

# Whose Face Is It?

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Geronimo, Artist: C.S. Fly, 1886, Albumen silver print, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Louis and Jude Patch Guglielmino

Pictorial portraits tend to concentrate on a part of the human body that written portraits very rarely visit, that is, the top twelve or so inches. As important as the face is in establishing an

understanding of both others, and as most written portraits play down appearances in favor of developing narratives that focus on the “sitter’s” life and achievements. Read a well-written obituary and you’ll quickly get a feel for the ground that written portraits can cover, and by default the readily accepted limitations, of image driven portraiture.

I start in this way to underscore the importance of thought, and the word in not simply making sense of peoples lives and “painting” their portrait, but in sharing our understandings of both people and the images we make of them. Portraiture is after all, not simply about the craft of rendering likenesses, more important is how seeing drives us to think, to model that thought into words, then use those words to develop our intellectual ownership of those images. Putting financial gain, rock stars and those who’s business is based on marketing their appearance to one side, I now want to reflect on the idea of owning an appearance through inheritance.

With ancestry and the stewardship that often accompanies it in mind I have chosen as my starting point, two very similar “portraits”, one on a coin, the other on a badge. Both were drawn to celebrate the indigenous people of North America; both feature the profile head of a Native American drawn, by non- indigenous American artists. The coin, the “Indian Head” nickel,<sup>1</sup> is the work of sculptor James Earle Fraser and the badge,<sup>2</sup> a recycling of Earle’s image by a graphic designer working in the 1970’s for the Washington Redskins NFL franchise. Although both images could be mistaken for portraits of a specific person, neither in fact, is.

In 1913, the year the first Indian Nickel was struck, George Roberts the Director of the Mint wrote to Earle Fraser, asking whether the Indian head pictured on the obverse of his coin was a “ portrait or a type”, Fraser responded “It is type rather than portrait”. Before the nickel was made I had done several portraits of Indians, among them Iron Tail (Custer’s opponent at Little Big Horn), Two Moons and one or two others and probably got characteristics from those men in the head on the coin, but my purposes was not to make a portrait but a type”.<sup>3</sup>

The most likely reason Roberts asked, was that from the day the nickel went into circulation, three Plains Indians claimed to be the model for the head; Iron Tail, (1842-1916) an Oglala

Lakota chief and star in Buffalo Bills Wild West Show, Two Moons 1847-1917 a Cheyenne chief who took part in the Battle of Little Bighorn and Chief John Big Tree, 1877-19 67 a member of the Seneca Nation who between 1915 and 1950, not only appeared in 59 movies but in March 1964 featured on the front cover of Esquire magazine as the model for the Indian Head coin. Each bore more than a passing resemblance to the image on the coin. Each was happy to perpetuate the idea that it was a picture of them. In doing so they demonstrated that the optical phenomenon that allows us to see what we want to see (when it is to our advantage) really works. For similar reasons I suspect Earle's use of a clearly Plains Indian "Type", to celebrate the Tribal Nations (an ethnically extremely diverse group of cultures) has passed largely without comment.

The Washington Redskins logo presents a different problem. A problem that is less concerned with physiognomy and appearances, than it is with the more general issue of cultural identity. The logo was designed in 1971 in close consultation, the team's current owner claims, with representatives of the Tribal Nations that included Walter "Blackie" Wetzel, a former President of the National Congress of American Indians and Chairman of the Blackfeet Nation.

In spite of this provenance the logo is today a subject of litigation. In 2014 representatives of The Tribal Nations filed a lawsuit against the owner of the Redskins. The suit aimed to prevent the owner from using either the image of a Native American's head or the name "Redskins" to brand the club, on the grounds that both the word and the image were offensive to Native Americans.

Putting the "naming" to one side, we are now no longer worrying about an individual's ownership of their physiognomy or image, but the collective ownership of a culture and what I can best describe as a "look". Assuming the consultation with the tribal nations was a reality, then what has changed since 1971? And why the law suit today? The answer is that a lot has changed since 1971. Dee Brown's, book, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*<sup>4</sup>, published that year, set out the Native American perspective on the history of the injustices and betrayals that the US Government exercised over the indigenous people of North America. It became a popular book and changed the way educated Americans thought about

their past. By 1972 Congress had passed the Indian Education Act that established compulsory educational programs. By 1975 the Indian Self-Determination Act permitted tribes to participate in all social welfare programs. Then in the 1980's legislation was put in place that permitted reservations to operate casinos. That law delivered financial independence and security to several tribes. By 1992, the first legal action against the Redskins petitioned for the trademark registrations to be cancelled.

In short then, in just 20 years the balance of power, for the first time since that first Thanksgiving was reversed in favor of Native Americans. If you read, Dee Brown's, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, you will understand why the Tribal Nations are now protective of their image and will, for the foreseeable future, almost certainly continue to obstruct "outsiders" from fooling with their image. You will also see why what was understood prior to 1970 as a respectful possibly flattering portrait of a "Type" of Indian can now be understood, although not necessarily by the individuals who modeled for it, as offensive. All of this goes to highlight the importance of us remembering, that portraits can, even if they are inventions, generate significant meanings and encourage proprietorial attitudes.

1. <http://cointrackers.com/buffalo-indian-nickel/> ↵
2. <http://www.redskins.com> ↵
3. Bowers. Q.D, *The Official Red Book, A guide book of Buffalo and Jefferson Nickels*, Whitman Publishing, 2007 pp.38-39 ↵
4. D. Brown *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*. Published by Holt Paperbacks, 2001 ↵