



Collection of medals from the Research and Study Section Volte Face - Contemporary Medal. Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the acquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon

VOLTE FACE – CONTEMPORARY MEDAL: THE STUDY OF A COLLECTION OF CONTEMPORARY MEDALS

VOLTE FACE - CONTEMPORARY MEDAL: ESTUDIO DE UNA COLECCIÓN DE MEDALLAS CONTEMPORÁNEAS

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- Abstract** This article aims to describe the study carried out of the acquisition of contemporary medals of the *Volte Face-Contemporary Medal*, the former research unit of the Research and Studies Centre in Fine Arts (CIEBA) at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon. They researched on the history of the *Volte Face – Contemporary Medals* group and the experimental work developed in the study of medallic art. This experimental path led to the appearance of medals with different shapes and sizes, craft in materials of different origins, namely organic (wood, honeycombs, parts of animals), synthetic (plastic, acrylic, wood panels) and inorganic (ceramic and metal), whose characteristics have revealed themselves as a challenge for the acquisition conservation and packaging.
- Keywords** Contemporary Medal, Volte Face, Conservation, Degradation factors, Organic materials, Synthetic materials, Inorganic materials.
- Resumen** El presente artículo tiene como objetivo describir el estudio realizado en el acervo de las medallas contemporáneas de *Volte Face - Medalha Contemporânea*, antigua unidad de investigación del Centro de Investigación y Estudios de Bellas Artes (CIEBA) de la Facultad de Bellas Artes de la Universidad de Lisboa. Se ha realizado una investigación sobre la historia del *Volte Face - Medalha Contemporânea* y del trabajo experimental desarrollado en el área de las medallas. Esta vía de trabajo experimental condujo a la aparición de medallas de diferentes formas y tamaños, realizadas en materiales de diferentes orígenes, tanto orgánicos (madera, panales, partes de animales), como sintéticos (plásticos, acrílicos, derivados de la madera) e inorgánicos (cerámica y metal), cuyas características se han revelado como un desafío para la conservación y acondicionamiento del acervo.
- Palabras clave** Medalla contemporánea, *Volte Face*, conservación, factores de degradación, materiales orgánicos, materiales sintéticos, materiales inorgánicos.

INTRODUCTION

This article intends to make known the acquis of Contemporary Medals of the Research and Study Unit *Volte Face – Contemporary Medal*, a former unit of Research of the Faculty of Fine-Arts of Lisbon, allocated to the Centre of Research and Studies in Fine Arts (CIEBA).

The origin of medallic art at the Faculty of Fine-Arts – University of Lisbon (FBAUL), has its background in the foundation of the former Lisbon Fine-Arts Academy in 1836. It was part of the Academy score curriculum that was organized in the following classes: History Drawing, History Painting, Painting of Landscape and Natural Products, Sculpture, Civil Architecture, Historic Print, Landscape Print and Stamps and Medal Engraving (Lisboa, 2007). The classroom was then taught by José António do Valle, and only two students attended it, Francisco Augusto de Campos and Olympio Raimundo Ferreira (Silva, 1836-1840). However, it only lasted for a short time, as it was closed in 1841, due to the teacher's death (Lisboa, 2007). With its disappearance of the academic curriculum, the medallic art was charged to some crafters, being taught and developed at other institutions that didn't possess any pedagogical component. It took more than 100 years till the discipline was again taught at Superior School of Fine-Arts of Lisbon (ESBAL), after the artistic education reform which happened in Portugal in 1957. Under the Decree-Law, November 14th, 1957, the discipline was called «Technology of Sculpture (Ceramics and Medallic Art)», being taught twice a week, in three-hour classes (Regulamento das Escolas Superiores de Belas-Artes, 1957). Since then, the teaching of medallic art has made part of the curricular programs of FBAUL, splitting up from Ceramics and reaching a progressive autonomy and curricular equity in the curricular plan of artistic technologies available at FBAUL, after the artistic teaching reform of 1975.

Nowadays, the medallic art is taught in two modalities: the Medallic Art Lab, divided into six levels of teaching devoted to «reinforce the specific skills in the scientific area of Sculpture Course» and the Technological Studies of Medallic Art divided into four levels aimed to complement the «specific skills in the scientific area of Sculpture, Painting, Equipment Design, Communication Design, Art and Multimedia and Sciences of Art and Patrimony courses» (Programas das Unidades Curriculares de Medalhística, 2017-2018).

