

The Curious Case of a Roman God on a U.S. Coin

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COINS CAPTURE HOW THE NATION that made them wants to present itself to other nations and its own people. In this way, they provide unique insights. Because the United States has evolved tremendously over its 250-year history, it is not surprising that its coinage has evolved with it. This essay explores a remarkable episode in this evolution by focusing on the obverses of coins introduced between 1907 and 1916, ending with one of the most curious of all U.S. coins: the Mercury dime of 1916-1945.¹

Since the first United States coins were minted in 1792, the country's coinage has gone through three main representational stages, which overlapped with each other in time. The first stage focused on representing American aspirations by depicting a woman to represent liberty; this episode lasted 115 years.² The second, largely built on the Lady Liberty theme but with some interesting exceptions, began in 1907 and ended in 1948. The third

stage emphasized profiles of U.S. presidents on coins, beginning in 1909 and continuing today. Of these, the second stage was by far the most creative, and is the focus of this essay; it was triggered by one of the U.S.'s most energetic presidents, Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919).

Roosevelt, in office from 1901 to 1909, was one of the most consequential presidents, earning a place with Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln on Mount Rushmore. Among his many initiatives was a keen interest in transforming and invigorating U.S. coins in the early 1900s. To Roosevelt, a country's coins should reflect its principles and status. He admired Ancient Greek coins, such as the Athenian Owl Tetradrachm, and wondered why the coins of his own country couldn't reflect such a great level of artistry (Figure 1). One day, after visiting the Smithsonian Institution's collection of Ancient Greek coinage, Roosevelt was inspired to send a letter to Treasury Secretary Leslie Shaw that ultimately ushered in a new age of American coinage:

*I think our coinage is artistically of atrocious hideousness. Would it be possible, without asking permission of Congress, to employ a man like Saint-Gaudens to give us a coinage that would have some beauty?*³

1 The obverses (heads) of coins, more so than their reverses (tails), capture this evolution, and so are emphasized here.

2 Much of this evolution is captured in two earlier essays in this journal: Robert J. Stern, "The First Motto on United States Coins: 'Liberty – Parent of Science and Industry,'" *Athenaeum Review* 4 (summer 2020), pp. 109-115, athenaeumreview.org/essay/the-first-motto-on-united-states-coins-liberty-parent-of-science-and-industry, and Robert J. Stern, "The Evolution and Extinction of Lady Liberty," *Athenaeum Review* 6 (summer 2021), pp. 69-80, athenaeumreview.org/essay/the-evolution-and-extinction-of-lady-liberty.

3 December 27, 1904; www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/digital-library/0190583.



Figure 1. Left: Silver tetradrachm coin depicting the owl of Athena (c. 480–420 BC). The inscription "AΘE" is an abbreviation of AΘHNAION, which may be translated as "of the Athenians". Center and right: Medallion for 1905 inauguration of President Theodore Roosevelt, designed by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Notice use of Roman numerals for the year, like that of the 1907 \$20 gold coin. Saint-Gaudens' design of this medallion helped trigger the 1907–1916 transformation of US coins. Photos: Smithsonian Institution and Wikimedia/ Creative Commons.



Figure 2. Top: Saint-Gaudens' \$20 gold piece, obverse (left) and reverse (right). Bottom, from left to right: 1859 Indian head penny, 1907 \$10 gold coin (Eagle), 1908 \$5 gold coin (Half Eagle), and 1908 \$2.5 gold coin (Quarter Eagle). Notice the change in faces from young Caucasian woman on earlier designs to Native Americans on later coins. Photos: Wikipedia/ Creative Commons.

Enter Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907), an Irish immigrant, Roosevelt family friend and accomplished sculptor who would go on to design the ten- and twenty-dollar gold pieces (Figure 1). Roosevelt had been very pleased with Saint-Gaudens' efforts on his 1905 inauguration medallion and admired many of his sculptures (Figure 1). During a dinner at the White House in 1905, he asked Saint-Gaudens if he would be interested in creating new U.S. coins. The sculptor agreed to craft designs for the one-cent coin and the ten-dollar (eagle) and twenty-dollar (double eagle) gold coins. To avoid seeking Congressional approval, Roosevelt planned to get the designs approved by the U.S. mint before Congress reconvened in December 1907. Unfortunately, Saint-Gaudens was slowly dying of colon cancer, hindering progress. The one-cent project was abandoned and Saint-Gaudens concentrated on the gold coins. After Saint-Gaudens died in November 1907, his assistant Henry Hering finished the project, the same month that the new gold coins were released.

