

The Seated Liberties of the United States and Other Places

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As the young Republic grew, the Mint had a hard time keeping pace. For most of its early years, it was little more than a part-time business, taking in bullion and paying out struck coinage for a seignorage.

Finally, on July 4, 1829, the cornerstone was laid for a new Mint building. Construction was completed in late 1832 and the building opened for operation in January of 1833. To serve the expanding needs of the country, Congress authorized the construction of steam-driven presses. The presses first operated on March 23, 1836. To make use of the new technology, assistant engraver Christian Gobrecht created new designs.

The new Liberty was seated on a rock, facing left, dressed in a Greek gown called a chiton. At her right the word LIBERTY is engraved on a scroll across the front of the shield of the United States. She holds in her left hand a pole with a liberty cap.

Gobrecht's first reverse was a flying eagle, but initial resistance to such a break from tradition forced him to redeploy the familiar heraldic eagle from the Capped Bust series.

This theme served the half dime, dime, quarter, half dollar and dollar. It is also the artwork of the short-lived 20-cent piece of 1873-1878. America's coinage was consistent and easy to identify. The Seated Liberty series ran for 55 years, to 1891.

Of course, there were many relatively minor changes to the design. In all there are four varieties of half dime, five different dimes, quarters, and halves.

To indicate a decrease in the weight, arrows appeared at the date in 1853, 54 and 55. Later, the arrows told of an increase in weight in 1873 and 1874. (Congress adjusted the relative value of America's gold and silver coinage. This was critical since gold and silver coins had the same legal value, regardless of the abundances of gold and silver on the world markets.)

Also, in 1853 only, both the Half and Quarter have rays around the eagle. When the coins were first designed, Liberty's gown ended above the elbow. In 1854, the drapery of the chiton hangs from the elbow. This is a small, but noticeable change once you see both examples up close. In 1866, the motto "In God We Trust" was added to the quarter, half, and dollar.

Although the half dime and dime were produced first, the dollar was, of course, the model. The smaller coins came out in 1837. The dollar did not hit the streets until 1840. The perfect design eluded Gobrecht and at least ten known types of patterns and trials exist for the Seated Dollar, struck from dies cut in 1836, 38, and 39.

As stunning as the Gobrecht coins are, the theme was not unique to America when they were issued.

Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and the others knew their ancient history. The ability to read Hebrew, Greek, and Latin was part of every educated person's intellectual tool chest. From the start, the U.S. Mint has always had a large and ever-growing collection of ancient coins.

When Jesus was in His ministry, the coin most often paid out by the emperor Tiberius featured a seated goddess of Peace. The seated personifications of Concordia, Felicia and Roma herself also appear on many Roman coins.

The Romans were seldom inventors, of course, only copyists. So, it is no surprise that Greek coins have seated goddesses on them. For instance, the town of Pergamon in Mysia featured a seated Athena on its coins, one arm on her shield, the other hand holding a little winged Nike. The seated Tyche (Good Fortune) was common to the coins of Antioch and Syria.

In the early federal era, even though Britain lost her most important colonies, her ultimate victory over Napoleon Bonaparte left Britannia the ruler of the waves. The British copper penny with its seated goddess was carried all over the world.

Interestingly, during Napoleon's rule, the puppet state of Genoa, calling itself the Ligurian Republic, also issued a large gold coin with a personified Liguria seated left, holding a spear, and resting on a shield. That was in 1804.

Also, as the badge of the world's most successful free nation, the Seated Liberty has been redrawn by several other countries seeking to model our example. The large silver and gold coins of Peru are perfect examples. Switzerland also personified itself with a seated Helvetia for both regular issue and commemorative silver. In the 1860s and 1870s, the brief Spanish republic depicted itself as seated goddess with her arm on the Pyrenees and her feet resting on Morocco.