Through the programmes of the different levels available, the students get knowledge of traditional and contemporary medal concepts, are taught how to produce trophies, and in the highest levels, they are required to produce coins (numismatic area).

The students are encouraged to participate and share the projects they develop in the classroom at both national and international levels, and furthermore, to present technical and conceptual solutions for the Medallic Art World.

Being observed these preconditions, they became the highlights of the contributions that the Research and Studies Section *Volte Face – Contemporary Medal*, gave to the artistic teaching of medallic art at FBAUL.

The *Volte Face – Contemporary Medal* was a group formed by students and teachers¹ twenty years ago, in the school year 1997/1998 coming from the discipline of Medallic Art of FBAUL. At this venue, aimed to research, they could interact and develop new plastic languages for the medal (Duarte, 2013). This project starts developing, and in 2003 is set up as the *Investigation and Study Centre Volte Face – Contemporary Medal*. Four years

1 «The founding members of the project are Assistant Professor, Sculptor João Duarte, regent of the discipline, Assistant Professor Rui Vasquez and students, Amílcar Soares, Maria João Ferreira, Patrícia Bilé, José Viriato Bernardo, Jorge Baptista, Patrícia Oliveira, Nuno Carvalho, Dávinia de Brito and Olga Neves» (Duarte, 2001).



Example of a contemporary medal (Catarina Albuquerque, 2006, «Money Wins»; Construction; Plastic and Hot Glue).
Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the aquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon

later, it became a branch of the newly created CIEBA: *Investigation and Study's Section Volte Face – Contemporary Medal*.² It had as targets the learning and research in the Medallion Art Area, as well as its diffusion at both national and international context.³

The medals created by students of this group have an experimental basis, i.e. explore different plastic issues (Ferreira, 2010). This phenomenon makes the *Volte Face* medals collection a compendium of objects of different shapes, sizes and materials making the aesthetics solutions wander between two worlds: one more traditional associated to the order of a medal and other more contemporary, closely connected to each author's creative imagination.

The most traditional world has its background in the renaissance medals, which have survived all along the times, resulting in objects which are described as a piece of metal, with round shape, showing a famous person or commemorating an event celebration where the representations are executed in low-relief with an explaining caption (Rodrigues, 1875). In what concerns the contemporary medal, this is understood as a need each author has to get free from the traditional canons of the medallion art (Trigueiros, 2010) acquiring a three-dimensionality which is result of the plans expansion and becoming an object of

perfect figure⁴ with characteristics firmly sculptural (Teixeira, n.d.).

Though there have been some changes either formally or conceptually over the years, the medal has kept as a means of communication with capacity to convey its message throughout different destinations thanks to its condition of multiple object (Batista, 2005).

As it was said before *Volte Face – Contemporary Medal*, had as a target the dissemination of the medal. In that respect, the group established various protocols and partnerships with institutions of different fields: International Artistic Schools, Galleries and Public Institutions. The protocols signed with the City Councils of Seixal and Sintra are a good example, where the group establishes himself as a collaborator in two events: with the first city, it was developed an International Biennale of the Contemporary Medal; with the second one, there was a cooperation in the Contemporary Medal Award Dorita Castel-Branco. Internationally the group establishes partnership, for example, with the University of Arts in Philadelphia (USA), the National Academy of Art in Sofia (Bulgaria) or with the Faculty of Fine-Arts of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun (Poland), among many others institutions, which many links were created with, in order to develop an international circuit for the dissemination of the Portuguese contemporary medal around the world and the promotion of proposals from different countries in Portugal.

Besides the diffusion of these young authors' medals, the *Volte Face* has also as objective give «specific artistic training in the area of medallion art»⁵. This way, it was established a protocol with the National Press Medal House (INCM), with the aim of complementing the training

2 DUARTE, João (2013). *João Duarte, 30 Anos | Medalhas e Moedas 30 Years | Medals and Coins*. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda, S.A. 201.

3 «1- The Volte Face Center has as its objective the technical-scientific investigation, as well as the specific artistic training of the discipline of Medallion Art. 2 - The objectives of the Center are also: a) Collaboration with external entities, national or foreign, through the conclusion of agreements, research and pedagogical development, publications and services provided by the specialized professional training inherent to said discipline of Medallion Art; b) The provision of services to the community, within the areas of specific competence; c) The internationalization of its activities, through the exchange of projects and collaboration with foreign organizations and researchers in terms of the convergence of their respective interests». – Despacho n.º 5440/2004 (2004). Regulamento do Centro de Investigação e de Estudos Volte Face – Medalha Contemporânea. Diário da República, 2.ª Série, 128, 4276-4277.

