

Presentation Pieces in the Collection of the USS Constitution Museum

Silver Urn Presented to Captain Isaac Hull, 1813



Prepared by Caitlin Anderson, 2010

What is it?

Photo # NH 48965 Silver urn presented to Capt. Isaac Hull



Photo # NH 48964 Silver urn presented to Capt. Isaac Hull



[Silver urn presented to Capt. Isaac Hull. Thomas Fletcher & Sidney Gardiner. Philadelphia, 1813. Private Collection.]

When is it from?

Physical Characteristics:

The urn (known as a vase when it was made)¹ is 29.5 inches high, 22 inches wide, and 12 inches deep. It is made entirely of sterling silver. The workmanship exhibits a variety of techniques, including cast, applied, incised, chased, repoussé (hammered from behind), embossed, and engraved decorations.²

Its overall form is that of a Greek ceremonial urn, and it is decorated with various classical motifs, an engraved scene of the battle between the USS Constitution and the HMS Guerriere, and an inscription reading:

The Citizens of Philadelphia, at a meeting convened on the 5th of Septr. 1812, voted/
this Urn, to be presented in their name to CAPTAIN ISAAC HULL, Commander of
the/ United States Frigate Constitution, as a testimonial of their sense of his
distinguished/ gallantry and conduct, in bringing to action, and subduing the British
Frigate Guerriere,/ on the 19th day of August 1812, and of the eminent service he has
rendered to his/ Country, by achieving, in the first naval conflict of the war, a most
signal and decisive/ victory, over a foe that had till then challenged an unrivalled
superiority on the/
ocean, and thus establishing the claim of our Navy to the affection and confidence/
of the Nation/

Engraved by W. Hooker.

[Inscribed on Outside of Base:] FLETCHER & GARDINER Fecit Philada

Why is it important?

I. Summary

The significance of the Hull Urn lies, first, in the uniqueness of the object itself, and secondly, in the complex social history of its presentation.

The urn is the most notable single piece of the most notable period of American military silver: taller, heavier and more ambitious than any other item previously created in the United States. It is a superb example of the Empire style in the decorative arts, popular throughout the Euro-American world in the early 19th century. This style, popularized in Napoleonic France, drew on recent archaeological discoveries in Greece, Rome, and Egypt.

¹ For urn vs. vase see David B. Warren, "From the New Republic to the Centennial," in Warren, Katherine S. Howe, and Michael K. Brown, *Marks of Achievement: Four Centuries of American Presentation Silver* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1987), p. 79.

² Elizabeth Ingerman Wood, "Thomas Fletcher: A Philadelphia Entrepreneur of Presentation Silver," *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 3 (1976), pp. 136-171, p. 147.

The urn represents not only a piece of extraordinary workmanship but also the complex array of aims motivating the givers. Gratitude and patriotism are the primary motives of the 169 Philadelphia merchants who contributed to the urn, but they sought to enhance their own reputations as well. Newspapers proclaimed their generosity throughout the country, and it was very likely Fletcher & Gardiner's own \$20 contribution that ultimately netted the silversmiths the \$3000 commission and transformed them into America's premier makers of presentation silver.

II. The Givers

Presentation items represent complex social interactions that people sought to freeze in time by fashioning attractive artifacts in precious metals.³ The more explicit motivations for the Hull urn included commemoration, gratitude, and patriotism. But there were also unspoken, and perhaps less admirable motivations: among them, the desire to enhance the reputation of the giver.

