

THE MEDALLIC PORTRAITS OF CARLA KLEIN

Arnold Nieuwendam



1. Klein: *Nicolaas*, 1974, bronze, 70mm.

The Amsterdam sculptor and medallist Carla Klein (b.1943) has created some remarkable medals, bearing portraits of people and also animals. Fewer sculptors nowadays make portraits, and portraits on medals are also rarer than before, as medallic art has taken to abstraction and become more conceptual. To create a portrait that resembles its subject and is also an artistic design within the circle may be considered one of the most difficult tasks for a medallist. That is also the reason why so few succeed in getting it right. It is equally difficult to attain a good likeness with animals, and this is something that the owner usually wishes for.

In total Carla Klein has made thirty-three human portraits on twenty-eight medals, and she is currently working on two more. In addition she has made portraits of her cats Digger and Fari, as well as medals of dogs, horses, grebes, pigeons, and dolphins.

The first relief portrait that Klein modelled was a study in baked clay, with the title *Annemieke*. This was of the daughter of the landlady who provided the artist with a place to live during her studies at the State Academy of Art, Amsterdam, around 1970, who had an expressive face. Three studies followed of her friend Maria, also done in baked clay. These one-sided portraits, which differ from each other only slightly, were made in 1971.

Afterwards, in the course of time, five family portraits

were realised, beginning in 1974 with her father in a medal entitled *Nicolaas*; on the reverse his daughter placed the astrological sign Taurus (fig. 1). Two versions of this portrait were produced. A medal of her uncle Gerard followed, also in 1974. He was a market gardener, and the products that he cultivated are displayed on the reverse: grapes, tomatoes, and chrysanthemums. A beeswax model of the artist's sister Nicoline was begun during Klein's stay in the United States in 1975. The medal was produced later, in 1978, in Amsterdam, with the help also of sketches; Nicoline's favorite cat, Jasper, was placed on the reverse (fig. 2). Her daughter, Carmen, was also drawn and painted in watercolours in the United States, and a portrait modelled in beeswax; this portrait medal was also finished in Amsterdam in 1978. On the reverse is a heron, which is preening itself, a reference to girls of sixteen who often look a lot at themselves in the mirror.

In 1979 *Arnold* was portrayed on a medal (fig. 3). At that time he was not yet the husband of the artist. The painter Arnold Nieuwendam (Arnaldo) is portrayed on the front of the medal, whilst on the reverse he plays the guitar, with around him an appropriate text that translates as 'Painting life is making music'. *Liesbeth*, a medal of 1980, bears a portrait of a friend of the artist. While portraying *Liesbeth*, a comparison with a stork kept recurring, and the artist accordingly placed that bird on the reverse.



2. Klein: Nicoline, 1978, bronze, 82mm.



3. Klein: Arnold, 1979, bronze, 84mm.





4. Klein: Pukkie/Meis, 1989, bronze, 78mm.



5. Klein: Myrte, 1990, bronze, 65mm.



6. Klein: Carlota Esbach, 1992, bronze, 75mm.



7. Klein: Margreet Holleman, 1995, bronze, 80mm.

From 1981 Klein began to receive commissions for portrait medals. On the earliest, made in 1981 to celebrate twelve and a half years of marriage, the couple, Theo and Tonny, look into each other's eyes. The medal was produced in a large bronze version ninety-six millimetres in diameter, and also in gold, reduced to twenty-five millimetres; two examples of the smaller version were made. The reverse has a letter T, with the subjects' first names and surname. A portrait of the economist Professor H.J. Kuhlmeijer was commissioned by Koninklijk Begeer BV, and in 1984 a medal of Anna Evertje was commissioned for the subject's sixty-fifth birthday, to be given to her two daughters. She is shown on the reverse with her two grandchildren and a memorable inscription, which translates as 'To be a grandmother is a favour, to remain a grandmother is an art'.

An animal portrait also belongs with the artist's portrait commissions. Pukkie, a little dog whose pet name was Meis, appears on both sides of the medal (fig. 4). In 1990 two child portraits were commissioned by their grandmother, as a present for their parents. On the first medal is Myrte, who was then five years old; on the other side the child is portrayed with her doll (fig. 5). Her sister Judith, who was eight, covers the entire surface of the second medal, whilst the reverse illustrates an anecdote, showing Judith crying at the end of her first beach holiday. Klein displayed the girl's little feet sticking out from under the parasol, along with the little bucket and spade from which she was inseparable.

A medal of the constructional engineer Jan Brugge, also of 1990, shows him with luxuriant hair on the obverse, whilst the reverse consists of layers, the first forming a pentagram, an allusion to the golden section, and the uppermost being formed from a pair of compasses, a symbol of architecture; the initials JB and two chess pieces identify the designer and his hobby.

Klein's marriage medal of Brugge and Trudie Favié, which was completed in 1991, has on the front two dancing grebes, and on the reverse the artist has placed a tree of life with the names of the couple on the branches.

For the seventy-fifth birthday of Carlota Esbach, her sister had a medal made, with a portrait of Mrs Esbach on the front, and, as Mrs Esbach's profession was ward sister and one of her hobbies was the cultivation of flowers and plants, on the other side of the medal, along with her cat, there is a nurse's cross and a sprig of rest-harrow (fig. 6). Jan Brugge's next commission, in 1994, was for a medal of his wife Trudie, who had studied the history of literature, and accordingly the reverse features a pile of books with the inscription HABENT SUA FATA LIBELLI (Books have their own fortunes).

