. 1959), the son of a sculptor of the same name (1927-91), took place within this period, his career began in a more traditional area, which called for considerable skills and craftsmanship. For a long time he was engaged almost solely in making struck medals, engraving the dies himself and striking the medals by hand in the traditional manner. When his interests turned towards cast medals, he produced works that used the traditional process of engraving in the negative, but he created medals of a modern kind, and his unusual training made them quite unique. He then began to think of the renewal of the medal in an even less conservative way than most of his contemporaries, as is exemplified by his series of *Ritual Proto-Money* presented in *The Medal* in Spring 2000.¹ Another factor to influence the development of his very individual approach has been his arts and crafts way of thinking. For him the joy of making objects is of signal importance, as is shown by the way he made his struck medals.

In the mid 1990s Szlávics was preoccupied with the idea of movement within the genre of the medal. Wishing to create pieces that lived their own lives, albeit within the boundaries determined by the nature of the medium, he began to conceive of medals that would react when picked up, thereby producing a different sort of tension between the work and the viewer. Whilst the two would relate in a novel way, the traditional features of the medal – intimacy, tactility, artistic quality and fine workmanship – would be retained. This thinking first produced results in connection with a competition. The visualisation of time is an age-old idea, but on this occasion the artist wished actually to measure time. The measurement of time relies on periodic motion, and so his first work of this sort, *Time* (fig. 1), adopted the principle of the hourglass. Picking the work up sets it in motion, with powdered glass beginning to fall within the closed space, suggesting the passing of time and the transient nature of things.

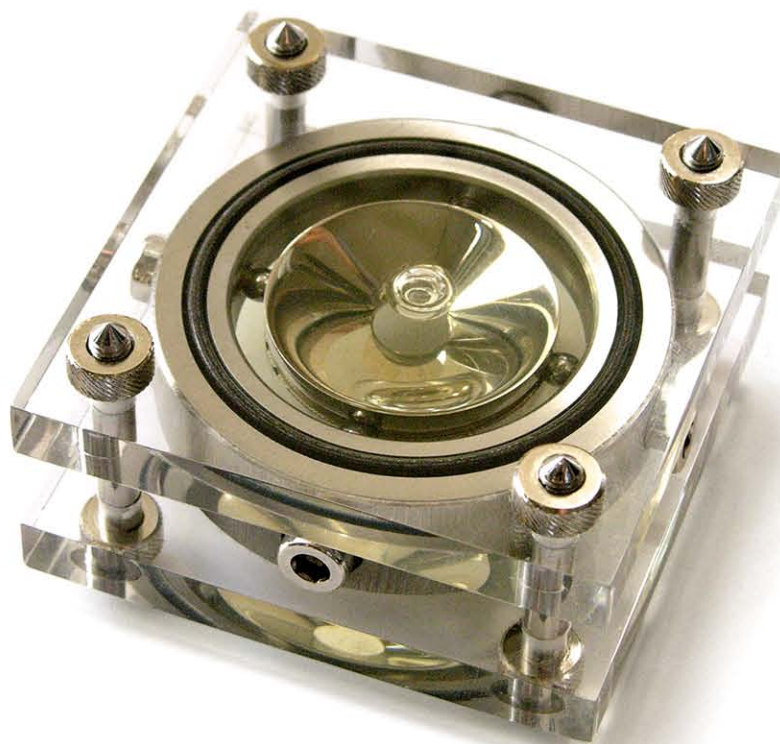
In another medal the representation of the passing of time was turned into something more complex. When this medal is moved, an air bubble swimming in oil sinks or rises within a given period of time. The technical problem that had to be solved was how to



1. Szlávics: *Time*, 1995, assembled chromium steel, glass, brass, etc., 64mm.

slow down the movement of the bubble, so that it would suggest the passage of time. In *Time-keeper* (fig. 2) a similar process was produced by having a hollow transparent ball ushered along its course. All the artist's works of this type suggest that the unfolding of life's phenomena over time can often be contradictory in direction and meaning. At the same time these pieces point to the changed relations between humanity and technology. Innumerable threads tie these works to traditional medals, but the great variety of techniques and materials employed in them means that they are all true representatives of the revival of the art.

A synthesis of the works addressing the complexities of time measurement and motion is to be found in the artist's first four-piece series, called *Four elements* (fig. 3). In their execution these pieces are a simplification of what had previously been highly intricate technical works, and the interior space is also diminished. The artist's aim was to make these works smaller and even more medallic. His use of the number four is not mere chance, and indeed nearly all his subsequent series consist of four items. This number has had an important symbolic significance since ancient times, and its use in the Bible led to further associations being developed by medieval theologians. The number also alludes to the elements that constitute the world. Szlávics' use of the symbols of various ancient cultures and mythologies suggests his longing to escape from the quotidian world into a different place with broader horizons. These symbols, discernible in the plexiglass triangles and cork rings, have been given a modern reinterpretation, for



2. Szlávics: *Time-keeper*, 1995, assembled plexiglass, chromium steel, etc., 71 x 71mm.

here the four elements are expressed using motion. *Fire* is evoked by light focussed in a lens, *Water* by a liquid, *Air* by a rotating part, and *Earth* by the sand that runs around the rim of the medal. *Water* and *Earth* are manifest in their material, whereas *Fire* and *Air* require human interaction: they have to be picked up. But all have movement contained within them.