The Hull Urn was part of a much broader impulse to commemorate—and capitalize on—the early naval successes of the War of 1812, and on Americans' burgeoning sense of national pride in those victories. The mass of the population celebrated Hull's triumph, and subsequent victories like that of Oliver Hazard Perry on Lake Erie, with ballads, spontaneous demonstrations, and cheap broadside prints. Elite members of each major city sought to outdo one another with expensive gifts and celebrations. Even in Federalist Boston, which opposed the war, more than five hundred of the city's leading citizens attended—and contributed to—a lavish public dinner in Hull's honor in Faneuil Hall.⁴ The citizens of New York and Washington invited him to similar banquets; gifts of swords and pistols streamed in from Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and other cities.⁵

The citizens of Philadelphia, like the city fathers of Charleston, S.C., chose to demonstrate their gratitude in silver.⁶ Gifts of silver to heroes date at least as far back as the silver mixing-bowl supposedly won by Odysseus in the *Iliad*. American naval officers received silver thank-yous in the War of the Austrian Succession (King George's War to the colonists), if not earlier.⁷ Military presentation silver reached a high point of size and ambition among the nations engaged in the Napoleonic Wars, with large showy pieces presented to Napoleon, Nelson, Wellesley and Wellington, among others.⁸

³ Gerald R. W. Ward, "Introduction," in Warren et al., *Marks of Achievement*, pp. 15-21.

⁴ Linda M. Maloney, *The Captain from Connecticut: The Life and Naval Times of Isaac Hull* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), p. 197. Hull's own home state, the Federalist stronghold of Connecticut, would not recognize his service until 1817, when they voted him a sword and a pair of pistols.

⁵ *Niles Weekly Register*, Sept. 12, 1812, p. 29; "Tribute of Respect to Captain Hull," *Commercial Advertiser* (New York), Sept. 8, 1812, p. 3.

⁶ Hull's letter of thanks to the Charleston committee is reprinted in *Daily National Intelligencer*, (Washington, DC) Friday, December 17, 1813.

⁷ For Odysseus, see Warren, "Introduction," p. 15; for King George's War, see Michael K. Brown, "The Colonial Period," in Warren, ed., *Marks of Achievement*, p. 57-58.

⁸ Wood, "Thomas Fletcher," p. 142.

One notable feature of the Hull Urn is the speed with which the givers organized themselves.⁹ Hull achieved his victory on August 19; the event was first reported in the Philadelphia papers on September 4. Yet by then the subscription list, dated the previous day, was already dozens of names long. The list survives in the archives of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, ink-splotted and dog-eared, presumably from heavy use in persuading the 169 subscribers to actually hand over the promised contributions. A second list of 194 names seems to have been used to identify additional subscribers, as the word "refused" is noted next to several names. A few insurance companies pledged \$100 or more (the largest contribution was \$115—about \$1800 in 2008 dollars), but the average contribution was \$10 or \$20—along the lines of \$160 or \$320 today.¹⁰

The stated motivations of the subscribers and Committee of the Hull Urn emphasize gratitude and national pride. The subscription list begins with a block of text praising Hull and his deeds:

Participating in the Glory acquired for our country by the gallant Commander, Officers and Crew of the United States Frigate Constitution in the brilliant achievement of the Capture of the British Frigate Guerrière, Captain Dacres, under circumstances which display equal skill and bravery—We hereby agree to contribute the sums severally annexed to our names for the purpose of procuring a splendid piece of Plate to be presented to Captain Hull and another of less value to Lieut. Morris in testimony of our warmest admiration and Esteem.¹¹

The inscription on the urn itself echoes the same sentiments, praising Hull for

achieving, in the first naval conflict of the war, a most signal and decisive victory, over a foe that had till then challenged [commanded?] an unrivalled superiority on the ocean, and thus establishing the claim of our Navy to the affection and confidence of the nation.¹²

Yet the merchants of Philadelphia had other motives for reaching into their pockets. The givers also hoped to gain from the public display of their generosity and civic-mindedness.¹³ If nothing else, the merchants of Philadelphia certainly achieved publicity. Of the committee's three resolutions, the third and briefest "resolved, that the proceedings of this meeting be published in all the newspapers of this city." The *Aurora* published an account on Sept. 7; in the following month the same account

⁹ Brown, "The Colonial Period," in Warren, ed., *Marks of Achievement*, p. 57-58.

¹⁰ For calculations of value, see Samuel H. Williamson, "Six Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1790 to Present," *MeasuringWorth*, 2009. <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>

¹¹ Isaac Hull subscription list, Sept. 3, 1812 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Miscellaneous Collections, Subscription Lists, Box 5-C). Transcribed in Wood, "Thomas Fletcher."

