
SHORT LIFE FOR THE LAST QUARTER EAGLE

The “2½ Indian,” as it has become known among coin collectors, had a relatively short life as American coin designs go. It was minted from 1908 to 1929, but not continuously. Production was stopped after 1915. Production was suspended for an eight-year gap from 1916 to 1924. Many were melted in 1916 as unsold.

The Philadelphia Mint furnished most of the Indian Head quarter eagles, with sporadic assists from the Denver Mint in 1911, 1914, and 1925. Just 15 coins make up the entire set 12 from the Philadelphia Mint and three from Denver.

Since there was little call for them in day-to-day commerce, production usually cranked up toward the end of the year to meet demand for Christmas gifts. By late January, most of them had found their way back into the various subtreasury vaults.

Production of the Indian Head quarter eagle resumed in 1925 but the economic collapse beginning in 1929 made the coin no longer useful. Not only was production of the 2½ Indian Head quarter eagle halted for good, but it marked the end of the \$2.50 coin denomination in American coinage. The Indian Head was the last American quarter eagle.

Teddy Roosevelt launched an artistic renaissance in American coin design that swept across all denominations. Coin historians call it The Golden Age of American coinage.

It began with a conversation in November 1905 between Roosevelt and sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens. "I want to make a suggestion," Roosevelt told the famed artist in November 1905. "It seems to be worthwhile to try for a really good coinage, though I suppose there will be a revolt about it!"

Roosevelt laid out his grand plan to reshape the look of American coinage and entreated the sculptor to be his co-conspirator against the deadheads at the U.S. Mint. He mused, only partly in jest, that their plot would "seriously increase the mortality among the employees of the Mint," concluding that they would "perish in a good cause."

The revolution began with the spectacular Saint-Gaudens eagle and double eagle designs and continued through the Bigelow -Pratt quarter and half eagle, then on to Victor D. Brenner's Lincoln penny and James Earle Fraser's Buffalo/Indian Head nickel. The silver coins soon followed with Adolph A. Weinman's famed Mercury dime and Walking Liberty half dollar along with Hermon A. MacNeil's classic Standing Liberty quarter and Anthony De Francisci's Peace Dollar.

By 1921, the revolution was won, and the Golden Age of America's coinage produced some of the most aesthetically pleasing coins in the world.

The Golden Age of American Coinage



*Lincoln
Penny*



*Mercury
Dime*



*Indian
Head
Quarter
Eagle*



*Buffalo
Nickel*



*Standing
Liberty
Quarter*



*Indian
Head
Eagle*



*Walking
Liberty
Half Dollar*



*Peace
Dollar*



*Saint-
Gaudens
Double
Eagle*

UNCHARTED DESIGN TERRITORY

In several respects, Bela Lyon Pratt's design for the quarter and half eagle gold coins was the most revolutionary and innovative of all the "radical" Golden Age coins. It was the first American coin to use the incused relief technique, the first American coin to depict a realistic Indian image, and among the first American coins to be produced in matte proofs (not Pratt's idea).

The obverse of Pratt's quarter eagle depicts an authentic-looking Indian chief in a war bonnet, with the date, 13 stars (six left, seven right), and the motto LIBERTY forming a circle around him. Pratt inscribed his initials "BLP" above the date.

The reverse shows an eagle in repose, perched upon fasces and an olive branch. The fasces (a bundle of rods containing an ax with a projecting blade, carried in front of magistrates in ancient Rome) symbolizes preparedness, the olive branch peace. Pratt managed to work in four different inscriptions on the reverse without making the design appear cluttered or unbalanced.

The reverse bears the words:

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA • E PLURIBUS UNUM,
IN GOD WE TRUST, • 2½ DOLLARS



Brian Rose, in his essay “The Numismatic Revolution of 1907-1921, the Men Behind It, and Their Designs,” credits Pratt and Bigelow with launching a new age of numismatic design, the age of photographic realism.

In contrast with the strong Greek influences upon the Saint-Gaudens coins, Pratt and Bigelow based the new half and quarter-eagles primarily on Middle Eastern and Egyptian art; in fact, Bigelow first struck upon the idea of an incused coin while viewing the Boston Museum of Fine Art's collection of Egyptian reliefs. Pratt's incused designs for the eagle and quarter-eagle represented the transition from classical art to modern. For the reverse, he used a nearly identical version of the Standing Eagle Saint-Gaudens used for the ten-dollar coin—a tribute to the late sculptor and to classic Greek art. For the obverse, he created an aged Indian warrior in full headdress, surrounded by thirteen stars. This design marked the beginning of a new age in numismatics: the age of photographic naturalism, and pointed out the way for the work of Victor Brenner and James Earl Fraser.

Critic's exceptions notwithstanding, Pratt's depiction of an American Indian represented a dramatic change in the way the American native was portrayed on American coinage. Pratt was the first to show a true Indian profile with a genuine headdress on a coin.

