vidual works which make no concessions to fashion and provide living proof that all artists do not have to be subject to the apparent artistic imperatives of the moment.

The works of Luke Elwes at Rebecca Hossack (35 Windmill Street, W1) are very different in nature. He does not seem to want to deal at all with the familiar, from which his cousin creates her very personal poetry. Instead he has turned in his recent subject matter increasingly to desert landscapes and the people who inhabit them. Clearly he seeks some philosophical truth which he feels cannot be encountered, say, in a Somerset cabbage-patch. His travels have taken him among other places to Western Australia and the Rift Valley and he shows obvious admiration for aboriginal art forms. But direct transcriptions from the natural world are not for him, however miraculous its realms may be. To this extent he is very much a modern artist. He is also influenced especially by the magical poetry found in Miro and Klee. Like the latter, Luke Elwes loves complex surfaces and creates these with considerable deftness.

These surfaces are juxtaposed usually with flat colours which symbolise day and night skies in the desert. Painted into and below the surfaces of his deserts we find the archetypal symbols of men who have lived there. Ideas and images such as these are moving — up to a point. Divorced from an objective framework in his art, the artist seems to me to live in a realm of significances he has encountered himself but cannot necessarily share. For all I know, one may be staring at the secret of life when apparently seeing only some flat, tasteful and very decorative paintings. Attempts to load works of art consciously with too much symbolic meaning can easily prove counter-productive.

There is merit in these works yet something about them makes me uneasy, even beyond the appearance of a quotation from Joseph Beuys in the artist's catalogue. In spite of their superficial beauty, they seem to be signalling their symbolic and intellectual pedigrees too obviously. The artist's earlier paintings, featuring strange rock formations in Western Australia, were less polished but more obviously impassioned. In the catalogue essay the artist has written himself, he avers, 'Because man cannot own the desert, he has to see himself simply as part of its pattern.'

This kind of quasi-philosophising is too common and facile; while single men may not wish to own tracts of barren desert, human collectives such as states are only too willing to do so — especially when such tracts contain oil. The artist should concentrate once more on honing his considerable visual skills and imagination and leave this kind of sermonising to those who generally lack such talents. There are plenty of former art students from Goldsmiths' College to write this sort of thing.

Sale-rooms

Honour bright

Alistair McAlpine

I have never understood the obsession some people have with medals. I can remember a Conservative peer who wanted desperately to be awarded a CBE and another, who, after a long and distinguished career in the House of Commons serving in several cabinets, retired to the quieter pastures of the Upper House. As chance would have it, when Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative Party she had need of his services and very well he served her. After the election victory of 1979, this peer's wife approached the new Prime Minister to suggest that he might be rewarded for the part he had played in that great victory, and the reward that she requested was a medal.

'It is embarrassing', she said, 'for my husband to attend official dinners where decorations are worn and to have no decoration of his own to wear'. Member of the Upper House he might be but there was nothing hung around his neck to indicate that. So, for those who feel the same way as these men, but who have neither the talent nor the influence to acquire a medal from Her Majesty, there is an auction held by Spinks on 28 April where they can buy the medal of their choice.

In this sale of orders, decorations and medals there should be something for even the most selective of medal-lovers. But what to chose? A man who wishes to wear a medal to which he has no right runs the risk that a legitimate holder of the same order will accost and question him. Stick to foreign orders: they have generally been given out with a lack of discernment that you do not find in Britain. Lot 412, the Croix de Tuillet 1830, is a colourful affair in silver, gold and enamel. *Donné par le roi des français*, it is likely to cost £200 and you are most unlikely to meet a French king. If you do and he questions your right to the Order, do not hesitate to question *his* right to the French throne. Lot 456, the Two Sicilies, Order of St Ferdinand, a very flashy number and quite safe to wear wherever you may dine, is the Grand Cross version, a breast star in silver having a gold and enamel centre, all for £500.

Lot 461, the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity, was, I imagine, a medal given to builders. The catalogue describes it as a medal 'awarded to individuals who rendered special services during the reconstruction of Italy following the second world war'. With the way that the Italians are setting about the prosecution of almost anyone involved with almost any construction project, this medal is more likely to be found on the chests of those eating in prison canteens than at official dinners; £90 should easily buy it.

Another Italian order that looks very smart is that of St Maurice and St Lazarus. It is a commander's neck badge, which means it has a brightly coloured ribbon; the wearer's wife could have a dress made to match. The medal is in gold and enamel with a gold crown, and the estimate is £200.

You would be taking a bit of a chance if you wore lot 383 these days. It comprises seven medals: the Order of Lenin, the Order of the Red Banner, the Order of the Red Star and four others, all for £200. These medals are, however, very popular with enthusiasts for the fashionable style known as 'grunge'. Reproductions of them are sold in most street markets.

If you feel embarrassed by foreign medals and wish to wear British ones then I suggest you stick to the likes of lot 263, the Royal Naval Temperance Society Medal, or Lot 264, the National Temperance League Royal Navy Branch Medal, or even lot 266, the Masonic Breast Star — but with this last you take a very real chance of having your hand shaken by a series of men who seem to have a number of their fingers missing.

Under no circumstances should you try to get away with wearing regimental medals, even one like lot 257, the Breadalbane Fencible's Medal, estimate £300, or lot 258, the Carmarthenshire Yeomanry Cavalry Medal of 1827, for £220, or even lot 259, Loyal London Volunteers, a large silver medal for £180, for although you are unlikely to be accosted by someone who served in these regiments since they were disbanded long ago, you will almost certainly meet the great-grandson of someone who did and he will remember.

I will give this sale of colourful trinkets a miss and will go instead to Christie's, who are selling vintage cameras. I have never learnt how to work a camera. However, seeing these wonderful examples, I rather fancy hanging one around my neck.