¹² Inscription, Hull Urn, USS Constitution Museum, Charlestown, Massachusetts.

¹³ Ward, "Introduction," p. 20.

appeared in newspapers as far afield as Norwich, Connecticut and Charleston, S. C.¹⁴ Simply announcing their mere intention to present Hull with a “superb piece of plate” was enough to get the committee members’ names published in newspapers all over the country.

Exactly what the givers hoped to gain is illustrated by the case of one Philadelphia luminary who *didn't* contribute. Among the twenty-five names marked "refused" on the subscription list is that of French-born Stephen Girard, Philadelphia’s richest citizen and best-known philanthropist. By 1812 he was one of the richest men in America, thanks to decades of steady accumulation in trade with France and the French Caribbean.¹⁵ After moving into banking, he died in 1831, by then definitively the richest man in the country. Girard's philanthropy was his second claim to notoriety. Girard was a "household name" by 1800 for his work caring for the sick and dying during Philadelphia's yellow fever outbreak in 1793, as other citizens fled the city. During the War of 1812 he became known as the "American Rothschild" and "America's first patriotic banker" for his assistance in financing the war effort.¹⁶

Such a man had nothing to gain by contributing to the Hull Urn. His reputation for generosity, patriotism, and immense wealth did not need to be burnished. To make an imperfect modern analogy, it would be like asking Bill Gates to join the Rotary Club. By contrast, the six members of the subscribers' committee—Commodore Richard Dale, U.S.N.; William Jones, merchant; George Harrison, Navy agent; Charles Biddle, Prothonotary of the City and County of Philadelphia; Thomas W. Francis, merchant, and John Sergeant, attorney-at-law—were prosperous and public-spirited but not unusually successful or prominent men.

III. The Makers

There were two contributors to the Hull Urn subscription who seem to have gained very materially from their donation: Thomas Fletcher and Sidney Gardiner, the men who ultimately made the piece. It is, on the surface of things, very difficult to understand why Fletcher and Gardiner should have received the Hull commission in the first place. Not only were the two men extremely young—both were barely twenty-five years old in August 1812—but they had relocated from Boston to Philadelphia only months before, attracted by that city’s greater wealth, population, and commercial importance. Their family networks, though large and moderately influential, did not extend much outside New England.

¹⁴ “Domestic Intelligence. Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Sept. 7. Tribute of Respect to Capt. Hull,” *Norwich Courier* (Norwich, Conn.), Sept. 16, 1812; “Philadelphia, Sept 7 Tribute of Respect to Captain Hull,” *Investigator* (Charleston, S. C.), September 18, 1812.

¹⁵ Albert J. Gares, "The West Indian Trade of Stephen Girard, 1789-1812," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 72:4 (October 1948) 311-342.

¹⁶ Kenneth L. Brown, "Stephen Girard's Bank," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 72:4 (January 1942), 29-55.

Not only were Fletcher & Gardiner young Yankee upstarts, but there were at least nine silversmiths in Philadelphia who would have been capable of carrying out such a large and ambitious commission: Joseph Anthony, Jr., Simon Chaudron, Jean B. Dumoutet, Harvey Lewis, James Black, Thomas Whartenby, Joseph Lownes, John McMullin, and Samuel Richards. All were older, more established, and better known in local circles than the two Yankee newcomers—but none of them appear on the Hull subscription list. In the absence of more definitive evidence, it seems reasonable to suggest that it was Fletcher & Gardiner's \$20 contribution to the Hull fund that netted them their \$3000 commission.¹⁷

