

Alexandre-Louis-Marie Charpentier (1856–1909)

A medalist, sculptor, and cabinetmaker, Alexandre Charpentier (fig. 1) was a versatile artist who experimented with an array of materials, from those traditionally used in sculpture, such as bronze, silver, and clay, to more unusual ones, such as glass and leather. This exhibition is arranged according to four themes that touch upon some of the major concerns of Charpentier's prolific career: Maternity and Children, Labor, Portraiture, and the Decorative Arts.



1 Alexandre Charpentier in his studio, photograph reprinted from Gabriel Mourey, "Alexandre Charpentier," *L'Art et Les Artistes*, vol. 6 (October 1907–March 1908), p. 337, National Gallery of Art Library

MATERNITY AND CHILDREN

Charpentier sculpted numerous portraits of children and domestic scenes of mothers with infants. *Maternity* (or *Young Mother Nursing*), made in 1882, was one of his earliest compositions to depict this subject (fig. 2; nos. 2 and 4). After earning an honorable mention at the Paris Salon of 1883, where it was exhibited in plaster, *Maternity* was commissioned in marble by the French government for the state collection. The work became one of Charpentier's most successful compositions, one that he would translate into a variety of media in future decades. Among the more unusual examples is a terracotta version with a rich iridescent glaze (no. 2) produced by the renowned experimental ceramicist Emile Muller, who executed other terracotta works by the artist.

In the 1890s Charpentier began including his metal plaquettes as decorative elements on furniture that he designed and built. For example, he adorned the front of a nursery dresser from 1893 with plaquettes of *Maternity* and another subject, *Jean and Pierre*. The latter composition was also used as a cover for a pencil box (no. 8). In this double portrait, Charpentier depicted his son (Jean) and nephew (Pierre) with exaggerated, caricature-like features. In contrast to the humorous portraits of the infant boys, the artist sculpted his daughter Thérèse as a poised young girl wearing her hair in braided loops. The portrait appeared on a rectangular bronze medal (no. 5) made for the Society of Friends of the French Medal in 1899 and bears on its reverse a miniature version of *Maternity*.



2 *Maternity*, Private collection



3 *Eiffel Tower*, Private collection

LABOR

Labor reforms in the late nineteenth century drew attention to the dignity of the worker. Many European sculptors made field workers and miners the subject of public monuments. Charpentier took a broad approach to this theme, depicting manual laborers operating machines as well as doctors in hospitals performing surgeries and delivering babies (nos. 21 and 22).

Several of Charpentier's reliefs illustrate techniques and processes used to create sculptures and medals. For example, two versions of *Metalsmith* (nos. 10 and 20) show a young man filing an object—perhaps a medal—held in a vice. Similarly, a scene with a man operating a screw press, a machine used to strike medals, advertises one of the leading French medal manufacturing firms (nos. 12 and 13). The reverse of this octagonal medal (no. 14) displays three miniature versions of this same scene, a clever reference to the processes of replication and reduction, which were essential to the production of medals. Significantly, this particular firm was known for its invention of a device used to reduce artists' designs to the size of medals.

A small silver medal, issued as a souvenir for ascending the Eiffel Tower, depicts on one side a distant view of Paris from the height of the tower's observation platform, while eloquently paying homage on the other side to the thousands of iron workers who built the tower between 1887 and 1889 (fig. 3; nos. 17 and 18). The scene of the three iron riveters also appears embossed on a swatch of leather, which the artist intended for a book cover (no. 11).



4 Paul Margueritte,
Private collection

PORTRAITURE

Charpentier was a prolific portraitist. While observing certain conventions of the European portrait medal such as the head in profile, he modernized the tradition by leaving some works roughly hewn and using innovative materials. For example, the rapidly modeled, jagged-edged terracotta portraits of the actors and critics affiliated with the radical, realist *Théâtre Libre* (Free Theater) convey the spontaneity of sketching in wet clay, as in the portrait of the writer Paul Margueritte (fig. 4; nos. 30 and 31). Works in *pâte de verre*—made by molding and then fusing layers of glass particles—introduce color, as in the portrait of novelist, critic, and polemical journalist Emile Zola (fig. 5; no. 23; see also nos. 25 and 27).

Charpentier depicted his friend Zola on several occasions. A silver medal (no. 37), commissioned by the French newspaper *Le Siècle*, commemorates Zola's defense of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish French military captain who was unjustly imprisoned for treason by powerful anti-Semitic factions. Zola's statements invigorated the mounting public protests and helped lead to Dreyfus' release. On the reverse of this medal is a quote from Zola: "The truth is on the march and nothing can stop it."



5 Emile Zola, Private collection

Other eminent sitters include a feminist journalist (no. 27), a scholar of French eighteenth-century art (no. 38), and a publisher of popular dictionaries (nos. 34 and 35). Charpentier was fully aware of the cult of celebrities, and his work represents an understanding that, in a democratic society, a new range of heroes had come to the fore.

DECORATIVE ARTS

Industrialization allowed for a profusion of machine-made home furnishings and decorative objects. While these helped to broaden the public market for the decorative arts, many of these mass-produced works were poor imitations of things that once were carefully wrought by master craftsmen. Artists and critics across Europe sought to restore a higher level of craftsmanship and an appreciation for design by advocating for collaborations between decorative and fine artists. Charpentier was one of the foremost French artists

involved in this movement. A prime example of his efforts to draw these fields together is his use of poetic, low-relief sculptures to make embossed playbills that capture a subtle trace of the raised surface (nos. 46 and 47).

In the 1890s Charpentier helped to found the group known variously as Les Cinq (The Five), Les Six (The Six), and L'Art dans Tout (Art in Everything). The members, who included a painter and lace maker, interior decorator, and several architects, met regularly in Charpentier's studio and exhibited together in Paris from 1895 to 1901, creating complete interior ensembles from their individual designs. One such collaboration between Charpentier and the interior decorator Tony Selmersheim (French, 1871–1971) resulted in the ornate mantel clock *The Flight of Time* (fig. 6; no. 58, on pedestal). Charpentier's gilt bronze sculpture on top of the clock shows a bearded man reaching toward a woman as she is swept away by Time, who ominously carries a scythe. Charpentier's plaques of *The Fates* are inset on Selmersheim's elegantly carved, precious padouk-wood base.



6 Alexandre Charpentier and Tony Selmersheim,
The Flight of Time
(mantel clock), Private collection



7 Armoire for Stringed Instruments, photograph reprinted from Vittorio Pica, "Artisti Contemporanei: Alexandre Charpentier," *Emporium*, vol. 22, (October 1905), p. 249, National Gallery of Art Library

An amateur violinist, Charpentier often turned to musical subjects for his decorative compositions. *Woman Playing the Double Bass* (no. 42) and *Woman Playing the Violin* (no. 43) were designed for the panels of a large armoire used for storing stringed instruments (fig. 7). The curved ebony relief *The Dance* (no. 50) was a study, perhaps for the key guard or music rest of a grand piano that Charpentier and the painter Albert Besnard decorated for Baron Joseph Vitta. In addition to these unique objects, Charpentier adorned lock plates, doorplates, doorknobs, and window handles with similar themes (nos. 44, 45, 55, 56, and 57). Although often created for private commissions, such utilitarian works were subsequently mass-produced and sold by commercial hardware firms.

This exhibition is on view August 6, 2006–January 28, 2007. It was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

This gallery guide was written by Karen Lemmey, Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow, department of sculpture and decorative arts, and produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office. Copyright © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.