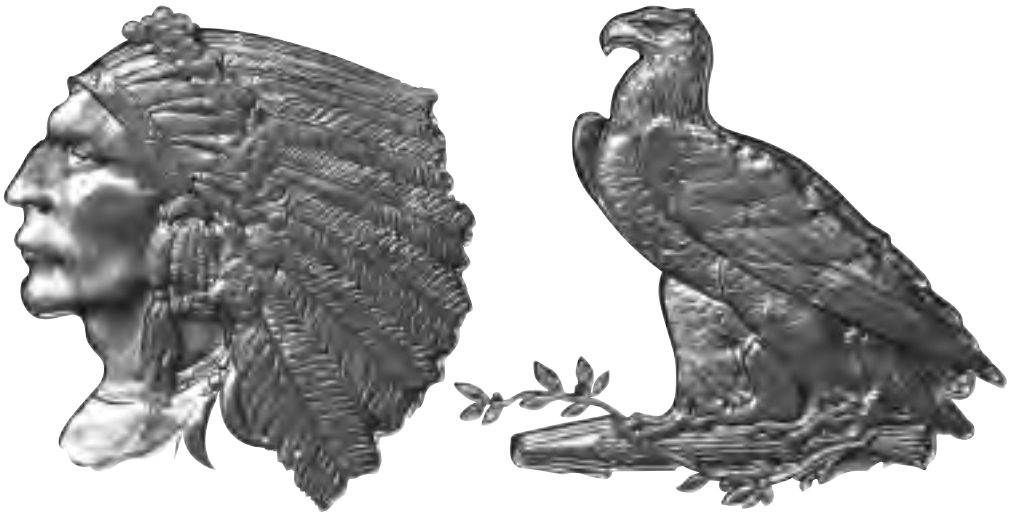

VICTORY OVER BUREAUCRACY

With the president's blessing and over the Mint's objections, Bigelow set about securing exactly the right talent to execute his idea. Through their mutual interest in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Bigelow knew and admired Boston sculptor Bela Lyon Pratt, who had been a student of Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Bigelow approached Pratt about the assignment and persuaded the respected artist to accept the challenge.

Pratt plunged into the assignment with zest. For the reverse, he adapted the Standing Eagle from Saint-Gaudens' ten-dollar coin, a tribute to his former mentor. It may also have been a sly jab in the ribs of mint engraver Charles Barber, whose notion of the ideal eagle was the awkward Great Seal eagle that plagued the quarter and half dollar of the time – a Barber design.

Walter Breen supposed that Pratt's eagle, as designed, "must have been worthy of a J.J. Audubon." That was before Charles Barber got his hamfisted hands on it.



"Pratt, Bela Lyon" filled the obverse with the face of an aging Indian warrior in full headdress to represent an "impression emblematic of Liberty" as required by the Mint Act of 1792. The striking image set a milestone for American coin design. In his prize-winning essay "Glory Years: The Numismatic Revolution of 1907-1921, the Men Behind It, and Their Designs," Brian Rose noted, "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 [Lincoln penny] and James Earle Fraser [Buffalo/Indian Head nickel]."

Pratt delivered his designs by mid-1908. President Roosevelt liked them. Bigelow beamed with pride. Roosevelt ordered the models dispatched forthwith to the Mint for immediate production of master dies, hubs, and working dies. He wanted the public to see the new coins as soon as possible.

But Charles Barber, the consummate bureaucratic foot-dragger, defied the president – from stubbornness, stupidity, or both – and held up production for months. He fiddled with Pratt’s designs, complaining of this supposed flaw and that, making unneeded changes, and procrastinating in the apparent hope he could make the designs go away by neglect. He clearly did not comprehend that he was dealing with a president to whom “no” was not an acceptable answer.

In the end, Barber’s obstructionist tactics failed to kill the project. Although he did managed to dilute the visual impact of Pratt’s creations somewhat, it is a testament to the power of Pratt’s artistic genius that even Barber’s chronic mediocrity could not completely camouflage the brilliance of the designs.

The dies were finally finished and delivered to the Coiner’s Department to begin production.

A FIRESTORM OF CONTROVERSY

The first Indian Head quarter eagles left the Mint on October 9, 1908 and at last went into circulation in November. It had taken nearly a year from the time Dr. Bigelow conceived the design concept to get the finished coins into the public’s hands.

President Roosevelt sent a letter to Pratt thanking him for the “great service you have rendered the country.”

The arrival of the radical new coin design on the public scene met with mixed reaction. There were those who admired the artistic beauty of the design. Others raised a great cry of criticism.

Pratt’s design had champions other than his patrons Bigelow and Roosevelt. Writer Chandler Post praised Pratt for his naturalistic depiction of a true native Indian, a feat which Post maintained was rarely achieved in sculpting.

However, there were plenty of critics to disagree...quite vocally. Though some of the complaints held merit, much of the adverse reaction was simply to something new and non-traditional.

