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**James Earle Fraser:
Legacy of the West**
by William E. Pike

James Earle Fraser: Legacy of the West

Best known as the designer of the Indian Head/Buffalo nickel, James Earle Fraser was forever influenced by his youthful days in the fast-developing West.

by William E. Pike
LM 4962



The statue *End of the Trail* reflects James Earle Fraser's experience with, and concern for, American Indians.

THE TOWN OF Mitchell, in what was to become the State of South Dakota, was a true frontier village in the early 1880s. To the west of Mitchell stretched miles of grassland, the untamed Missouri River, the Badlands and the Black Hills. It was the gateway to a land of bison and Indians, of settlers and cowboys.

And it was on a ranch near Mitchell that James Earle Fraser, just reaching his teens, began to discover his own innate skills as an artist by working the native, chalky clay into miniature statues. Within three decades, his art work would be seen by every American in the form of one of the nation's most famous, and reflective, coins.

Fraser was born in Winona, Minnesota, on November 4, 1876, to a railroad engineer and a descendant of a *Mayflower* passenger. By 1881 his nomadic family had moved to Mitchell with the intention of settling down. At first, they lived in an abandoned railroad boxcar, but later took to ranch life.

It was in this environment that the young Fraser experienced the ways of the American West, including those of the Native Americans who were being forced from their homeland. He later would describe these formative years:

I lived in the Indian country of Dakota, in the land that belonged to the Indians, and I saw them in their villages, crossing the prairies on their hunting expeditions. Often they stopped beside our ranch house; and camped and traded rabbits and other game for chickens. They seemed very happy until the order came to place them on reservations. One group after another was surrounded by soldiers and herded beyond the Missouri River. I realized that they were always being sent farther West, and I often heard my father say that the Indians would someday be pushed into the Pacific Ocean.

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Though Fraser witnessed the evolution of the West from the 19th century to the 20th in his early youth, he would forever be influenced by this aspect of his background. His Dakota Territory roots would affect his art throughout his life.

The Fraser family left Mitchell in 1891, first for Minnesota again and then for Chicago. In the latter, the youth's interest in art—especially sculpture—grew. In 1894 he traveled to Paris to study at the École des Beaux Arts. In Paris his precocious artistic ability was noticed by legendary sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who put him to work as an assistant. After two years, in 1900, Fraser returned to the United States to continue working for Saint-Gaudens at his studio in Cornish, New Hampshire. By 1902 Fraser had opened a studio of his own in the Greenwich Village district of New York City.

His first highly important commission came in 1906, when he was asked to carve a marble bust of President Theodore Roosevelt for the United States Senate chamber. From there, his career skyrocketed.

His statue entitled *End of the Trail*, an image of an Indian slumped over in despair upon an equally despondent horse, was to be his best-known sculptural work. Begun in 1894, it forever epitomizes his experiences with, and concerns for, the American Indians.

The statue won the 1898 American Art Association competition, and in 1915 a gold medal at the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco. However, without a doubt, his legacy to American culture is most evident in his famous and popular numismatic creation, the Indian Head nickel.

Early in the 20th century, Fraser had created models of three distinctive American Indian chiefs: Iron Tail, a Sioux; Big Tree, a Kiowa; and Two Moons, a Cheyenne. When asked by Secretary of the Treasury Franklin MacVeagh to design a replacement for the Liberty Head nickel in 1911, Fraser did not have to look far for inspiration:

