

Notes on The Metal Mirror

It was as if he were x-raying that disc, revealing everything that had been effaced by time, flattened under the blows of the coiner's hammer, everything that appeared to have vanished forever. As his fingers ran over its surface they were groping for the unseen traces of design and relief,' the disc spoke to him. ..

Yury Dombrovsky, *The Keeper of Antiquities* (1945)

This catalogue marks the occasion of an exhibition of Stephen Sack's coin photography at the British Museum. The images that form *The Metal Mirror* were made over an eighteen month period, but it would be true to say that for Sack the project, from initial concept to final realisation, has been a full fifteen years in the making. Although not all the works here are derived from the British Museum's own numismatic collections (some are from the Cabinet des Medailles in Brussels, others from the artist's own collection and a few come from private lenders) it was the opportunity to exhibit at this particular institution that motivated Sack to create an entirely new set of coin-based images. An important aspect of this project has been the collaboration between the artist and curatorial staff of the Department of Coins and Medals:

Sack has drawn on the specialist knowledge and enthusiasm of staff to further his understanding of coins and they in return have seen the objects in their care revealed literally - in a new light.

The works presented here aim to achieve more than technical accomplishment. Photography has in recent decades ventured out of its established boundaries and asserted itself as a unique and powerful medium for artistic expression. Sack's aesthetic sensibility, informed by a conceptual understanding of his subject matter tied to an inspired lyricism, places his work in this newer tradition.

Art and money are well acquainted and over the centuries many artists have been moved to make a critical response to it. Some, including Rubens, Delacroix and Picasso, have found coins inspiring as beautiful objects in their own right (it is true that some coins can satisfy as works of art, both in terms of quality of engraving and originality of design). Others, among them Titian and Veronese, have depicted coins in such biblical episodes as the clearing of the temple and Christ with the tribute penny. Coins also featured in the allegorical still-life paintings and genre scenes of money lenders and misers that were popular in Northern Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this context the coin is symbolic: it is there to remind the viewer of the ephemeral nature of life and the dangers of avarice. In the twentieth century artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys and, notoriously, J.S. Boggs have been more interested in concepts of value, their work often being informed by irony (in the case of Boggs, the eXChange of drawn copies of bank notes for goods and services has ensured the close

attention of the banking authorities). Sack's work does not look to beautiful coins for inspiration - at least in the conventional sense of the word - and neither does it seek to make a polemic statement on the nature of capitalism. Instead, his images have their own starting point.

Born in Plainfield, New Jersey (USA) in 1955, Stephen Sack moved to Brussels in the late nineteen seventies. Since 1983 he has worked on several distinct series of photographic works collectively entitled *The Chromosomic Memory*. Central to this body of work is the artist's desire to arrive at a philosophical understanding of his subject matter. The object - be it a coin, a tombstone inscription or a mediaeval clock - is transformed by time and deterioration, and undergoes a process of metamorphosis that can, potentially, reveal its *essential being*. It is this manifestation that Sack documents in the subsequent photographic image. Whereas the archaeologist and the historian must give a scholarly interpretation of artefacts and events, Sack sifts through the detritus of history finding rich aesthetic possibilities and symbolic significance in the material he discovers there.

The first coin images were made in 1983 as part of a series from *The Chromosomic Memory* entitled *Faces*. In these works corrosion has partly destroyed the portrait on the coin and it now appears as an eery mask emerging from an erupting volcanic surface. The series also includes a set of deteriorated photographic portraits taken from gravestones. Altered by time and the elements the photograph can no longer serve as a visual record of the deceased and has become a phantom portrait. There is clearly a parallel here: the latter, destroyed like the interred corpse, might be read as a metaphor for our own mortality (incidentally putting us in mind of the *vanitas* themes of Sack's Low Country predecessors) but they are also creatures reborn under the lens of the camera. The coins too have been subject to this metaphysical transmutation: struck as monetary objects, their worn surfaces are revealed in a new and fantastic guise.

Numismatics continued to hold a fascination for Sack; he started to collect numismatic reference works, he visited museums and sought the advice of experts. The new work reflects this increased understanding of the coin as a historical artefact. The invitation to exhibit at the British Museum came early in 1998 and Sack immediately set to work, spending extended periods at the British Museum and the Cabinet des Medailles in Brussels. The process of selecting the coins was demanding: thousands were examined as Sack searched for the few elusive pieces that had a particular resonance for him, and fewer still had the exact qualities he was looking for when placed before the camera. It was the ancient coins that most interested him, although not exclusively so, and those selected originate from a variety of cultures and time periods: Roman coins minted in Alexandria, Gaul and Judaea, as well as Rome itself; Indo-Greek pieces from Afghanistan; medieval Islamic coins from Turkey and Iraq. Here, time has acted as a transforming agent allowing the coin to develop what he refers to as its 'magical properties'. The individual history of the coin - from its moment of striking, as it circulates, is lost, buried and finally

recovered - invests it with a symbolic dimension that goes beyond the iconography of the image stamped upon it. While Sack recognises that the photographic operation is purely technical, he describes the imaginative processes involved in the making of the image as being 'alchemical'. One deposit of Roman coins, recovered from a shrine dedicated to the goddess Coventina on Hadrian's Wall, particularly caught his attention. Dating mainly from the end of the second century, these coins were tossed into a well as votive offerings to the goddess and lay undisturbed until the end of the nineteenth century. The quasimagical function of the coins and the fact that their surfaces had been partially destroyed by water corrosion made them perfect for Sack's purposes.

The images themselves observe certain conventions: they are all large scale (a metre or so in size) and rectangular in format; they are all in colour; they are all enlarged details, cropped as necessary by the artist. The physical size and editing of the image removes the coin from its familiar context, and it would prove difficult for anyone but an expert to recognise the source of these works. Sack is clear that the image should function as an autonomous art work; to receive it simply as a 'coin' would be to demystify and inhibit the viewer's imaginative response to it. For the same reason the exhibited images are not individually titled and neither are the source-coins displayed alongside.

In a broad sense, both art and numismatics are concerned with investigating the human condition, albeit through different lines of enquiry. The artist explores the world about him by processing sensation through his imagination and projecting it in some plastic form, while the numismatist studies the material evidence of his coins and draws conclusions about the people who made them: their political and economic history, their social aspirations and religious beliefs. In these images of phantom-like figures, mythical beasts and shadowy architecture, suggestive of a lost and ancient world, the two disciplines converge. Artistic and academic interaction has been the key to this project and from the original and challenging nature of these art works it is clear that this has been a fruitful and enriching collaboration.

Brendan Moore, *The Metal Mirror* exhibition curator, British Museum