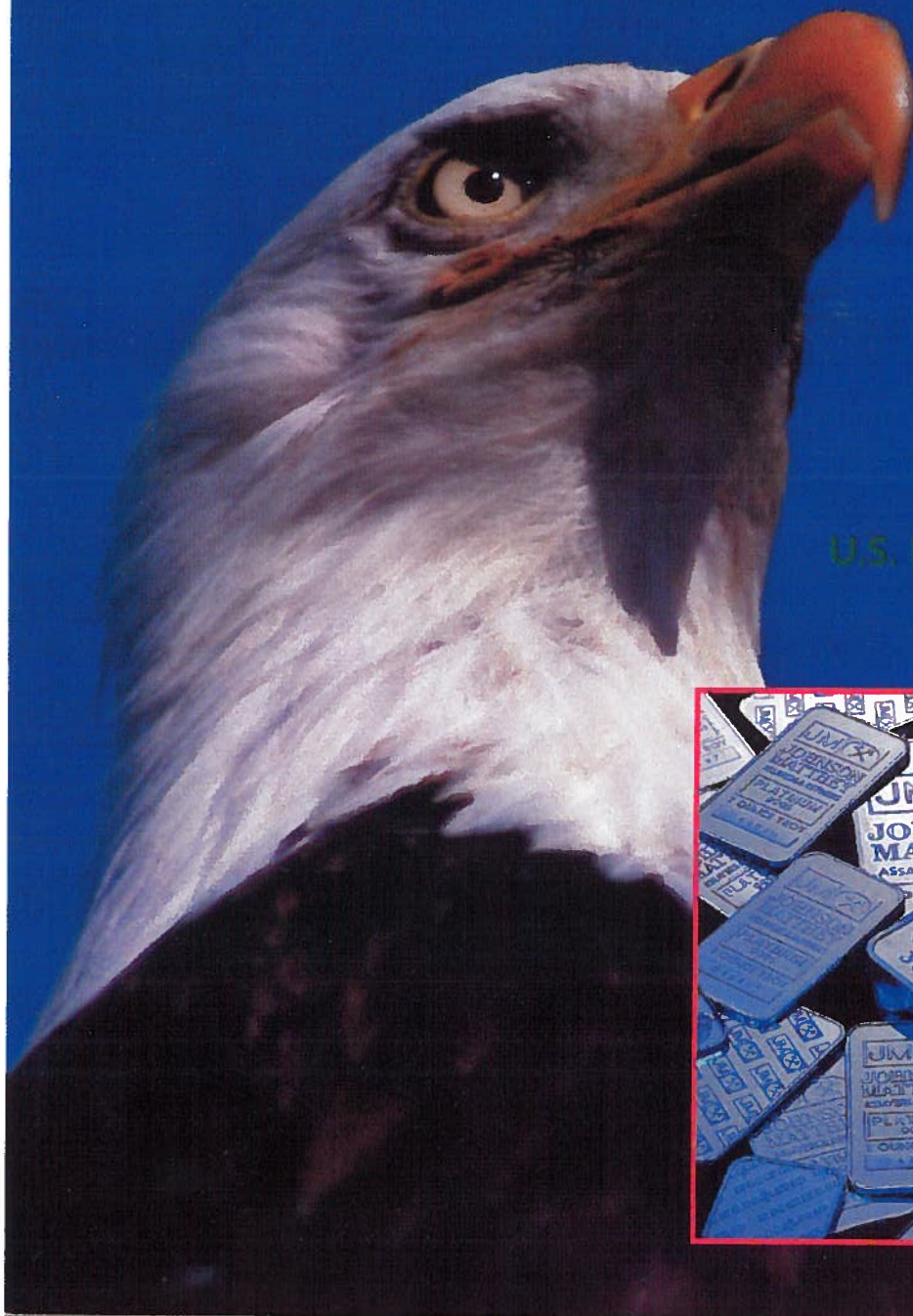


The Numismatist

FOR COLLECTORS OF COINS, MEDALS, TOKENS AND PAPER MONEY

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Platinum Eagles Join
U.S. Mint's Bullion Lineup

by David L. Ganz



The Buffalo Nickel: America's Handsomest Coin

Its bold design and sturdy composition make James Earle Fraser's Indian Head nickel a favorite among collectors of United States coins.

by Michael E. Marotta
ANA 162953



Actual Size: 21.21mm

The beast depicted on the reverse of the Indian Head nickel is not a buffalo at all, but rather an American bison. The Native American "chief" on the obverse is not a chief and is, in fact, a composite of three faces.

THE INDIAN HEAD, or Buffalo, nickel may be America's best-designed coin. James Earle Fraser's motif and the tough, copper-nickel alloy combined to produce a stunning and yet practical medium of commerce.

By the time the Buffalo nickel was introduced in 1913, United States coinage had undergone a subtle change. For more than 100 years, Liberty had been embodied by a woman. There was no doubt about it—the images on the Capped Bust half dollar (1807-39) and Seated Liberty quarter (1839-91) were decidedly feminine. Longacre's Indian Head cent (1859-1909) carried a strong, yet female, portrait. However, Liberty on the coinage designed by Charles Barber was androgynous. Not so with Fraser's work. Like the gold half and quarter eagles of Bela Lyon Pratt, his Buffalo nickel clearly presented Liberty as a Native American *man*.