Quite a different tone characterises another series, *Genesis* (fig. 4), the four pieces of which allude to the moment of the Creation. Geometrical forms rise from or sink into a rough base of sombre appearance. The contrast between the rusty surface, again suggesting time and the transient nature of things, and the smooth and shiny nickel-plated tubular forms expresses ideas of birth and renewal. The use of geometrical forms is a further indication of the artist's attraction to mystic symbols and the meaning they accrued in ancient cultures and religions, and their appearance in other works by Szlávics shows that these are not incidental features. The helix, triangle, circle and cross are universal ancient symbols charged with meaning. Their connotations include motion, time, birth, unfolding, and they echo the repetitive rhythms of life. This series also shows very plainly a constant preoccupation of Szlávics, namely the correlation between surfaces and scale. The size of the pieces in this series was determined primarily by the scale at which the grains of rust were most effective. (Following an international presentation, this series obtained the City of Sopron prize at the Sopron national medal biennale of 1997.)

In the mid 1990s the primary materials used by Szlávics were steel, brass, glass, plexiglass and cork. A few years later, in 2000, wood came to the fore. The nature of the materials used is important in the transmission of a symbolic message. Metal may convey feelings of purity and coldness, very different from the effect of an organic material such as wood, whilst bone, the use of which runs right through Szlávics' working life, is associated with transience. Bone was also a key material in various medals Szlávics made at this time. In these works the circular wooden surrounds contain glass-topped metal caskets, within which are unique objects linked to the subject of each medal. Entitled *What's my name and branch of service* (fig. 5), one of these is a memento of the Second World War and the deaths that accompanied the 2nd Hungarian Army's devastating defeat along the river Don in the Soviet Union in the winter of 1942. The powdered glass and the tiny bones in the casket furnish associations with both snow and human remains. The changing image produced when the medal is moved stands for the absence of spacial limits of the meandering river Don and a past without temporal limits.

Another medal, *Covenant*, is formally similar but contains no moving elements and makes use of lettering (fig. 6). The piece of Israeli stone placed in the casket refers to the fragmented tablets in the Ark of the Covenant of tradition. A text – an early version of the Ten Commandments – is inscribed in Hebrew script on the glass surface of the casket and appears to hover



3. Szilávis: *Four elements (Fire, Water, Air, Earth)*, 1995, assembled plexiglass, cork, gilt brass, etc., 83 x 83mm. each.



4. Szilávis: *Genesis I-IV*, 1995, steel and nickel-plated brass, mixed technique, 80 x 75mm., 80 x 85mm., 80 x 80mm., 60 x 65mm.



5. Szlávic: *What's my name and branch of service*, 2000, wood, iron, bone, etc., mixed technique, 95mm.



6. Szlávic: *Covenant*, 2000, wood, silver, etc., mixed technique, 95mm.



7. Szlávics: *My 20th century I-IV*, 2000, iron and bone, mixed technique, 95mm. each.

above the stone. Only consonants were indicated in the old quadratric Hebrew script, and the alphabet used today, which includes vowels, began to be used only around 500BC. We are therefore looking at an ancient Hebrew text. The medal refers to a distant past, which still has repercussions in the present day.

In Szlávics' earlier works a central preoccupation had been time, but another major concern – that of inner space – also became increasingly prominent at this time. The appearance of inner space is especially noticeable in the series *My 20th century* (fig. 7), which both continues and contrasts with the works already mentioned. Always ready for a new beginning, the artist again used the

square inside the circle as the principal formal element, but the wood, which had suggested warmth, was now replaced with the rigidity and aggressiveness of iron. In the inner space – a deep square cavity – tiny animal bones indicate brutality. For the artist, this shocking and disillusioning image added the final touch to the last century, the tiny bones suggesting the mass graves left after wars and repeated genocide. It is a stark and depressing commemoration of the turn of the millennium.

Following a brief pause, Szlávics has produced two medallic series annually since 2002. These have delved further into the questions raised by the artist in earlier



8. Szlávics: *For D. V.'s birthday: Studio I-IV*, 2002, wood, iron and textile, mixed technique, 95 x 95mm. each.

works. Their common feature is once again a wooden surround. After working with metal, he always returns to wood. The square shape has also returned, and the division of the series into four parts has been retained. In 2002 two of these series bore the title *For D.V.'s birthday*. One is subtitled *Studio*, the other *Ancient Jewish cemetery*. The titles allude to the two central motifs in works by the Hungarian painter Dezső Váli (b. 1942). The two artists did not meet but were in contact through the internet, and Váli's works and personality have had a considerable influence on Szlávics. This has resulted in the square shapes, the presence of the table, and the predominance of black in the *Studio* series (fig.