4 The sculpture of perfect figure «is that whose volume corresponds to at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the real volume of a body or an object», (Vilhena, 2004).

5 Despacho n.º 5440/2004 (2004). Regulamento do Centro de Investigação e de Estudos Volte Face – Medalha Contemporânea. Diário da República, 2.ª Série, 128, 4276-4277.

of students in the areas of Medal Art and numismatic engraving, through a professional internship at the INCM facilities and an annual contest for a medal edition.

In addition to enabling his members and medallic art students with tools to explore solutions for the medal, the *Volte Face* also provided them with the possibility to interact with the World of Medals, besides the academic context, allowing the students to integrate the same circuits as the artists with long careers.

After 18 years of being working as a group, the *Section of Investigation and Studies Volte Face – Contemporary Medal* ended, being extinguished in 2016.

THE COLLECTION: ITS CHARACTERISTICS AND CONSERVATION PROBLEMS

With the aim of giving answers to the activities and commitments where *Volte Face* was involved, year after year, it was constituting a collection with the deposits of pieces produced by their different members. With this research

we could inventory about 500 pieces from 32 authors of the group.

Before, we referred the proposals done by the group, which differed between the order medal and the author medal. The first one is very linked to the commemorative medal, i.e. it results from an order which is done to the artist where someone asks him to produce a medal which commemorates a fact, a character or a monument (Lamas, 1916). The second, the author medal is the one which doesn't depend on any commemorative event and orders, being assumed as a choice of the author either formally or conceptually (Duarte, 2005). This phenomenon created a wide variety of formal, dimensional and material possibilities.

Material

The acquisition materials have different origins: organic, inorganic and synthetic. Within the category of the organic materials, we have, for example, wood, paper or parts of animals. Among the inorganic materials, we can find

Materials	Examples
Metals	Stainless steel; Aluminum; Brass; Iron; Bronze; Silver; Lead; Tin; Gold leaf; Copper.
Ceramics	Porcelain; Raku; Terracotta; Earthenware; Stoneware.
Stones and Minerals	Small rocks; Marble; Plaster; Sand.
Glasses	Mirrors; Glass.
Polymers	Acrylic; Nylon; Epoxy Resin; Polyurethane; Various plastics; Films of X - ray; Wax; Paraffin.
Textile	Cotton yarn; Satin; Woollen ribbons.
Wood and Wood Derivatives	Coconut shell; Sisal; Wood Agglomerate; K-Line; MDF; Card; Paper; Pine.
Perishables Materials	Pills; Shells; Spines; Honeycombs; Manure; Birds Wings; Feathers; Corn.
Constituent Materials of the Volte Face - Contemporary Medal Collection.	

ceramics, stones and the metals. And at last, the synthetic materials, as it is the case of acrylic and epoxy resins.

These materials are used simultaneously in the medals production, emerging proposals which include, for example, wood and metals, honeycombs with metal and paper or even bird wings pasted on stones. The main types of materials are listed on the previous table.

Metals

With regard to metals, we can verify that the studied pieces show a dominance of bronze, lead and iron, followed by the other metals, listed on the table, in smaller quantities.

The pieces produced in bronze, stamped or casted show for the most part patinas induced by the artists, which add an aesthetic value to the piece. The bronze is a metal alloy, of copper and tin with a yellowish colour. When affected by the corrosion, the bronze may acquire a patina which goes from the reddish brown to green (more corrosion) (Ashurst, 1988). We can see corrosion remains on the inventoried objects, such as small green oxide marks on the patinas. Sometimes the patinas are produced by the artist and result from physical and chemical procedures which promote oxidation reactions on the surfaces being some of those processes harmful, existing the possibility to destroy the piece (Rich, 1988).

The medals produced in lead are, within the metal categories, the ones which can be found in better conditions of conservation, showing few damages. Even so, we can see some losses and holes which, for the most part, result from mistakes provoked by the experimental process which involves the production, being visible the existence of white powdery products on some relieves, quite probably, products of the lead corrosion. This metal is characterised as being one of the most resilient to the corrosion action, however,

as time goes by, it can develop an insoluble patina of lead sulphate (Ashurst, 1988) whose oxidation products are, generally, white (Ankersmit, 2017). The objects produced with this material were crafted through the foundry (the lead shows a low melting point).