A 1908 issue of *The Numismatist* called the Pratt design for the quarter and half eagles a "novelty in modern coinage, but one that for various reasons has been adversely commented upon by both artist, banker and citizen when opinions have been solicited."

The loudest voice among the detractors – at least the one who gets the most ink in historical references – was longtime Philadelphia numismatist S.H. Chapman. Chapman was so incensed by the Pratt quarter eagle that in December 1908 he fired off a steaming hot letter to President Roosevelt lambasting the coin as being ugly, easily counterfeited, and unhygienic:

It was the hope of every one that when our new coinage appeared we would have one of great beauty and artistic merit. But the new \$5 and \$2.50 gold pieces just issued totally lack these qualities, and not only those of beauty, but actually miss the practicability to which every effect of beauty in relief has been sacrificed.

The idea of Dr. Bigelow to sink the whole relief below the flat surface of the coin causes it to appear like a design merely incised in the blank, and precludes entirely the effect of miniature bas-relief.

The head of the Indian is without artistic merit, and portrays an Indian who is emaciated, totally unlike the big, strong Indian chiefs as seen in real life.

The treatment of the head is crude and hard, with sharp, abrupt outlines as if carved by a mere metal chaser; and on the reverse is a reproduction of the Saint-Gaudens' eagle, which represents not our national bird [the bald eagle] but resembles more closely the golden eagle, which is also indigenous to Europe.

The placing of the design below the surface of the flan, with deeply incised outlines, gives the effect of having been engraved into the metal, and can, therefore, be closely imitated by any metal chaser with the graver, without dies or moulds. And I am certain that if this had been suggested to the secret service officials it would never have been issued by the Treasury Department, and the issuance ought to be immediately stopped and the coins recalled, for every one will be in danger of the imitations.

The sunken design, especially the deeply sunken portion of the neck of the Indian, will be a great receptacle for dirt and conveyor of disease, and the coin will be the most unhygienic ever issued.

Chapman also objected to what he considered to be poor stacking qualities of the coin. Because it was thinner than its predecessor, Chapman pointed out, the coin stacks made by banks would not be of uniform size, especially when mixed with the older coins.

Chapman could find nothing good to say about the new quarter eagle and demanded nothing less than that they be erased in total:

These coins will be a disgrace to our country as a monument of our present ideas of art as applied to coinage. As compared with those of recent issues of European countries, not to mention the beautiful works of the ancient Greek coin engravers, it is an utterly miserable, hideous production, and let us hope that its issue will not be continued and that it will be recalled and remelted.

Roosevelt forwarded Chapman's letter to Dr. Bigelow. Why to Bigelow and not to Pratt? Roosevelt apparently looked upon Bigelow as a project manager of sorts with responsibility for the coin.

Bigelow shot back a sharply-worded rebuttal three days later:

He [Mr. Chapman] says 'sinking the relief below the surface makes it look like an incised design and precludes the effect of a bas-relief. This is hardly correct, as Mr. Chapman can readily see for himself in photographs of the Egyptian sculptures. The bas-relief effect is accentuated and not diminished by the shadow of the sharp outline.

He says the head of the Indian is 'without artistic merit and portrays an Indian who is emaciated, totally unlike the big, strong Indian chiefs as seen in real life.' The answer to this is that the head was taken from a recent photograph of an Indian whose health was excellent. Perhaps Mr. Chapman has in mind the fatter but less characteristic type of Indian sometimes seen on the reservations.

[Regarding the eagle's authenticity] ...an absolutely correct representation of the white-headed American eagle.

[Regarding ease of counterfeiting] This criticism can hardly be taken seriously. If a forger were going to engrave anything, he would not waste his labor on a single coin. It would be as easy to engrave a die [thereby allowing him to make hundreds or thousands of coins.]

[Regarding the unhygienic qualities] This remains to be seen. The question of hygiene has more relation to silver coins than gold, as they find their way into dirtier pockets. A dirty gold coin would be an anomaly. I have never happened to see one.

[Regarding stacking and thickness] What Mr. Chapman says in regard to this is perfectly true. I noticed it as soon as they were issued and called Mr. Leach's attention to it. It proved to be due to an accidental warping of the steel die in hardening. Mr. Leach tells me that it can and will be avoided in the future. I agree with Mr. Chapman that it would be well if all the coins in circulation were of the same thickness.

Chapman was not mollified by Bigelow's response and again wrote to the President offering a point by point rebuttal of Bigelow's arguments. The letter included another jab at the health of the Indian shown on the coin and pointing out that in California there were plenty of filthy gold coins. His vigorous opposition failed to move the President, however, and the Bigelow-Pratt quarter eagle remained in circulation.

The general public took the new coin design mostly in stride. The average American could not usually afford to carry gold coins as pocket change. While gold coins still circulated in some parts of the West, in the more populous East they were mostly stacked in bank vaults.