

EMPIRE NUMISMATICS



US \$2.50 INDIAN HEAD QUARTER EAGLE 1908-1929

Diameter: 17/24" (18 mm)

Weight: 64.5 grains (4.18 grams)

Composition: 90% gold - 10% copper

Designer: Bela Lyon Pratt

Engraver: Charles E. Barber

Mint Marks: Philadelphia (none)

Denver (D - found left of arrows on reverse)

Obverse: Male Indian head wearing feathered headdress, facing left. LIBERTY above head with date below. Designer's initials BLP over date. 13 stars (6 left/7 right) around plain border. Devices are incuse (below the plane of the field).

Reverse: Eagle perched on a group of arrows and an olive branch. UNITED STATES OF AMERICA above eagle around plain border. Motto E PLURIBUS UNUM in the field to the left in 3 rows.

Motto: IN GOD WE TRUST in the field to the right in 4 rows. Denomination 2 1/2 DOLLARS below eagle. Edge: Reeded

The \$2.50 and \$5.00 Indian Head designs were the next logical step to President Theodore Roosevelt's "pet crime", his desire to improve our "atrociously hideous" coinage and restore it to the beauty and dignity of Ancient Greek coinage. President Roosevelt's personal friend Augustus Saint-Gaudens was a resounding success with the first two inspired efforts (his famous \$20 and Indian Head \$10 debuting to rave reviews in 1907).

Another of President Roosevelt's close friends, Bostonian Dr. William Sturgis Bigelow provided the spark for the \$2.50 and \$5.00 gold coins. Apparently inspired by Egyptian reliefs on display at The Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Bigelow got the idea of making coins with the devices sunken below the fields. Despite the fact that there was no modern precedent using this technique for production of coinage, Roosevelt gave the unique concept his blessing.

After the difficulties encountered dealing with mint engraver Charles Barber on the Saint-Gaudens \$20 it was decided that secretly working with an outside designer would be the best course of action.

Bigelow wasted no time in persuading prominent Boston sculptor Bela Lyon Pratt to submit models in this technique. President Roosevelt enthusiastically approved the designs and instructed that they be immediately sent to the mint for conversion into dies so that the new coinage could be in the public's hands as soon as possible. After some "foot dragging" by Barber the first \$2.50 Indians left the Mint on Oct. 9, 1908.

Despite initial criticism, most likely due to the incuse technique being such a radical departure from all previous issues, this design stands as one of the most aesthetically pleasing of all 20th century U.S. coins.

The \$2.50 Indian Series ran from 1908 through 1929 when it became yet another victim of the Stock Market crash. With only 15 different date/mintmark combinations it is one of the smallest series in U.S. coinage making a complete set attainable for most collectors.