To end the metals, we checked the medals completely or partly crafted in iron. It is a metal which can be worked in different ways –cast, melted, welded, among other processes (Ashurst, 1988)– the objects produced with this material show more oxidation marks than the others. In some cases, every piece is homogeneously oxidised. In other cases, there are only some oxidation marks along the surface. The products of the iron corrosion are usually called rust and are characterized by a tone which goes from the red to the reddish brown (Ankersmit, 2017).

Because the artists often chose oxidised finishings, together with the lack of documentation (photos, descriptive documents) concerning the *acquis* objects since their origin, it is difficult to do the diagnosis of the medals, since there isn't any comparison about the evolution of the pieces conservation state.

Ceramics and petrous

In the case of ceramic and petrous materials, we verify pathologies connected with the pieces execution, as it is the case of cracks which happen during the clay baking or, in the case of plaster, the existence of clay remains of the moulds. However, considering the weakness of those materials, we can observe losses either with the supports or with the glazes and fractures caused by potential shocks. In the studied *acquis*, we can find a great variety of ceramic pastes, namely red clay, porcelain and stoneware, undertook as terracotta or glazed and engobed.

The plaster material which results from the crush, dehydration and calcination of the



Fracture in the Terracotta (Joana Pacheco; n.d., Untitled; Modeling / Construction; Terracotta and Cotton Yarn). Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the acquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon



Loss in polychrome glaze (Joana Pacheco; n.d., Untitled; Modeling; Glazed clay). Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the acquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon

gypsum (when under temperatures above the 100°C, this material turns into a white dust), (Mascaranhas, 2008) is one of the protagonists of this acquis. The examine plasters can be found in two ways: pieces only cast in plaster in their original colour and pieces cast and patinated. We can find plasters still with some clay remains over the surface, left by the contact with clay moulds, or even clay patinas which cover completely the surfaces, having the artist taken visual advantage of this factor. We can still observe marks of abrasion and losses on some pieces. In the case of the patinated plasters in order to imitate metals as the bronze, we can find losses on the polychromy.

Glass and mirrors

The glass is an amorphous material, without an atomic structure as the other solids, presenting a structural morphology similar to a liquid. It is composed by several substances –silica, sodium, potassium, lead and calcium– and each one of these components presents a different role in the glass characteristics (Newton, 1990). The medals observed in the

acquis, which are produced with glass are, for the most part, combined with other materials, as for example, paraffins, metals or paper. In relation to the conservation state of glass, we can say that they are in a good state, not showing material instabilities or physical damages. The example presented in the next image shows a medal composed by paper, paraffin and glass, being possible to see that, laterally, the paraffin shows losses and the glass remains without damages.



Example of medal with glass (Ana Gonçalves; n.d., «Sem Título II»; Casting with Inclusions; Paraffin, Paper and Glass). Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the acquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon

Polymer

In relation to polymers and plastic, there is a predominance of pieces produced in epoxy resin (González, 2010) rather than the others: acrylics, polyurethane resin or waxes and paraffins. The epoxy resin used, in spite of being chemically resilient, is sensible to the UV radiation. The objects produced with the epoxy resin tend to become yellowish due to the photo oxidation (Shashoua, 2008).

The majority of the objects produced mainly with resin, are yellowish, being possible to verify different yellow tones.



Yellow Epoxy Resin (Sérgio Reis; n.d., Untitled; Casting with Inclusions; Resin and Stainless Steel). Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the acquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon

This material can be worked in different ways. One of the most common example in the acquis is the leak of resin into a mould (casting). Its transparency characteristic allows the authors to take advantage of the inclusion of objects or other material in the resin, so they can be seen inside.

Textiles

In what concerns the textiles, we can find some details as the cotton yarns, the satin or the woollen ribbons. In many cases these details are constituent parts of the medals, being always in harmony with other materials.

Some authors frequently use the crochet for the execution of their plastic solutions, while others opt for the use of daily objects such as cotton gloves or different fabrics.

