



February 2012



***The Dying Tecumseh***

modeled ca. 1837-1846, carved  
1856

**Ferdinand Pettrich**

Born: Dresden, Germany 1798

Died: Rome, Italy 1872

marble with painted copper alloy  
tomahawk

36 5/8 x 77 5/8 x 53 3/4 in. (93.1  
x 197.2 x 136.6 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art  
Museum

Transfer from the U.S. Capitol  
1916.8.1

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

***This larger than life sculpture of the dying American Indian Chief Tecumseh was sculpted by the German artist Ferdinand Pettrich in the mid-nineteenth century. The chief is remembered for uniting various American Indian tribes and allying with the British to oppose the United States during the War of 1812. His death during the Battle of the Thames in 1813 heralded the retreat of the British and the surrender of the united tribes to William Henry Harrison, the future ninth President of the United States. But why was the chief immortalized in marble nearly half a century after his death? This was among the questions researcher Laura posed as she began her investigation of the history behind the art.***

- **Was the sculpture of Tecumseh commissioned? If it was carved in Brazil, how did it end up in the United States?**

From the perspective of a researcher, this sculpture was a fascinating piece to work on. Some very unique challenges arose that serve as a very good example of some of the 'curve-balls' that can be thrown at you while conducting original research. Through some information I had gleaned from the curatorial file, I learned that in 1868, Father Antonio Bresciani had written a dissertation on the sculptures of Ferdinand Pettrich. When I located the journal, which had

been digitized by Google Books, I found the title very interesting: [\*A Dissertation on the Indian Statues of Chevalier Ferdinand Pettrich\*](#). I wondered why the title of 'chevalier' was being used in reference to Pettrich, as I had not previously come across this reference in any of my other sources. I discovered that Pettrich was awarded the Order of San Silvestre by the Pope, prior to his arrival in the United States. Apparently, this honorable knighthood is "intended to honor Roman Catholic lay people who are actively involved in the life of the church, particularly as it is exemplified in the exercise of their professional duties and mastership of the different arts" (Rock, 1908.) Now with this new title added to my list of search terms, I began to come across many interesting finds, one in particular of which would help me immensely in piecing together the story of *The Dying Tecumseh*.

I found out that Pettrich had been referred to a number of names in an array of sources: Friedrich August Pettrick, Ferdinand Frederick August Pettrich, Frederick Augustus Ferdinand Pettrick, Frederick August Pettrich, Frederick August Ferdinand Pettrich, Ferdinando Pettrich and even Adolphus Pettrich. Each name became increasingly similar to the next, an all too common occurrence which can greatly complicate things for the researcher. I believe that it was Pettrich's multi-national lifestyle that can, in some part, account for these name variations and how people of different cultures interpreted his name. Also, Pettrich came from a family of sculptors so it might have been easy to confuse Pettrich's name with that of his father Franz or his son Adolphus, as was the case in one source I found.

In searching Wordcat for books on 'Chevalier Ferdinand Pettrich' and 'Chevalier Pettrich', I came across an advertisement for an exhibition of *The Dying Tecumseh* at Gurney's Gallery in New York City. This advertisement resembled a small exhibition catalogue in length and included information on the sculpture's creation, the artist himself, Tecumseh, and contemporary reviews of the sculpture by the press. The library catalog record did not give a precise date for this advertisement, only that it was published sometime during the nineteenth-century. However, by piecing together some facts we already knew about the work, I was able to roughly figure out when the work was on view in Gurney's Gallery. We know that in 1857 Pettrich left Brazil for Rome and then the sculpture was put into storage for some time. Then in 1864 it showed up on display in the U.S. Capitol building. So sometime during those seven years the sculpture had to be on exhibition in New York at Jeremiah Gurney's gallery at 707 Broadway in New York City.

According to this advertisement I discovered that the work has quite an interesting history. Around 1850, an American dentist working in Rio de Janeiro visited Pettrich at his country-seat. Pettrich's residence was "about twelve leagues from Rio, picturesquely situated among the mountains" (Gurney, 18??.) This was Pettrich's second residence in Rio, as the Emperor of Brazil had provided accommodations and a studio for him within his palace. The American, Dr. De

Witt Van Tuyl, was amazed to see Pettrich's immense portfolio of work, filled with sketches of both North American and South American natives. In the portfolio he also found an elegant drawing of the dying Indian chief, Tecumseh. The advertisement reports that Pettrich told Van Tuyl that the clay model for Tecumseh was destroyed while he spent time recovering from wounds inflicted by an attempt on his life in Washington, D. C. Pettrich relayed that "he had been so much employed that he could not remodel it, but would now be happy to execute it in marble, could he be generously paid" (Gurney, 18??.) The two men agreed upon all of the terms set forth for the commission and an order was immediately dispatched to Italy to obtain a suitable block of Carrara marble. A model was immediately begun in clay and then cast in plaster. The Carrara marble arrived from Italy in the latter half of 1851, and was placed in Pettrich's palace studio.

The sculpture of Tecumseh, on being completed in 1856, was pronounced, by the Foreign Ambassadors and connoisseurs of the fine arts in Brazil, to be the "gem of the age, and worthy of a great master" (Gurney, 18??.) The first to view the sculpture in its completed form was the Brazilian royal family and the nobility. The ambassador from Rome was so impressed with the statue of Tecumseh, and of the Native American bas-relief sculptures Pettrich made while in Brazil, that he wrote to the Pope that he "was greatly surprised to find an artist of such extraordinary talent so far from Rome, the cradle of the fine arts" (Gurney, 18??.) Pettrich was immediately requested to return to Rome, along with all of his artworks. When he and his family departed for Rome in 1857, Pettrich was given permission from Van Tuyl to store the sculpture of Tecumseh, as Van Tuyl was traveling at the time.

Although this advertisement for exhibition gave us a wealth of new information on Pettrich and his sculpture *The Dying Tecumseh*, further research could be always be conducted. One question that could be explored would be the following:

- **What was the general attitude towards Native American Indians in American sculpture during the first half of the nineteenth-century? And consequently, how did this affect Pettrich's composition of *The Dying Tecumseh*?**

**Bibliography: Ferdinand Pettrich, *The Dying Tecumseh***

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Rock, P.M.J. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York, NY: Robert Appleton Company, 1908.