For Dutch coin collectors Margreet Holleman of Holleman Coins is a well-known name. To illustrate her profession, her portrait medal (fig. 7) has a pearled border and cracks at the edges like those found on ancient coins; on the reverse is a heap of coins with different images, including an owl, a horse, a branch, a cup, and the number 25, and on top of the heap lie her three cats: the Somalian Nikita in front, on the right the British short-hair Boris, and on the left the tomcat Joessef.

In 1995 some friends of an architect couple commissioned a medal from Klein. The front features two portraits turned towards each other, the man in profile, looking to the right, and the woman with her face turned three-quarters to the left. On the reverse is the inscription VAN DE VALK EN WOUDESTRA ARCHITECTEN 25 JAAR HENDRIK-JAN & TRUDY. The couple had been married for twenty-five years, and worked together as architects, a profession that was symbolised by Gaudí's church of the *Sagrada Família*



8. Klein: Child portraits, 1995, bronze, 85mm.



9. Klein: Self-portrait, 1996, bronze, 75mm.



10. Klein: Johan and Marianne Toet, 1998, bronze, 80mm.

in Barcelona, its four towers placed in the centre of the design as a symbol of eternity.

Carlota Esbach, who had received a medal as a present from her sister, commissioned a medal of her two nieces and nephew in 1995; *Child portraits* is its title (fig. 8). It is not often nowadays that three child portraits appear on one medal. On the reverse is a nest with young birds, representing the three children, who are still in need of the care of their parents, with a text that translates as 'We have not yet flown out'.

A medal with a self-portrait of Carla Klein (fig. 9) was made at the request of her husband in 1996 for his fiftieth birthday. The original agreement was to have only one cast, but in the end the foundry made three examples. The first one went to the husband, the second to the Rijksmuseum Het Koninklijk Penningkabinet in Leiden, and the third to the artist's sister in the United States. The front features Klein's face in profile, with on her shoulder one of her cats, Digger, supported by the right hand of its owner. The reverse consists of a series of symbolic circles. The central circle has the artist's monogram CK; in the second circle are the names of her husband and two cats, Arnold, Digger, and Fari; on the third she has put her profession: BEELDHOUWER MEDAILLEUR (Sculptor medallist); and the raised border of the fourth circle underscores the circular shape of the medal. Klein says about this work: 'This is my world, around which all revolve.'

When her Italian friend Anelide Lucchesie Tofani celebrated her fiftieth birthday on 13 January 1998, Klein spontaneously made her portrait as a present; the reverse has the name Anelide in stylised letters. In the same year Johan and Marianne Toet had themselves immortalised in bronze on the occasion of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary (fig. 10). On the reverse is depicted the bridge at Gorinchem with in front a sailing ship, with the surname TOET on its hull; the arches of the bridge are inscribed with the names Marianne and Johan. This place is of special importance to the couple, not only because they live there and love the place, but also because their son works in inland navigation and passes this bridge regularly.

On the reverse of a medal entitled *Durf te leven* (*Dare to live*) the medallist modelled two Dutch dogs (Keeshonden) who had already died. The commission stipulated that they must have a close likeness, and underneath their names Flip and Bobo were written. The medal was made for a thirty-fifth wedding anniversary celebration, which took place in 1999. On the obverse are five birds flying around the globe, to represent the members of the Vuursteen family who have found jobs in different parts of the world. As well as the inscription on the globe, which translates as 'Dare to live', the names of the family members are given on the tree: Karel, Juliëtte, Marcelle, Wiebeke, and Gijs.

At the end of 1999 a medal marking thirty years of



11. Klein: *Thirty years of veterinary practice*, 1999, bronze, 90mm.

veterinary practice was produced, also as the result of a commission (fig. 11). On the medal are the two children of the vet Ernst Osinga with their backs turned to each other, and underneath are their names, Ernst and Mariëtte; the dog on the reverse is a labrador named Beaulieu. A commission of March 2000 was for a portrait of the famous lawyer B.M. Telders, who died in a concentration camp. The artist's most recent portrait at the time of writing (May 2000), on which she is still working, is of her niece, Margit, who died from a serious illness on 21 January 2000. The parents will receive an example as a tangible memento in bronze.

Carla Klein is a self-taught medallist. Professor Piet Esser, her teacher at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam from 1967 until 1972, instructed her in the techniques of making sculptures, but not of making medals, and Klein began to work in this field only after she had left the Rijksakademie. This was confirmed by Esser in conversation with the author in December 1999. Klein does, however, admire the works of Esser, along with those of the medallist Christle Seth-Höfner, and, more recently, Heide

Dobberkau has been added to the list. She also considers the medals of the Renaissance a high point.

Each of Klein's medals is worked on for at least six months, always in peace and quiet. She has not bothered much with the various trends that have affected medallic art, and as a result has developed over the course of the years a particular style of her own. After the models are sculpted, there is little filing or polishing to get a smoother surface. The sculptor has remained faithful to herself, and to the task she gave herself when she began her medal work: to create, as well as she could, medals within the traditional circle. The intensity and quiet strength with which she imbues her work and her technical skills together make her one of the masters of the contemporary portrait medal.

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