This was only the beginning of Roosevelt's plan, and it had mixed results, largely because of the sculptor's declining health. The twenty-dollar gold coin was hailed by Roosevelt and others as a masterpiece, and is widely regarded today as one of the most beautiful American coins ever made (Figure 2). A full figure representing Liberty strides toward the viewer, the torch of liberty raised in her right hand and the olive branch of peace grasped in her left. Wind blows her long hair and her robes billow. One sandaled foot rests on a rock while the sun rises over the Capitol dome behind her. The reverse shows an eagle in flight over a blazing sun. The beautiful Double Eagle may be the sculptor's best work, all the more remarkable because he made it as he painfully neared the end of his life.

In contrast, the ten-dollar gold coin was a hideous throwback, especially the obverse, dominated by the face of a young Caucasian woman in a feathered headdress with "Liberty"

emblazoned on it. Although this was designed by the dying Saint-Gaudens, it is a derivative re-creation of the 1859 U.S. cent, where a similar young Caucasian woman posed as a Native American in a headdress (Figure 2). The symbology of this design is hard to mistake today—the Caucasian replacing the Native American in the numismatic equivalent of vaudeville's blackface. One wonders what a healthy Saint-Gaudens would have created.

As the revolution started by Roosevelt and Saint-Gaudens continued, Boston sculptor Bela Lyon Pratt redesigned the five-dollar (half eagle) and two-and-a-half-dollar (quarter eagle) gold coins, which appeared in 1908 (Figure 2). Superficially, these look like the ten-dollar coin, but a closer look shows that the young woman has been replaced by an unmistakable Native American. These coins shocked some people. In 1970, Cornelius Vermeule dismissed complaints made in 1908 that the Indian was too thin: "the Indian is far from emaciated, and the coins show more imagination and daring of design than almost any other issue in American history."

What made the designers of these coins change whose head the feathered headdress rested on? Guilt may be part of the answer. It is noteworthy that the new ten-dollar coin entered circulation on November 4, 1907, a few days before the 46th state, Oklahoma, was admitted to the Union on November 16. Oklahoma had been Indian Territory, where Native Americans were sequestered after being uprooted from other parts of the U.S., but even this territory had been largely usurped by the white man. The more authentic profile appeared in 1908, not long after Indian Territory was no more. Did the conscious or subconscious recognition that U.S. treatment of Native Americans was deeply wrong motivate Pratt to represent them for the first time on a coin?

The U.S. numismatic revolution continued in 1909 with the one-cent coin, the last of the three coins that Roosevelt and Saint-Gaudens



Figure 3. The 1913 Indian head/buffalo 5 cent piece. The phrase "In God We Trust" is notably missing. Photos: Wikimedia/ Creative Commons.

had discussed at their dinner. This was also the first coin honoring a president: the Lincoln penny. Roosevelt, who ended his presidency that year, considered Lincoln to be the savior of the Union and the greatest Republican president. He ordered the new coin to be designed by New York medalist Victor David Brenner, and produced to commemorate Lincoln's 100th birthday in 1909. The last Lincoln penny was minted in 2025, a run of 116 years, by far the longest tenure of any U.S. coin.

Next came the stunning redesign of the five-cent piece by the American sculptor James Earle Fraser, put into circulation in 1913. It is sometimes called the Indian Head or Buffalo nickel and was uniquely realistic, with an obverse featuring a right-facing profile of an unmistakable Native American wearing pigtailed and two feathers (Figure 3). Compare this profile with those of Native Americans on the half Eagle and quarter Eagle; I find Fraser's to be vastly better (Figure 2 and 3). The reverse featured an American Bison, or buffalo, standing in profile.

This was the only coin that acknowledged the native people and the wildlife that had been all but obliterated by the young nation's

westward expansion, and can be seen as an expression of nostalgia or apology. The dire plight of Native Americans has already been mentioned, and the buffalo also suffered terribly at the hands of the growing nation. This majestic animal was almost wiped out by wanton "sport" killings by Caucasians, with its population reaching a nadir in the late 19th century of less than 1000 individuals. This is the only twentieth-century coin to lack the phrase "In God We Trust," a very appropriate omission on a coin featuring the two greatest victims of U.S. westward expansion.