The major pathologies to remark in this group are the deformations, namely with the crochet objects. Two of the most common changes are: the winding of the ends of the crochet and/or the yellowish spots, connected to factors such as humidity and temperature fluctuations, light exposure or contact with dirt and dust (Canadian Conservation Institute, 2017).

Woods and its derivates

The wood has a wide role in the artistic activity, which goes from the support for the painting (Llamas, 2014), to the prime material to sculpture (Machado, 1937). In the acquis of medals of *Volte Face*, we can find different types of wood standing out the pine. This wood is classified as resinous, i.e. timber produced by conifers (Pires, 2014).

In relation to the wood-based materials, we can find some objects produced in wood shaving and wood-based panels (whose most common variant is the MDF – *Medium Density Fiberboard*). The first one is characterized by the decomposition and homogenous reorganization of the wood constituents, being observable a composition of panels by wood chips and fibres. Thus, the MDF is a wood fiber pressed with synthetic resins (Conde, 2012). The wood elements of the medals are in a good state of conservation, not being visible any macroscopic damages. There are still some



Example of a pine wood medal (Alexandre Coxo; n.d., Untitled; Construction; Wood and Iron).
Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the acquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon

products of vegetable origin such as the sisal and the paper.

Perishable materials

At last, we could also find the existence of some perishable materials such as pills, spines, honeycombs, manure and even parts of animals. In relation to the conservation, this category looks a bit like *Eat-Art*, artistic movement which uses the food as raw-material. It will be very difficult to restore these objects, what makes the conservator-restorer to stick to controlling the object transformation, permitting it follows its natural evolution (Llamas, 2014). The same happens with the medals of this group of materials. This group of pieces is the one which shows elements more degraded in the collection as it is the case of a medal crafted with bird wings and a stone, which is completely damaged.

Similar to other contemporary art collection, the acquis of medals of the group *Volte Face-Contemporary Medal*, shows a

multiplicity of materials. This fact is a challenge for its conservation, as far as it implies the combination of several materials with different characteristics and needs among them, in a very same acquis.

Size and form issues

The medal was traditionally differentiated from other objects such as the plaquettes or the medallions through their sizes. The medal was a «round object with a size between 35 mm and 100 mm or more». ⁶ Nowadays, the medals have sizes which can reach a maximum of 150 mm. These latest parameters are quantified on the forms for the submission of pieces for XXXV FIDEM Art Medal Congress, in Ottawa (International Art Medal Federation, 2018).

The inventoried medals present sizes between 45 mm and 176 mm, being these the

⁶ Documento Avulso: «Questions d'ordre commercial», da Caixa de Arquivo Paris 1937 – Liege 1939, consultado nos Arquivos FIDEM, na Faculdade de Belas-Artes da Universidade de Lisboa.



Medal with 45 mm of diameter (Joana Alves; n.d., Untitled; Foundry; Plaster). Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the acquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon

two extremes of the acquis. The other pieces range around a medium size of 80 mm.

This acquis is diverse not only on their sizes and materials, but also on their shapes. It's observable a complex range of forms which goes from traditional «round cookie» (Teixeira, s.d.) to small three-dimensional objects, the so called «object medal» (Carvalho, 1982). From a more traditional perspective, of face and back, we observe round, square, rectangular or even triangular shaped medals.

The round three-dimensional medals present spherical, cubical, parallelepiped forms or so irregular forms which are difficult to bring them close to geometric solids.

In the formal fields it may still exist variations such as the existence of openings or rips in the compositions of the medal. These can or not have interactive elements (visual, kinetic or audio), resulting from action mechanisms such as rails, hinges or axis.

These several characteristics of the medals have made them a challenge to their conservation, as it is necessary to coordinate conditions that can help to protect the storage objects. Until now, the medals are accommodated in containers created by their authors. These solutions include daily containers such as cookies boxes or juice cartons. There are

containers designed according to the pieces with foam coating with shaped edges, and others without any kind of packaging being spread in carton boxes. The study, which is being developed around the collection, aims the creation of packaging containers which respect the unique characteristics of the medals.

Conclusions

This study has permitted structure the group *Volte Face – Contemporary Medal* within the overview of an experimental approach of the Contemporary Medal, integrated into an academic circle of medallic art.

