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A NEW OHLFSEN MEDALLION IN SYDNEY

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In 1989 the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney acquired a bronze portrait plaque depicting W.A. Holman; it is signed by Dora Ohlfsen (1913). It is a rare piece, possibly only the second of its type to have appeared on the Australian market in recent times; Ohlfsen's oeuvre is not large, and there are apparently few pieces in private hands in Australia. Dora Ohlfsen (1869-1948) was one of the most distinguished Australian medalists and, indeed, ranks among the country's more prominent sculptors in the first half of the 20th century. But today her work is largely forgotten. Ohlfsen's career was primarily conducted in Italy (her adopted home), and there she won wide appreciation from European audiences. Her return visits to Australia were notable but she found little to interest her in the parochial societies of Sydney and Melbourne. Her work was bought by European and American patrons, and found its way into major European museums (The British Museum, and The Petit Palais in Paris). But, as with many Australian artists attracted to Europe, she has been overlooked by historians and, until recently, the museums in her own country (Ballarat is an exception, for they kept a record of their local girl's achievements).

The MAAS plaque bears a portrait bust and the inscription: "W.A. Holman. Premier. New South Wales. 1913", and beneath, "Dora Ohlfsen, Sydney 1913". Holman was the second Labor premier of NSW (1913-1920): a colourful figure in politics at the time, and a great orator. His striking features (to judge from contemporary photos) evidently recommended him to Ohlfsen as a subject for her work. But it is also possible that the plaque was commissioned. Ohlfsen held shows in Sydney (1912) and Melbourne (1913) before once more returning to Italy. The Holman portrait may have been begun in Sydney and then finished in the following year. If it did not sell, Ohlfsen may have taken it herself to

Europe. Perhaps it was bought by Holman and then taken to London, either on a visit in 1913, or in 1917. At any rate, the plaque was rediscovered in London, and brought back to Sydney for auction in 1989.

The Holman portrait is one of the few Ohlfsen portraits of a contemporary Australian held in a public collection in this country. A glance at the Ohlfsen collections of both Ballarat and the NSW Gallery, the two largest holdings, reveals that her allegorical works have attracted the attention of curators (titles: Anzac Memorial Medal, 1916; Ploughing the Field, 1900; The Awakening of Australian Art, 1907). These were undoubtedly the works designed to display her best qualities, her 'exhibition' pieces. But the basis of her livelihood were the portraits of notables, and of interesting figures of the time. In Australia she seems to have worked on a series of celebrated figures in the arts (Miss Nellie Stewart, a work in pink marble) and on well-known personalities in politics (Billy Hughes, Donald Grant). The Holman portrait belongs to this genre. It is arguable that the neglect of Ohlfsen's portrait work has in part led to the obscurity in which she now languishes. Her allegorical works, such as "The Awakening of Australian Art" are competent works in a style typical of the early 20th century, but which today hold little interest for audiences. Her best known work, the Anzac Memorial Medal (1919), of which there are a number currently in the market, is chiefly recalled by collectors as one of the best commemorative pieces of the Gallipoli campaign, and not primarily as a fine monument to medallic art (symptomatic of this is the fact that most people know the piece, but few can remember its author). New attention to Ohlfsen's portraits of figures such as Mussolini (1926?), Billy Hughes (1921-2) and W.A. Holman (1913) may well promote a long overdue re-assessment of the great Australian medalist's career.

