## A HISTORY OF THE INDIAN HEAD QUARTER EAGLES

Conceived in controversy, born of conflict, and reviled at birth, the $2.50 "Indian Head" quarter eagle overcame its rocky beginnings to become one of America's most popular gold coins. The tale of this extraordinary coin ripples with the sinews of high drama and political intrigue, of powerful ambition hammering against bureaucratic inertia, of soaring imagination transcending drab intellect.

This is the story of a coin, yes, but it is also the story of a nation growing up, a young country coming of age and proclaiming its unique character as it demands a place of respect on the world stage. The Indian Head quarter eagle and its big brother, the Indian Head half eagle, manifested a visionary president's declaration to the global community that America was not just a rebellious offspring of the Old World but a fresh idea in its own right to be taken quite seriously indeed.

### A NUMISMATIC REVOLUTION TAKES SHAPE

In 1901, a crazed anarchist assassin's bullets felled President William McKinley and thrust a feisty youthful Teddy Roosevelt into the White House. Not yet 43, Roosevelt became America's youngest president.

He attacked the challenges of the presidency with the vigorous gusto he had demonstrated in leading the charge of the Rough Rider Regiment up San Juan Hill in the Spanish-American War. Roosevelt saw much in the nation that needed fixing and set his boundless energy and bulldog determination to the task. "I always believe in going hard at everything," he often said.

One target of his sweeping reform campaign was American coinage, which stagnated with designs that were boring and uninspired when they were new and had not grown more endearing with age. The penny had carried the same tired design for over forty years. The $20 gold double eagle had looked the same to three generations of Americans. The eagle, half eagle and quarter eagle carried the same countenance for nearly seven decades.

Grumbling about the coin designs began bubbling up as early as 1879, according to numismatic historian Dr. Thomas Fitzgerald. "The criticisms continued and grew louder following the striking of the 'Bland' silver dollar

*John Singer Sargent's 1903 portrait of Theodore Roosevelt (now hangs in the White House)*

(Morgan), the Barber nickel and silver coins along with the unchanged gold designs dating back over sixty years. The Treasury Department considered a contest to redesign the coinage: even a public competition with Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Henry Mitchell and Charles Barber acting as judges in 1891. The results were poor and Saint-Gaudens reportedly told Mint Director Frank Leach that there were only four competent coin designers known, of which three were in France and Saint-Gaudens was the fourth."

Roosevelt bristled at the "stupefying mediocrity" (Breen 1988) of United States coin design, which he described as an abomination "artistically of atrocious hideousness." The man who built the Panama Canal and enforced the Monroe Doctrine with gunboat diplomacy demanded respect for his nation as he put the world on notice it had better not mess with America. He believed that a nation's coinage was its sovereign signature, and he was convinced it should be signed with a bold stroke that commanded respect and left no doubt about the forceful personality of America at the dawn of the 20th century.

Roosevelt made no secret of his contempt for the colorless drudges at the U.S. Mint headed by chief engraver Charles E. Barber. Barber's designs exhibited all the excitement of a cold, soggy bowl of oatmeal. Roosevelt concluded that the creative well at the Mint was dry, and he would have to take unconventional measures to whip up the creative energy needed to fulfill his vision.

Winning a mandate to the presidency on his own merit in the 1904 election, Roosevelt was emboldened to commit what he called his "pet crime" of transforming United States coinage to a state of pride and respect…even if it meant trampling roughshod over the established inbred Washington political cliques.

What he accomplished revolutionized American coinage. Over the next fourteen years, every U.S. coin denomination would be revitalized with some of the most stunning designs in American numismatic history – before or since.

Believing it hopeless to expect anything more than the mundane from the bureaucratic hacks at the Mint, Roosevelt looked outside the usual channels for inspiration. He had been much impressed by the work of famed Boston sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens with whom he had struck up a close friendship. Saint-Gaudens designed Roosevelt's 1905 inaugural medal.

On a cold November night in 1905, the two friends fell into a discussion about U.S. coinage. They agreed that radical changes were needed. Both men admired the drama and visual impact of ancient high-relief coinage and the Renaissance medals of Pisanello and Sperandio. The discussion grew more animated as the vision took form in their minds. Saint-Gaudens' son Homer later detailed how "they both grew enthusiastic over the old high-relief Greek coins" as each fed on the creative energy of the other until at last "the

President declared that he would have the mint stamp a modern version of such coins in spite of itself if my father would design them…the cent, the eagle, and the double eagle."

Saint-Gaudens eagerly accepted the challenge, even though he knew he would have to hurry. He had learned five years earlier that he was dying of cancer. Though he continued to work, his health was fading rapidly. Time was short.