In general, female symbols of Liberty on U.S. coinage have not held up well to the rigors of circulation. On the Morgan dollar (1878-1921), Barber nickel (1883-1912) and Mercury dime (1916-45), Miss Liberty had masses of delicate curls and swirls that paled as the coins passed from hand to hand. By contrast, Fraser's artistic effort had a fundamental vocabulary of detail that was not easily worn away. The coin, with its broad, deeply cut image, is rugged. Even in grades less than Fine, both the Native American and the buffalo (or, more correctly, bison) remain expressive and alive. Of course, some allowance must be made for the coinage metals, as nickel is substantially harder and more durable than silver (an exception is Barber's design for 5-cent piece, which did not take

IF YOU LOOK at a "Buff nick" in About Good grade, you'll find . . . the feathers and braid are clear, and the face is unmistakable.

.....

good advantage of the alloy).

The obverse of Fraser's Buffalo nickel is composed of three planes. The lowest is represented by the fields to the immediate right of the Indian's face and below the chin; between the feathers and the neck; and above the top of the head. The second plane includes the front of the face, and the nose, eyes, mouth and chin. The most elevated plane is the middle and back of the head, where the high relief of the Indian's hair protects his facial characteristics. No matter how worn a specimen is, the portrait always displays some expression. If you look at a "Buff nick" in About Good grade, you'll find the rim is worn flat, the legend LIBERTY is gone, and the date has been wiped out. Even so, the feathers and braid are clear, and the face is unmistakable.

The reverse has perhaps six, distinct planes. The buffalo's mouth is on the second-lowest plane, while its eye is on the fourth plane, well protected by the surrounding metal. Overall, the buffalo's shoulder and the coin's rim protect the deeper levels. In lower grades, the buffalo has no horn or tail, but its powerful shoulders and shaggy head still dominate the design, and little doubt remains that it is a bull.

Fraser seems to have been confident that the nickel-alloy coin would stand up to commercial circulation. The first nickels off the press showed a bison standing on a realistic, raised mound, upon which the words FIVE CENTS were exposed. (These have come to be known as Type I specimens.) However, government officials, perhaps fearing the denomination might be susceptible to alteration and passed as a \$5 dollar coin (much like the 1883 Liberty Head nickel), ordered a revised coin (Type II) with a level mound and the mark of value cut into the depth of the coin, protected within an exergue. (Time and experience indicates this may not have been necessary—a Type I nickel in only Good condition still displays much of the FIVE CENTS denomination.)

Grousing about new coins is an unwritten right of all collectors, so it is no surprise that Fraser's 5-cent piece was the subject of criticism. Writing in *The Numismatist* of May 1913, W.H. DeSchon complained that the legend "E Pluribus Unum" was crowded. "This fault, together with the fact that the letters are very small, will soon reduce the words through wear to mere ridges on the surface." (However, this is not what

As a kid in the '50s, I always liked
the Buffalo nickel better than
"the one with the guy." I think
it was the "Cowboys and Indians"
influence from TV.

—BOB FRITSCH



Actual Size: 21.21mm

Type I nickels picture the buffalo atop a raised mound.



Actual Size: 21.21 mm

Even in About Good condition, the features of a Buffalo nickel stand out loud and clear.

The Buffalo nickel is perhaps one of our most desirable, yet overlooked, coins. As interest in it grows, I foresee an explosive number of new varieties surfacing.

—LOU COLES

... COLLECTORS HAVING THE patience to seek out Fine to Extremely Fine examples will be rewarded with a stunning array of attractive, reasonably priced coins.

happened to circulated coins, as the legend was protected by the rim and the buffalo's shoulder.)

Supporting the contention that the Buffalo nickel stands up well to abuse are the two details important to determining the grade of the coin: the buffalo's seemingly insignificant horn and tail. The animal's shoulder is the highest surface and the first spot to show wear. Yet, the amount of wool remaining in this area is not considered when judging a coin's condition. As such, even low- or middle-grade coins are visually powerful and compelling. As the coin deteriorated in circulation, the depths of its obverse and reverse designs acquired an attractive, hard blackness, offsetting the otherwise uniform grey of its surfaces. The Buffalo nickel's copper-nickel alloy is not nearly as reactive as silver or bronze. In this series, toning generally is subtle and found most often on coins of higher grade.

These factors have proven to be an asset for hobbyists, as they make collecting an attractive date and mint set of the series an attainable and affordable goal. For most years, the branch mints in Denver and San Francisco struck only a fraction of the Buffalo nickel population; up through America's Great Depression, "D" and "S" mintmarks appeared on only 5 to 20 percent of 5-cent coins. As a result, mint-state examples from these outlets are pricey. However, collectors having the patience to seek out Fine to Extremely Fine examples will be rewarded with a stunning array of attractive, reasonably priced coins.

How much of the Buffalo nickel's success was part of Fraser's plan and how much was luck, we may never know. It is important, however, not to underestimate the artist's insight. Consider his famous sculpture, *End of the Trail*, which is so compelling that it is almost overdone. Yet, like the Parthenon, 2,500 years of exposure to the elements will never wear away its essential geometry. Though of different fabric and design, the Buffalo nickel has the same stark, enduring lines.

The Thomas Jefferson commemorative 5-cent piece, designed by Felix Schlag, replaced the Buffalo nickel in 1938. Yet, after 60 years, Fraser's coin still is the object of great attention, perhaps because of its durability and distinctly American flavor.

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The Buffalo nickels of 1913 supported a lot of trade—white rice, white sugar, crackers and sardines all were 5 cents a pound. For a nickel you could get a cigar or a glass of beer.

—DEBORAH CALLAHAN

A director of the Ancient Numismatic Collectors, an ANA member club, Michael Marotta is a frequent contributor to THE NUMISMATIST. He has completed the ANA correspondence course, "Grading Coins Today," earning high honors. In 1996 he received a first-place ANA Heath Literary Award for "A New Look at the Origins of Coinage," which appeared in the August 1995 issue.



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