The coinage transformation was almost completed in 1916 with the introduction of the Walking Liberty half-dollar, the Standing Liberty quarter dollar and the Mercury dime (Figure 4).⁴ The dime and half dollar were designed by Adolf Weinman (1870-1952) whereas the quarter dollar was the work of

⁴ The coinage transformation finished with the introduction of the "Peace" silver dollar in 1921 but this design, featuring a bust of a young woman with a spiked crown, is anticlimactic, largely a throwback to 19th century U.S. designs. The one interesting innovation is the word "Peace" on the reverse, acknowledging the end of World War I.



Figure 4. The 1916 silver coins, obverse on left, reverse on right. "Walking Liberty" half dollar (top), "Standing Liberty" quarter dollar (center) and "Mercury" dime (bottom). Photos: Wikimedia/Creative Commons.

Hermon Atkins MacNeil (1866-1947). Let's discuss the new fifty-cent piece first, because it was clearly inspired by Saint-Gaudens' double eagle. Weinman was a German immigrant who worked for Saint-Gaudens for nine years, so he knew the sculptor's work intimately. He knew that Saint-Gaudens had been inspired by the work of French medalist Louis-Oscar Roty (1846-1911), especially the latter's soft modeling, flowing figures, integrated lettering, and rejection of neoclassical stiffness. Roty's pioneering design "*La Semeuse*" (the sower) went into circulation on the fifty-centime and one- and two-franc coins in 1897 and 1898, just before Roosevelt became president and started discussing beautifying U.S. coins with Saint-Gaudens (Figure 5). Saint-Gaudens followed Roty's lead and Weinman did so, too.

The coins in Figure 5 can be viewed as three studies of a draped young woman vigorously striding across a landscape, her arms and hands in motion. They make up a perhaps unintended joint study by three accomplished sculptor-medalists. In 1897, Roty's *La Semeuse* is walking away from us. Ten years later, St. Gaudens' Lady Liberty is walking at us or standing before us. Nine years after that, Weinman's Walking Liberty is striding across in front of us. Three different and beautiful views of a strong young woman outdoors, made by three outstanding artists over two decades—remarkable!

Which of these three coins do you prefer? All are beautiful; in all three, the young women are in natural settings, with the rising or setting sun low in the sky. In all three, the women are draped in loose robes that in the two American versions seem dangerously long. Roty's and Weinman's women wear identical Phrygian caps; Roty's and St. Gaudens' versions highlight their long hair, blowing in a strong wind.⁵ I think Weinman's Walking Liberty half dollar is the best of the three; do you agree?

5 See Stern, "The Evolution and Extinction of Lady Liberty," for a discussion of this cap's significance.

Giving Roty credit for having stunningly executed his inspiration, let's compare the two American versions. Both sport sandals and olive branches, but the torch is gone from Weinman's version. Instead, her outstretched right arm and two fingers beckon to someone or something unseen. Her hair is much shorter, hidden beneath her cap. She is clothed in the U.S. flag, its stars billowing behind while the striped part of the flag serves as her robe. Weinman's reverse is also stunning, with a fierce, rampant eagle striding across a rocky mountain perch, adorned by a stunted pine tree; eagle wings unfolding in preparation for flight (Figure 4). This is by far the best representation of the American Eagle on any U.S. coin or other official representation.

Considered together, both sides of Weinman's half dollar make a confident, assertive statement about how the United States regarded itself as an increasingly powerful nation, poised to dominate the world in the 20th century. This and Saint-Gaudens' prequel are the only American coins to use art to predict the nation's trajectory, all the more remarkable because the prediction came true, and because these two are the most inspired and most beautiful of all U.S. coins.

MacNeil's quarter dollar suffers by comparison with Weinman's masterpiece. Its imagery is militaristic, albeit defensive. Lady Liberty in very loose robes faces right (heraldic east) in the direction of the European war, and her shield (with the U.S. seal) faces right as well. She holds an olive branch as she strides through an opening in a low wall. MacNeil explained that this depicted the nation "stepping forward in... the defense of peace as her ultimate goal," an obvious reference to U.S. attitudes about World War I, which it would enter the following year.