The 20th century American numismatic revolution was put into motion.

## A RADICAL DESIGN CONCEPT

The opening volley of the revolution achieved a monumental creative victory greater than even the ambitious Teddy Roosevelt had hoped for. Despite dogged interference and attempts at sabotage by an obstinate and embittered Charles Barber, the collaboration of Roosevelt and Saint-Gaudens produced the exquisite eagle and spectacular double eagle coin that bears Saint-Gaudens' name.

The double eagle he created is often described as the most beautiful coin in American history. So timeless was the design that the obverse is still used today on American eagle coins, nearly a century after its debut.

Sadly, Augustus Saint-Gaudens died before he could see the revolution to conclusion. In fact, he didn't even live to see his beautiful coin creations put into production. But his death in 1907 did not stop the movement. One of his students was called to duty to take up the banner and complete his mission.

*Picture Courtesy of, C.Baer, Stan Lair Collection*

*Dr. William Sturgis Bigelow portrait by John Singer Sargent*

Elated by the artistic success of the double eagle and eagle, Roosevelt immediately turned his attention to the other gold coin denominations. Another close friend of President Roosevelt came forward with a novel and radical proposal for the design of the half eagle and quarter eagles.

Dr. William S. Bigelow, a prominent Boston physician, was actively involved with the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where he had seen and been intrigued by the incuse style of ancient Egyptian artwork. Numismatic expert Walter Breen described how these artwork inspired a coin design:

> Around New Year's Day, 1908, Dr. William Sturgis Bigelow, an intimate friend of Pres. Theodore Roosevelt, got the idea of making coins with devices sunk beneath the fields - not true intaglio, but rather with relief designs depressed so that the highest points would not be at once worn away, somewhat in the manner of certain Egyptian Fourth Dynasty stelae.

Bigelow reasoned that this technique of depressing the image below the coin surface would eliminate the problems encountered with Saint-Gaudens' high-relief designs for the double eagle, which exposed the raised parts to excessive wear and made stacking the coins difficult.

Though the incuse technique was considered a radical new coin design concept in the early 20th century, Bigelow was not the first to propose it for an American coin. More than a hundred years earlier, in 1792 a Philadelphia publisher named Matthew Carey suggested intaglio coins with a recessed design to prevent wear on the design. His proposal was not implemented and was soon forgotten.

The concept of incuse coins originated in ancient times. Frank Leach, who presided as Mint Director during Roosevelt's overhaul of the nation's coinage, wrote in his Recollections of a Newspaper Man, "Confirming the truth of the old saying, 'there is nothing new in the world,' we found, in looking over some authorities on ancient coinage, that almost the very first attempt making coins was by depressing or incusing the designs."

Bigelow suggested the incuse technique to the President. Roosevelt, ever the innovator, liked the idea greatly even though, according to Frank Leach, it was a departure from the original plan for the coins:

> Originally it was the intention to give the $5 and $2.50 pieces the same design as that used on the double eagle or $20 piece, but before final action to that end was taken President Roosevelt invited me to lunch with him at the White House. His purpose was to have me meet Doctor William Sturgis Bigelow of Boston, a lover of art and friend of the President, who was showing great interest in the undertaking for improving the appearance of American coins, and who had a new design for the smaller gold coins. It was his idea that the commercial needs of the country required coins that would "stack" evenly, and that the preservation of as much as possible of the flat plane of the piece was desirable.

Roosevelt gave Bigelow the green light to pursue getting the revolutionary designs done for the quarter and half eagle gold coins. Leach had no choice but to go along with the president's decision.

**INCUSE OR NOT?**

**According to numismatic scholar Dr. Thomas Fitzgerald, the term "incuse" is commonly, and mistakenly, used to describe the technique Bigelow recommended for the gold coins. However, a true incuse image would be a fully negative image impressed into the metal in what is sometimes called "hollow relief." The actual technique used by Pratt was in fact a positive image recessed into the metal so its raised features were below the surface plane of the coin.**

**Numismatic writers sometimes refer to the Pratt design as "incused relief," which seems like a contradiction in terms but is technically closer to being accurate than simply "incuse." Pratt's Indian Head is a relief image incused at its edges into the surface of the coin.**

**Though "incuse" is imprecise in describing the Pratt design, "for most collectors the difference is irrelevant," says Douglas Mudd, Curator of Exhibitions at the American Numismatic Association. Persistent and pervasive misuse over time has legitimized the term for common usage.**

**Nonetheless, it's an interesting bit of coin trivia to stir conversation at coin club meetings.**