8), whilst the impact of a painter with an intense awareness of the age in which he lives, a keen sense of identity, and a close adherence to traditional values is particularly strong in the *Ancient Jewish cemetery* series (fig. 9). The highly visible stapling together of the wooden pieces in this series creates a specific effect, and the use of a dry root is decorative but also carries several layers of meaning. The Jewish symbols of the seven-branched candlestick and the star of David on the gravestones confirm the interpretation. Colour was already important in the earlier works but now its role is even greater. The contrast between the burnt and blackened sticks, stapled together, and the natural



9. Szilágyi: *For D.V.'s birthday: Ancient Jewish cemetery I-IV*, 2002, wood and iron, mixed technique, 100 x 100mm. each.

weathered wood enhances the rhythm of the forms. (At the national medal biennale in Sopron in 2003 Szilágyi was again awarded the prestigious City of Sopron prize.)

A similar approach can be found in another series, *P. Howard – To go or to die* (fig. 10). This earned him first prize in a competition centred on the popular Hungarian novelist Jenő Rejtő, whose pen-name was P. Howard and who is particularly well-known for his novels set around the French Foreign Legion. The aim was not to create an illustration but to elicit associations and present the writer's life and work in a synthesis. The

objects used for the composition – pieces of black wood stapled together, tiny bones, a dry root and a fob watch – are embedded in foundry sand contained within rectangular iron frames. The colour scheme of the series is balanced, the white, black and reddish brown hues contributing greatly to the equilibrium of the pieces. A harmony is thereby created between the tragic life of the writer and the wry humour of his works, which are regarded by some as pulp fiction.

These serious works, which address very broad issues, were followed by more personal works raising questions that are principally formal and often centre on



10. Szlávics: P. Howard: *To go or to die I-IV*, 2003, iron, wood and bone, mixed technique, 100 x 100mm. each.

ways of creating inner spaces. *A little night music* (fig. 11) is also a four-part series made up of square components, and yet it creates a quite different impression. The artist had become preoccupied with the question of how to use old objects in his works, as though the arts and crafts approach of his early days had once again acquired a greater importance for him. In this work parts of an old master violin have been placed in four frames of cherry-tree wood. The worn surface of the violin has assumed a beautiful colour, reminding the viewer that the patina of wood is also a function of time. The task that the artist set himself centred on the

handling of space, that is, how the body of the violin could be sited within the inner space. Questions of space have been a recurrent theme in modern Hungarian medallist art. In the 1970s a new interpretation of space and an expansion of forms produced a change in outlook that led to a symbolism proclaiming the unity of humanity and nature. More recently, as well as the representation of space, the actual experience of space has become the subject, and this has involved a sensitive evocation of inner feelings. In keeping with this latter trend, Szlávics has made use of a range of old objects to create inner spaces, relating them to one



11. Szilávis: *A little night music I-IV*, 2004, wood, mixed technique, 114 x 114mm. each.

another and presenting through them the various attitudes of his age. The harmony created between the wood of the frames and of the violin and the sureness of the artistic execution suggest a rare confidence. This is confirmed by the tranquillity and sense of order that inhabit the square format of the four pieces.

Similar questions and formal and tonal solutions are brought together in another four-part series, *On the road* (fig. 12). The deep square iron frames contain the disassembled parts of an old worn-out planing bench.

Together they act as a protest against any forced opposition between the past and modernity. The battered fragments of the joiner's bench provide a huge diversity of inner spaces. These negative forms, together with the time-worn surfaces, generate associations with gates, windows and other aspects of human habitations. The colours produced by the patina of the old wood and the remains of the textile covering of the bench combine with effects of light and shade to create a subtle and haunting atmosphere.



12. Szlávis: *On the road I-IV*, 2005, wood, iron and textile, mixed technique, 120 x 120mm. each.

The questions of content and form raised by the works of László Szlávis Jr place them within the vanguard of Hungarian medallic art. In the period covered in this essay a recurrent theme has been time, but Szlávis has not represented this in a linear way, choosing instead more empirical solutions. Latterly his interest has turned to problems of space, but, unlike many artists, it has been primarily inner space and negative forms that have interested him. The consistency of the formal idiom of his works shows that

they are not the outcome of unconnected ideas. Rather they are experiments, searching in one particular direction and investigating the degree to which the limits of the medallic genre can be stretched.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All photographs are by László Szlávis Jr.

NOTE

1. Viktória L. Kovásznai, 'A series of *Ritual Proto-Money* by László Szlávis Jr', *The Medal*, 36 (2000), pp. 75-81.