

# London Evening Standard

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## Badges of Dishonour

British Museum, WC1

★★★★ Ben Lewis's rating

NOT RATED Reader rating

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## The British Museum deserves a medal

By Ben Lewis 29.06.09

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I'm all for historical museums revitalising their collections by exhibiting contemporary art alongside their dusty treasures.

But the recent attempts by the [British Museum](#) to achieve this synergy — with the kitsch of [Marc Quinn's](#) gold-plated [Kate Moss](#) and [Damien Hirst's](#) spin-painted skulls — were just cynical attempts to cash in on hustling artists' media profile.

It is on a firmer footing with this witty and nerdy exhibition of satirical medals — both from forgotten 18th and 19th-century master-craftsmen and from contemporary artists including the [Chapmans](#), [Cornelia Parker](#), [Grayson Perry](#), [Richard Hamilton](#) and cartoonist [Steve Bell](#).

Since ancient times, medals have celebrated military victories, sporting triumphs and coronations.

But there's a little-known flipside: from the late Renaissance to the early 20th century, a nastier kind of medal mocked political leaders and gloated over defeats.

Those on show are full of bare bottoms, farting and rude jokes.

One German medal-maker expressed his contempt for a peace treaty by showing Britain, [France](#) and [Holland](#) hurling manure.

Pacifist medals commemorate the First World War with skeletons on cannons.

This is also a chance to see Duchamp's "sculpture" of a cast bath-plug — an anti-medal.

Fast-forward to today, and it turns out that there's a British Art Medal Trust that has been commissioning living artists.

There are several directed against the [Iraq War](#), including [Steve Bell's](#), entitled [Collateral Damage Medal](#), which shows the queen's head wrapped in bandages.

But [Grayson Perry](#) wins the gold, riffing on ancient Christian medals of the Madonna by depicting a female figure clutching shopping bags in a critique of consumerism.

Until 27 September ([www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)).

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*Details are correct at the time of publication - please check with venue before booking.*

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