The Hull Urn transformed the careers of Fletcher & Gardiner. Just a year before, they had been relatively unknown Boston artisans, fresh out of apprenticeships. By the time the urn was complete they had "revolutionized the significance of the precious metals in the United States as a medium of public appreciation and celebration of heroes."¹⁸ Their combination of high-quality workmanship and neoclassical bombast proved popular, and the Isaac Hull urn was the first of many commissions awarded to military heroes: Captain Jacob Jones, Captain James Biddle, Oliver H. Perry, George Armistead, Andrew Jackson, John Rodgers all received Fletcher & Gardiner silver for their service in the War of 1812. As war receded into the past, recipients of Fletcher & Gardiner handiwork were more often politicians like New York Governor DeWitt Clinton, who received two handsome vases for his efforts in building the Erie Canal.¹⁹ Of all their commissions, however, the Hull Urn remained the most significant. It was the largest piece either ever produced, and their lasting pride in the item is evident in the fact that the pair continued to use an image of the Hull Urn on their trade card for the rest of their careers.

¹⁷ Donald L. Fennimore and Ann K. Wagner, "Thomas Fletcher and Sidney Gardiner: Their Lives and Work," in Fennimore and Wagner, eds., *Silversmiths to the Nation: Thomas Fletcher and Sidney Gardiner: 1808-1842* (Winterthur Museum, 2007), pp. 32-57, 41.

¹⁸ Fennimore and Wagner, "Fletcher & Gardiner," p. 39.

¹⁹ Wood, "Thomas Fletcher," p. 169.



Proof of a Trade Card or Advertisement for Fletcher & Gardiner with a Representation of the Hull Vase, Philadelphia, ca. 1822. Plate: H. 634", W. 438" (Winterthur, Joseph Downs Manuscript and Microfilm Collection No. 63x13).

IV. The Gift

The fame of the Hull Urn as an artifact rests less on any innovations in style or technique, or the harmonious beauty of its design, than on its sheer size and ambition. At the time of its manufacture, and for some time thereafter, the urn was "the heaviest, tallest, and most complex work in silver ever produced in North America."²⁰

In designing the Hull Urn, Fletcher and Gardiner sought inspiration in a style just then coming into vogue in Europe: a late stage of neoclassicalism known as Empire. Though the United States was in the process of solidifying its separate political identity during the War of 1812, sometimes called the "Second American War of Independence," Americans were not yet seeking a self-consciously distinct style in the decorative arts. The Hull Urn falls squarely within a design aesthetic known as "Empire style" in France, "Regency" in England, and "Biedermeier" in Germany. Like the Neoclassical style that had been popular throughout the western world for most of the eighteenth century, the Empire style relied on forms and motifs derived from classical antiquity. When "Empire" is distinguished from "Neoclassical" (it's a fine distinction), art historians are usually referring to a stricter adherence to the classical Greek, Roman, and Egyptian design that resulted from the archaeological expeditions of the Napoleonic era.²¹

²⁰ Ken Johnson, "The Gleaming Trophies for a Country's Heroes," Review of "Silversmiths to the Nation: Thomas Fletcher and Sidney Gardiner, 1808-1842," an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 2007-May 2008. *New York Times*, November 23, 2007.

²¹ "Empire style." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 25 Nov. 2009 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/186121/Empire-style>>.

The overall form of the Hull Urn was that of a Greek ceremonial vase, one also used in a French vase of a few years earlier that has been suggested as a model for Fletcher and Gardiner. Though there is no evidence that either man saw a piece by Napoleon's silversmith Martin Guillaume Biennais called the *pot-à-oille* displayed at L'Exposition de l'Industrie in Paris in 1806, the design was engraved and widely distributed early in 1812.²²



Charles Percier and Pierre François Fontaine, Design for a *pot-à-oille* from *Recueil de decorations interieures* (Paris: Privately printed, 1812).

Online at New York Public Library Digital Gallery, <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/>

The committee of Philadelphia merchants had pledged to commission a vase “ornamented with appropriate emblems, devices and inscriptions,” and Fletcher & Gardiner rose to the occasion. Of all the various classical images and motifs represented on the urn, none (according to one art historian) are subject to an inappropriate interpretation, which indicates that they were probably chosen intentionally.²³

²² Wood, “Thomas Fletcher,” p. 144.