This brings us to Weinman's ten-cent piece, the coin of this essay's title (Figure 4). The obverse features a young person—who could be male or female—wearing a Phrygian cap that sprouts wings. This is a radical new



Figure 5. Evolution of Weinman's Walking Liberty half dollar. Left to right: Charlotte Ragot, model posing for "*La Semeuse*"; Roty's 1897 1-franc coin "*La Semeuse*"; Saint-Gaudens' 1907 \$20 gold coin; Weinman's 1916 half-dollar. Photos: Wikimedia/ Creative Commons



Figure 6. Mercury and fasces. From left to right: Mercury portrayed on a bronze Roman coin (215–211 BC); Mercurius by Artus Quellinus the Elder, mid-17th century (note wings on head like those on Weinman's dime (Figure 5); rostrum and well of US House of Representatives, flanked by two fasces, symbols of government and power; close-up of one of the congressional fasces; detail of fasces on reverse of Weinman's dime. Photos: Wikimedia/Creative Commons

representation of Liberty, never envisaged before. According to Vermeule, Weinman considered the winged cap to symbolize "liberty of thought."⁶ But the similarity of the image on the dime to the Roman god Mercury (the Greek god Hermes) is compelling, all the more so because wings appear in no other representation of Liberty, and wings on the god's ankles or head are invariable identifiers of Mercury (compare Figures 5 and 6).

Mercury was the Roman god of commerce, communication, travelers, and trickery—none of these are obviously related to Liberty, so Weinman's choice is puzzling. But on second thought, maybe they are partial synonyms

6 Vermeule, C. (1971) *Numismatic Art in America*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

for Liberty. The Founding Fathers knew that commerce is a central aspect of liberty; that's why our nation's motto on the first U.S. coins in 1792 was "Liberty: Parent of Science and Industry."⁷ Communication is also central to Liberty, as made clear by the Constitution's First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Travel—the freedom to move, to go freely—is also clearly implicit in Liberty.

7 See Stern, "The First Motto on United States Coins: 'Liberty – Parent of Science and Industry.'"

Commerce, communication and travel are obviously shared interests of Lady Liberty and Mercury, but what about trickery? Liberty likes to present herself as stern, sober, and immune to shenanigans—but the truth is, she has a soft spot for trickery. From revolutionaries pretending to be Mohawks at the Boston Tea Party to late-night TV hosts ridiculing politicians, humor, satire and trickery have always been part of liberty. Comedy is liberty's pressure valve: satire pricks pomposity, parody deflates tyrants, and a well-timed hoax can expose truths that solemn speeches cannot. Of course, deception can also shackle freedom when it becomes disinformation—but in its mischievous, truth-revealing form, trickery inspires the jester, licensed to mock kings, puncture dogma, and remind the powerful that their high perches wobble on banana peels. So maybe, given his fourfold job description Mercury is an appropriate representation of Liberty?

Mercury is not the only Roman reference on Weinman's dime. The reverse features the Roman symbol of government and law, the fasces. This is a bound bundle of wooden rods, often including an axe with its blade emerging. It was originally a symbol of the pre-Roman Etruscan civilization: the bundling of thin, easily broken rods tied into a thick column becomes

much harder to break, symbolizing the strength of nations. The term "fascism" is derived from it because Mussolini's party called themselves "*fascisti*" after the symbol, beginning in 1919. Today we link the symbol with the ideology of fascism, but there was no such connotation in 1916 when Weinman designed his dime. In fact, the Founding Fathers had consciously cultivated an association with Republican Rome during the nation's early years. The fasces displayed behind the Speaker's podium in the House of Representatives are an enduring symbol of that association, a visual representation of the original national slogan "E Pluribus Unum" (Out of many, one; Figure 6). Weinman adopted this symbol for the reverse of his dime.

I hope you have enjoyed and learned from this essay. I am nostalgic for the coins of this era, especially the high level of representational art they depict. For better or worse, coins and even paper currency are almost obsolete, increasingly replaced by credit cards, Apple Pay and Venmo. This may be a good thing, because US coins unimaginatively celebrate the U.S. presidency, with a different famous deceased president on the obverse of each denomination. But it is good to contemplate a time, not so long ago, when coins were much more important and when more creative representations of our nation graced them. ♠