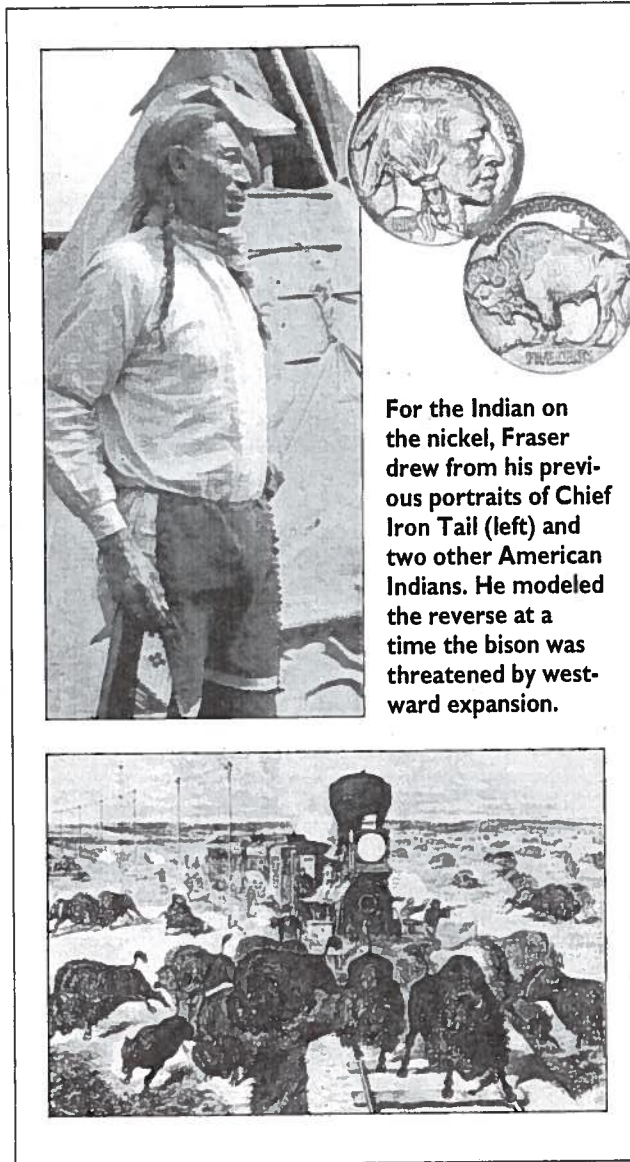
In my search for symbols, I found no motif within the boundaries of the United States so distinctive as the American buffalo. . . . With the Indian head on the obverse, we have perfect unity in theme. It has pertinent



Sculptor James Earle Fraser works on a bust of President Theodore Roosevelt. Both men were deeply influenced by their experiences in the West.

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For the Indian on the nickel, Fraser drew from his previous portraits of Chief Iron Tail (left) and two other American Indians. He modeled the reverse at a time the bison was threatened by westward expansion.

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Fraser created a composite of his three earlier American Indian images and utilized it for his rugged, deeply cut obverse motif. For the reverse, he sketched Black Diamond, a bison at the Bronx Zoo (formerly the New York Zoological Garden), then rendered the profile image in bas relief. This was to be an American coin—pure, simple and unmistakable.

Though the coin met with a fair amount of criticism, it also was easily accepted by a broad cross-section of citizens who saw it for what it was—a uniquely American creation. It was an obvious break from the feminine, mythical images of Liberty or even the idealized portrait on James Longacre's Indian Head cent. For a quarter century, the Indian Head/Buffalo nickel defined American coinage and reminded the nation of its native heritage, one that Fraser had watched slip close to extinction.

In 1926 Fraser and his wife, sculptor Laura Gardin Fraser, collaborated in creating a commemorative coin, the Oregon Trail Memorial half dollar. Among his other works of numismatic interest are the Victory Medal of World War I and the Navy Cross. The Victory Medal was authorized in 1919 to recognize members of the United States Armed Forces who served on active duty between April 6, 1917, and November 11, 1918; more than 4 million were struck. The Navy Cross, awarded to officers and enlisted men who distinguish themselves by extraordinary heroism in military operations against the enemy, is second in stature only to

the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Fraser was a prolific artist and designed monumental works that stand today in many prominent places: Alexander Hamilton's statue on the

grounds of the United States Treasury Building; the Tomb of Robert Todd Lincoln in Arlington Cemetery; General George S. Patton's statue at the United States Military Academy; the bridgehead for Arlington Bridge in Washington, D.C.; and many, many more.

A successful artist to the end, James Earle Fraser died in Westport, Connecticut, on October 11, 1953. His legacy can be found in the raw power and strength of the images he set in stone and metal. More than mere *ars gratia artis*, these works were meant to present to posterity the essence of America as Fraser knew it: strong, rugged and vast, yet changing from one age to another. This was America as Fraser experienced it as a mere Dakota boy, with eyes open and hands ready to create. •

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An ANA member since 1985, William E. Pike lives in South Dakota, where he is a member of the Pierre Coin and Stamp Club. His collecting interests include Liberty nickels, ancient coins and wooden money. His most recent article for THE NUMISMATIST, "Collecting Wooden Money," was published in the December 1996 issue.



Fraser's medallic works include the Navy Cross (left). The decoration originally was awarded for combat heroism and other distinguished service, but since August 7, 1942, it has been presented only for extraordinary heroism in the presence of great danger and personal risk. It now is the second highest decoration for U.S. Naval personnel. His motif for the obverse of the World War I Victory medal (right), authorized in 1919, features a winged, female figure holding a shield and sword. On the example shown here, the ribbon carries three battle clasps and a Defensive Sector clasp.

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