²³ Wood, “Thomas Fletcher,” p. 146.

Classical Motifs on the Hull Urn

Motif	Meaning
Square base	May represent the square stones of Apollo, Heracles, Hermes and Poseidon
Head of Neptune (on each side of the base)	Symbol of sea power (also his trident)
Four rams' heads	The number four represents the equity and justice of a deity; the ram is associated with Mars, god of war
Bellflowers (pendant from each handle)	Signify adulation
Oak leaves (on either side of the bellflowers)	Oaks sacred to Zeus and indicative of strength and permanence
The two winged figures on either side of the framed scene of the two ships	Personifications of Fame and Fortune (Fame holds a laurel wreath and a quill; Fortune holds her revolving wheel)
Dolphins (at the top of the border framing the ships)	Another symbol of sea power
Shells (band encircling the rim of the urn)	More symbols of Neptune
Eagle (on the very top of the lid)	Symbol of Zeus and freedom (as well as the USA). Eagle guards Zeus's thunderbolts

Source: Henry Turner Bailey and Ethel Pool, *Symbolism for Artists* (Worcester, Mass.: The Davis Press, 1925).

Fletcher indicated that the urn cost between \$2200 and \$2300 to make, but did not specify whether this included the wages of hired hands (they hired at least two to make the urn), overhead on his shop, or other sunk costs.²⁴

²⁴ Fennimore and Wagner, "Fletcher & Gardiner," p. 39.

Appendix: "Tribute of Respect to Captain Hull," *Aurora General Advertiser* (Philadelphia), Sept. 7, 1812.

At a meeting of the citizens of Philadelphia, held pursuant to public notice, at the Merchants Coffee-House, September 5, 1812, for the purpose of devising an appropriate expression of the sense they entertain of the gallant conduct of captain ISAAC HULL, and the officers and crew of the United States frigate CONSTITUTION, in their late engagement with his Britannic majesty's frigate Guerriere,

Commodore Richard Dale was chosen Chairman, and JOHN SERGEANT Sec'y.

The following resolutions were read and unanimously adopted.

The brilliant victory which swells with pride and gratitude every American bosom, is of a character to challenge the annals of naval fame for a parallel, and the more it is analyzed, the more will it exalt the glory of the heroes who achieved it. It is no less distinguished for the unexampled effects produced in less than half an hour, than for the cool collected prowess, and transcendent nautical talent, which, while dealing destruction to a brave, skillful and veteran foe, preserved the victor comparatively uninjured and prepared again for battle and for conquest. Let this immortal record of fame, animate the gallant defenders of our flag to similar deeds of glory, and serve as examples of the high degree of discipline and order, to which a brave crew can be trained in the short space of three months, by the indefatigable zeal of officers, who are no less an ornament to their profession than to society.

Impelled by feelings flowing from a participation in the glory acquired for our country, by the brilliant victory achieved [sic] by the commander, officers and crew of the United States frigate Constitution, on the 20th of August last, over the British frigate Guerriere, Capt. Dacres:--

Resolved, That a piece of Plate of the most elegant workmanship, ornamented with appropriate emblems, devices and inscriptions, be presented in the name of the citizens of Philadelphia, to captain ISAAC HULL; and that a piece of Plate, also of the most elegant workmanship and ornamented with appropriate emblems, devices and inscriptions, be presented to Lieut. CHARLES MORRIS, as a testimony of the respect and admiration the citizens entertain of their gallant conduct, in the late action with the British frigate Guerriere; and that such tokens of their high esteem and approbation, be presented to the other officers, and to the crew of the frigate Constitution, as the committee to be appointed to carry this resolution into effect may deem proper.

Resolved, that commodore Richard Dale, William Jones, George Harrison, Charles Biddle, Thomas W. Francis, and John Sergeant be a committee on behalf of the citizens, to carry the foregoing resolutions into effect.

Resolved, that the proceedings of this meeting be published in all the newspapers of this city.

RICHARD DALE, Chairman.

John Sergeant, Sec'y.