We can conclude that, in what concerns to the conservation, there is a need to know the characteristics of the contemporary collections previously, in order to establish assertively the solution for their preservation. In the specific case of the collection of the *Investigation and Studies Centre Volte Face–Contemporary Medal*, it became clear the need to do a data collections of the pieces, as well as the main pathologies of the medals materials, in order to find solutions that can lead to better packaging of the medals. Only after the gathering of the data collection of a piece or groups of pieces, it will be possible to ensure which is the most correct solution for the preservation of the pieces, providing priorities and strategies according to the state of conservation of each of the collections objects.

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Square medal (Rui Vasquez, 2003, *Centenário do Nascimento do Professor Francisco de Paula Leite Pinto*; Construction; Acrylic and Bronze). Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the acquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon

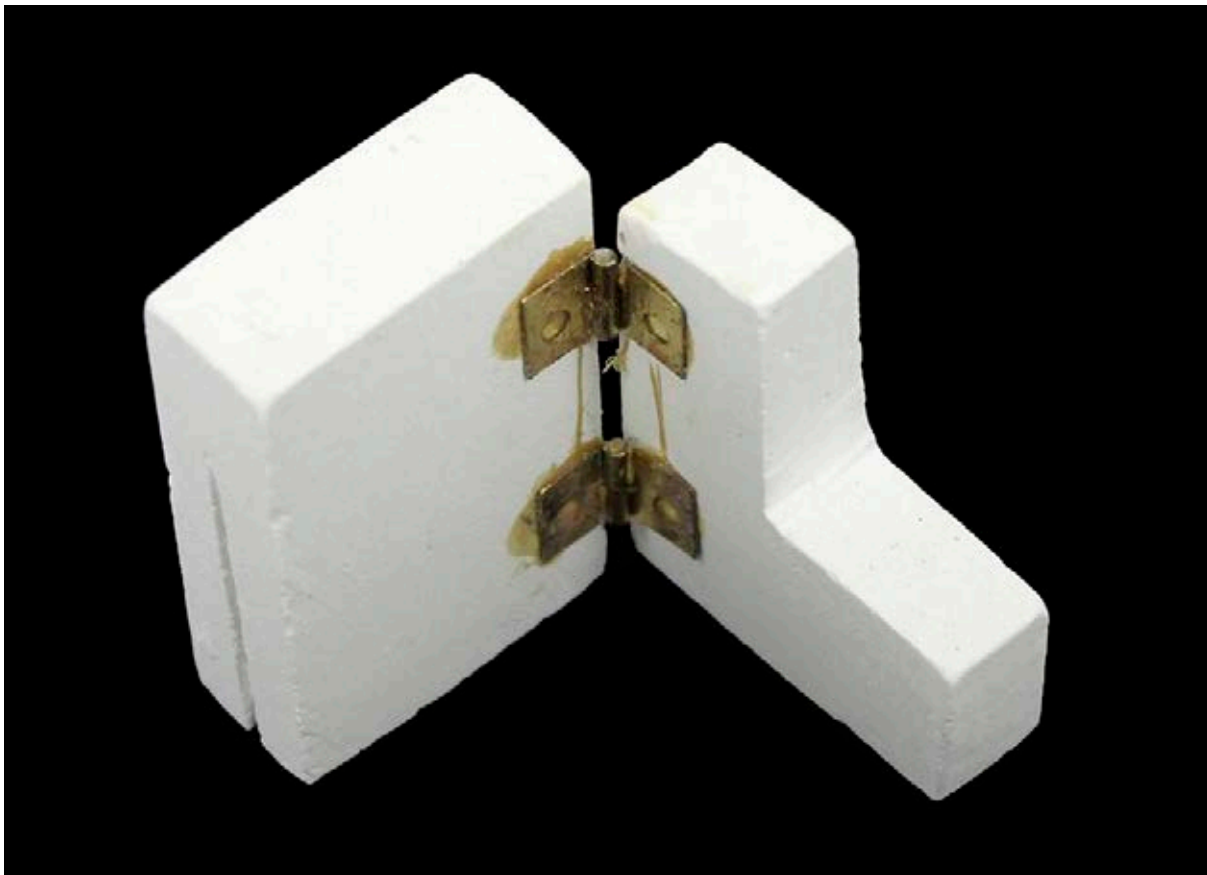
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Irregular format medal (Catarina Albuquerque, 2006, *Holly Mother*; Construction; Rubber). Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the acquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon

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Medal with hinges (Joana Alves 2003. Untitled; Construction and Foundry; Plaster).
Photography: Ana Sofia Neves. Work of the acquis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon

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