

★★★★ Ben Lewis's rating

The British Museum deserves a medal

By Ben Lewis 29.06.09

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)



Buyers beware: Faith in Shopping by Grayson Perry

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