



The Curious Collector by Len Augsburger, LSCC #1271

Pitter Patter About Patterns

Liberty Seated collectors tend to not discuss pattern coins, and it's understandable why. They are expensive, and no one is going to see cases full of pattern coins at a typical coin show. More typically you see a piece here and there in dealer offerings, perhaps a small group if a dealer specializes in patterns, but such dealers are few and far between. Even if pattern coins are generally available, no one is quite sure how to collect them. It's not like Whitman issues a coin folder with a list of the ones you are supposed to acquire.

Some years ago I came on the idea of collecting one each of every major design type within the Seated quarter pattern series. It's about seven or eight coins. Probably I was influenced by the old saying that every collection should contain at least one pattern coin. You can be sure that saying was made up by someone who had pattern pieces to sell. In any event, I bought the first coin from a self-proclaimed "market maker" in the series, a nice toner in PR66. I gave up on the series after a few failed attempts to acquire some of the tougher pieces, which exist in single-digit quantities. The PR66 got offered back to the dealer who sold it, and failed to attract even a lowball offer. So much for "market maker" status. I put the piece in a Heritage sale and took a \$100 loss on it. In my view the \$100 represented the cost to "rent" a rare coin for a few years.

Today I own only a single pattern piece, a Judd-158 1854 pattern cent that features the Liberty Seated design. The workmanship is crude and represents an intermediate step in the die production process. Reduced by a lathe from an 1854 dollar die, the die bears circular lathe marks that, in normal production, would be smoothed out. I enjoy the piece as a curiosity – who ever heard of a Liberty Seated "cent?" These dies were produced in order to test different alloys for coining, none of which were adopted, and the coiner was more interested in testing different compositions than in producing neatly finished dies.



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Another approach to patterns is to collect circulated pieces, which do occasionally show up from time to time. Recently Mark Borckardt shared with me an image of a low-grade “Paquet” pattern quarter from 1864. The Paquet designs are well-known, and an 1861 Paquet \$20 (graded MS67 by PCGS and certified by CAC) was sold by Heritage at this year’s ANA for \$7.2 million. The piece Mark showed me cost considerably less, \$1092.50, when sold in September 2003 by Superior (lot 2793, illustration from the Superior catalog). I’m told this will be in an upcoming Heritage sale, though I don’t see it listed yet. In any case it must certainly be the most affordable example of this design type. The Heritage auction archives note a number of lower-priced pattern pieces, including an 1868 J-646 dime, evaluated as “net PR20” by ANACS, which noted the piece is corroded. Indeed it is, and it’s hard to appreciate a coin like this even with the relatively low price tag of \$411.25. This piece sold during the 2013 ANA convention.

John Frost has a mini-collection of circulated patterns, including an 1875 20c J-1407. It’s easy to understand how this might have circulated at the time. How closely do you look at your pocket change? Could you pick out a random states quarter with a minor design modification? Likely not. Granted, we have a lot more different designs in change today, but the point is that most users go by a quick look and feel. A coin like John’s had the right color, the right size, and the right picture of Liberty on the front. There wasn’t much need to look more deeply than that. John also has a couple circulated two-cent patterns, and, with copper coins, these are even less likely to be looked over. Imagine accepting such a coin in a 19th century retail establishment – there was probably not much light, and examining a coin that is dark to begin with would not be a terribly successful endeavor.



For those who have collected Liberty Seated patterns, feel free to reach out and share further thoughts on the subject, and I’ll be back next month with more observations on other aspects of Liberty Seated coinage.