

A New Gobrecht Dollar Letter

by R.W. Julian, LSCC #2394

Many of the letters dealing with the Gobrecht Dollar of 1836 have appeared in print but a letter from Mint Director Robert M. Patterson to artist Titian Peale has been found in the National Archives that appears to be unpublished.

Dr. Patterson became mint director in early July 1835 and immediately began to consider new designs for the silver coinage. By late that month, he had determined to use a seated figure representing Liberty for the obverse and a flying eagle for the reverse. The seated figure was based primarily on the appearance of Britannia on the British copper coinage while the eagle was an entirely new concept as envisioned by Patterson.

To this end, he contacted artists Thomas Sully and Titian Peale to prepare the necessary drawings. The original letter to Sully, who prepared the seated figure, has been published but not that to Peale.

The August 1, 1835 letter to Titian Peale is somewhat tentative as the instructions were later changed. In particular, the scroll with E PLURIBUS UNUM was discarded as Patterson had decided to no longer use this motto on any coin.

The notation about the eagle rising in flight is, however, an important part of the Gobrecht Dollar history. Patterson later noted that the rising eagle symbolized the growing importance of the United



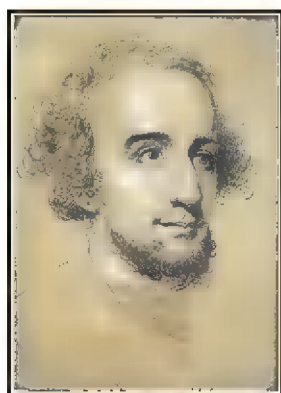
Mint Director
Robert M. Patterson

States in world affairs. This was against the backdrop of the indemnity negotiations carried on by President Andrew Jackson in the early 1830s; he had forced several European governments to pay reparations for American ships seized during the Napoleonic wars of the early 1800s. The indemnity disputes put the United States on the world stage for the first time, as a diplomatic equal to the European powers, especially France.

The indemnity matter was a major point of discussion among the upper classes in this country and no doubt Europe as well. Even Jackson's political opponents realized the importance of the diplomatic victories. In Patterson's mind, the rising eagle clearly symbolized this new state of international affairs.

In a letter to Treasury Secretary Levi Woodbury of April 9, 1836, the director noted that "the eagle is flying, and like the country of which it is the emblem, its course onward and upward." The comment was intended for the President, who would have understood the meaning and taken it as a personal compliment.

The original letter sent to Peale presumably has not survived but what was found in Record Group 104 at the Philadelphia branch of the National Archives is a draft by Patterson. It was then copied by a clerk and the finished letter sent to the artist. (The marked-out words indicate last-minute changes made by the director.) The



Titian R. Peale



1836 Gobrecht silver dollar illustrating the eagle created by Titian R. Peale.

(Continued on next page)

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(Continued from previous page)

draft letter reads as follows:

Mint of the United States
Philadelphia, Aug. 1, 1835

Dear Sir,

The law establishing the Mint requires that "upon the reverse of each of the gold and silver coins, there shall be the figure or representation of an eagle, with this inscription, "United States of America." Wishing, in a new die which we propose to make, to fulfill this law in a manner more accordant to good taste and to nature, than in our present coin, I request let me pray you to ~~render~~ draw, a sketch of the American Bald Eagle, in the attitude of flying, and somewhat rising in its flight, amidst a constellation of 24 stars, irregularly disposed around it, and having in its claws a scroll, with the words "E Pluribus Unum," the whole surrounded by the legend "United States of America." ~~It is desirable that the drawing should not be upon too large a scale.~~

Very respectfully & faithfully

Yours

R. M. Patterson
Director

To/Titian R. Peale, Esq.

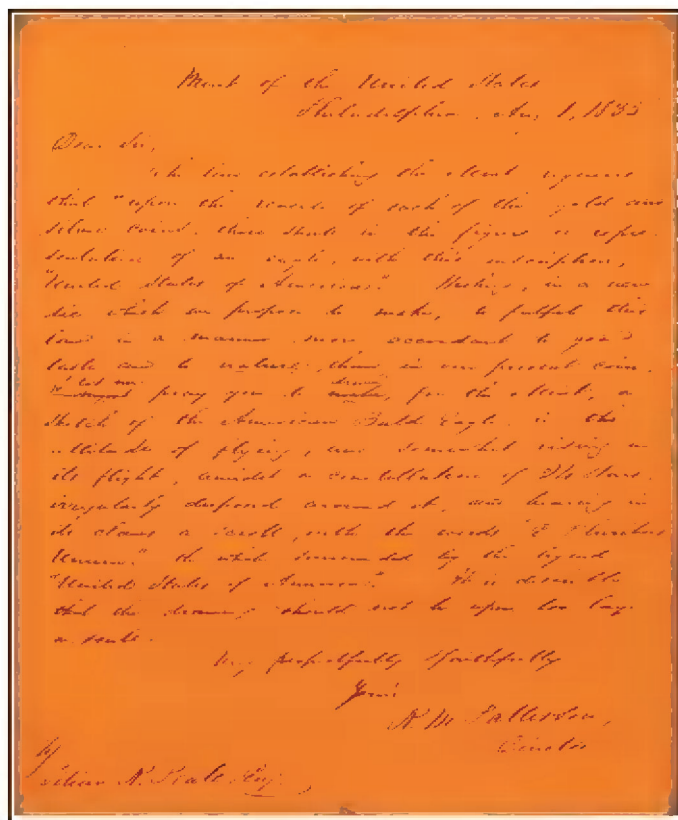
In due course Peale executed drawings for Patterson but it was not until April 1836 that Patterson was satisfied; about 30 drawings had been made by Peale before one was finally accepted. (In the meantime, the mint director had modified his original ideas, as noted above.) In due course (August 1836) a reverse dollar die was prepared by Christian Gobrecht. Its first regular use was in early December 1836 when 400 silver dollars were struck for distribution, primarily in Philadelphia.

On August 1, 1836, Titian Peale was paid \$103.50 for a "design for a coin," almost certainly for the finished drawing for the flying eagle requested exactly a year earlier. It is not clear, however, why there was a delay of four months between acceptance of the drawing, as noted in the April 9 letter to Treasury Secretary Levi Woodbury, and the payment to the artist.

In yet another payment to Titian Peale for artistic work we find that he received \$75 by warrant on October 2, 1837 for "two designs for eagles." These drawings may have been for half dollars but were more likely done at the request of Dr. Patterson in connection with the dollar coinage. The late March 1837 striking of silver dollars (600 pieces) had been a failure, due to the coins not striking up well in the steam coining press, and the coins were later melted by order of the director. It is therefore likely that Peale attempted to create another eagle that would strike up better in this type of coining press.

The silver dollars of 1838 and 1839 did use a slightly different eagle from that of 1836 but whether this change was due to the 1837 Peale drawings is uncertain.

As an aside it is worth noting that Titian Peale was a younger brother to Franklin Peale, who became chief coiner on the retirement of Adam Eckfeldt in February 1839. In August 1835, when the letter to Titian Peale was written, Franklin Peale had only just returned from a fact-finding trip to European mints and was in the process of adapting many of the new ideas to the Philadelphia Mint.



Letter from Mint Director Patterson to Titian Peale.