CHANGING STYLE OF AMERICAN INDIAN MOTIFS

Previous Indian motifs on U.S. coins had been stylistic fantasies, even including the much-admired Saint-Gaudens \$10 Indian gold piece. Designers typically portrayed the classic profile of Lady Liberty topped off with a feathered bonnet reminiscent of cigar store wooden Indians which bore no resemblance to any authentic headdress actually worn by a real native chieftain.

Essayist Steven Roach characterized how depictions of the American Indian varied according to the times:

It has been said that American art of the late nineteenth century seems to owe more to theatrics than to observation. As the twentieth century emerged, the Indian became a vanishing species and the artist's depiction of the West changed to represent it as it had been, and to memorialize the American Indian. Changes in the depiction of the American Indian have been as varied as the Indians themselves, but it has not of itself been any guarantee of quality art. At best, the pieces are expressive, emotional, and personal, but at worst, the Indian has merely been a form of genre which is stereotyped, overblown, and repetitive.

The Massachusetts 1787 copper half cent was probably the first coin in North America to depict an Indian, standing with a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. Variations on the same design appeared at intervals in post-colonial coinage.



*Massachusetts 1787 half cent
-believed to be the first coin in
America to portray an Indian image*

On regular issue U.S. coins, the Indian motif didn't appear until the mid-19th century with the introduction of James B. Longacre's Indian Princess Head dollar and three dollar gold pieces. Longacre modified the theme with a different headdress for the 1859 Indian Head cent. Saint-Gaudens' 1907 Indian Head eagle continued the convention of depicting a classical Greco-Roman profile of Lady Liberty topped with a fanciful head covering intended to look like an Indian headdress.

Progression of Indian Images on U.S.-Issued Coins



*1854 Indian
Princess \$3*



*1854 Indian
Princess Head \$1*



*1859 Indian
Head Cent*



*1907 Indian
Head Eagle*



*1929 Indian Head
Quarter Eagle*



*1913 Buffalo/Indian
Head Nickel*



*2000 Sacagawea
Golden Dollar*



*2006 Buffalo
\$50*

Pratt's 1908 Indian Head quarter and half eagles marked a dramatic change in the way the Indian was depicted on American coins, from stylized symbolism to photorealism. The change was revolutionary, not evolutionary.

The model for the face and his tribe is not known, but that he was a real person was made clear in Dr. Bigelow's comment that "the head was taken from a recent photograph of an Indian whose health was excellent" (Bigelow and Pratt furnished the photograph as proof).

James Earle Fraser followed Pratt's lead to create the powerful image of a realistic Indian chief (actually a composite of three different real Indians) on the 1913 Buffalo/Indian Head nickel.

Nearly 90 years passed before an Indian image again appeared on a U.S. coin with the issue in 2000 of the Sacagawea "golden" dollar. The depiction by designer Glenna Goodacre of the young Indian guide for Lewis and Clark, though not actually photorealistic, is at least photorepresentative.

Ironically, Indians had been depicted realistically on American paper money many times on private bank notes prior to the establishment of a federal paper currency during the Civil War.

On regular issue U.S. currency, only one bill has borne an Indian image, the powerful and strikingly realistic portrayal by of Chief Ta-to-ka-inyanka (Running Antelope) on the 1899 “Indian Chief” \$5 silver certificate. Even the dramatically naturalistic portrait by G.F.C. Smillie of the proud Indian chief took liberties with reality. The portrayal caused ill will among Indians because it depicted Chief Running Antelope, head of the Hunkpapa Sioux, wearing a Pawnee headdress. Not understanding the cultural implications, Smillie took artistic license because the original Sioux headdress with a single feather was not considered imposing enough or dramatic enough for the engraving.



It is said that Bela Lyon Pratt may have drawn inspiration for his design from the visual impact of Smillie’s commanding image of a true Indian. For the first time on American coins, he got it right.

AMERICAN OR EUROPEAN EAGLE?

Quibbles by S. H. Chapman about the authenticity of the eagle shown on the reverse of the Pratt’s design weren’t Pratt’s fault, according to Walter Breen. Chapman claimed the image looked more like a European golden eagle than an American bald or white-headed eagle (what qualified him as an expert on birds is not clear). Says Breen:

Chapman’s major objection to the eagle was well-founded, but the blame is on [Charles] Barber, not Pratt; Pratt knew what a bald eagle looked like from working with models and photographs – otherwise Roosevelt would not have approved his design! – whereas Barber evidently did not.

Roosevelt was an avid outdoorsman and naturalist, having spent a number of years ranching in the North Dakota Badlands. He would certainly have spotted any major inaccuracies in Pratt’s eagle depiction.

Besides, Pratt’s eagle was a faithful derivative of the eagle on the obverse of Saint-Gaudens’ \$10 eagle coin, which had been introduced a year earlier without controversy about the naturalistic accuracy of the bird’s image.

If there was fault in the final product, it was apparently more evidence of mint engraver Charles Barber’s incompetent tinkering with the design than of any deficiency in Pratt’s eye for nature.

