



The Politics of Design

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By Fred Poyner IV

The seal of a city speaks to inhabitants and visitors alike as an icon, a historical marker, a symbol that defines the city and gives it character. How such a design becomes the accepted standard, however, involves characteristics inherent to many creative public works. Both the selection procedure and the design itself may be subject to controversy, debate, and politicization. This was very much the case for artist James A. Wehn, popularly referred to in his day as "the first sculptor of Seattle." He put a great deal of energy and effort into creating a city seal for Seattle in the first part of the 20th century. Though he eventually succeeded, his design work had to overcome many hurdles, not the least of which was the city government itself.

The earliest official record of a City of Seattle seal dates to July 29, 1899, with the adoption of city ordinance no. 5478. This first seal sported no symbol and little design. More than anything it resembled a notary's emblem, consisting entirely of a circular arrangement of the words "The City of Seattle-Washington-Corporate Seal." In the years following, the simplistic nature of this design was repeatedly called into question.

Efforts to have a more graphic seal initially included a 1909 competition sponsored by the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. A corresponding city council resolution on February 15 of that year established three prizes to be awarded for designs received from the public. No further action came about as far as a new seal, however, and an account of the 1909 design competition in the Chief Seattle Tilikum relates that "through mismanagement of the competition and conflict with the mayor's office no seal was adopted by city officials."

Meanwhile, the idea of a new seal was being considered by other interests in the city. James A. Wehn, a young sculptor who had been awarded the city's first public sculpture commission—a statue and monument honoring Chief Seattle—had been thinking about the possibility of including a city seal in the base of his statue. As part of his commission Wehn worked with a committee of artists and prominent citizens, including the eminent Pacific Northwest historian Clarence B. Bagley. The completed statue was well-received and widely acclaimed as Seattle's "first public sculpture," but a seal was not incorporated into the base. This may have had something to do with the fact that Seattle had five different mayors in the five years (1907-1912) Wehn worked on the statue project: William Hickman Moore, John F. Miller, Hiram C. Gill, George W. Dilling, and finally George F. Cotterill, who accepted the statue on behalf of the city. As had been the case in 1909 with the Post-Intelligencer design competition, interest in the idea lagged at the city council level. The finished Chief Seattle monument was unveiled to the public on Founders' Day, November 13, 1912.

From the earliest years of his training as an artist, Wehn dedicated himself to realism and classical ideals in his sculptural works. With encouragement and instruction by Rowena Nichols, a prominent Northwest artist, he began his training with experimentations in clay modeling. In his pursuit of sculpture as a preferred medium Wehn learned the trade of metal craft at the foundry where his father worked, and he supplemented this experience by studying sculpture under German-born artist August Hubert in Chicago around 1900. After six months he returned from this apprenticeship and thereafter maintained a working studio in Seattle.

As a young artist living in Seattle in the early 1900s, Wehn developed a close association with Clarence Bagley and Edmond S. Meany, both of whom shared his passion for Northwest history, Indian culture, and pioneer settlement. The artist's earliest sculptural works reflect the careful attention to historical detail he shared with his counterparts. During this period Wehn accomplished a medallion of Chief Leschi and a bust of Princess Angeline-Chief Seattle's daughter-that illustrate the importance he placed on rendering his subjects' features in lifelike detail. For these and some later works, such as the Chief Seattle statue, he made repeated visits to local reservations to study the Indians' way of life and observe their characteristics in order to better understand their nature and how his ideas could be given form.

Wehn's attention to detail as applied to the human figure served him well over the years, especially when the design of public works was concerned. He endeavored to pass along this approach to design as part of his teaching philosophy during his tenure (1919-1924) as the first head of the University of Washington's sculpture department.

In 1927 a Seattle seal became a career focus for Wehn, beginning with the process of creating a lamppost base design for Seattle City Light. Architect Carl Gould was to draw the overall design for the standards while Wehn was enlisted to do the modeling for the large ornamental bases. As a part of his design Wehn provided space for the inclusion of a five-inch circular ornament of some significance. His final scheme-a medallion incorporating twin dolphins entwined and centered over Seattle's year of incorporation-1869-became the artist's first visual example of a seal included in public works for the city, albeit an unofficial one. Of the twin dolphins Wehn remarked that they had long been regarded in Greek mythology as symbolic of seaports. The designs were completed and the lampposts installed in September 1928. Today, a visitor walking along the waterfront section of Alaskan Way can still find these light posts adorned with Wehn's emblem.

In response to citizens' questions about whether the dolphin medallion was the official seal, city hall's answer was no, but, said Wehn, "these inquiries did stimulate some interest in the adopting of an official city seal." The lamp design bolstered Wehn's growing reputation as a sculptor. A letter to Wehn on March 30, 1928, from the Wendell Daggett, secretary-treasurer of Seattle's Mercury Club, congratulated the him "on your being so prominently identified with the project of beautifying Seattle's most prominent streets."

Gould, as the architect of City Light's streetlamp project and a close associate of Wehn's, elicited the involvement of Seattle pioneer and mill owner Charles Stimson to organize and chair a Civic Arts Committee (CAC) that would initiate a review of several designs for a city seal. The group asked Wehn, among others, to conceptualize designs for this purpose. In all, he prepared seven drawings for the CAC, all of which contained a profile of Chief Seattle centered in a medallion. Wehn felt strongly that the head of Chief Seattle "should rightly dominate the design; 'for him the City of Seattle was named by its founders.'" The twin dolphins were retained along the border, separated by a pine cone at the bottom center, and the inscription read, "Corporate Seal of the City of Seattle 1869."

It is evident from correspondence in 1928 between Wehn, Stimson, and Gould that Wehn's design was the preferred choice. Stimson wrote to Gould on June 12, 1928, that the CAC had approved Wehn's final design

for the city seal and recommended that it be forwarded on to the Seattle City Council or other proper officials to be formally adopted. Gould notified Wehn that the board of the Seattle Fine Arts Society, in a letter dated July 10, 1928, had approved the design unanimously.

Anxious to keep interest in his design active, Wehn urged Gould, in a letter dated September 15, 1928, to submit the drawing to the office of Mayor Frank Edwards for further action by the city council, pointing out that his design had garnered support from historian Clarence B. Bagley and the city's comptroller, Harold Carroll, whom Wehn referred to as "the custodian of seals for the City."

A letter dated October 26, 1928, from Charles Stimson to Mayor Edwards outlined how Wehn's design had been reviewed and approved by the CAC and the Seattle Fine Arts Society. Stimson received a favorable reply from the mayor's office and was instructed to send the design on to W. D. Barkhuff, chairman of a special committee for the mayor's office, for further consideration. Several months later Stimson emphasized in a letter to Barkhuff: "The present city seal is not in keeping with the dignity of this city and our committee felt that such a seal would be advisable for the city to have." In a follow-up letter to Barkhuff dated January 8, 1929, and timed to bolster Stimson's message, Wehn further explained the symbolic emphasis of his design as well as the details of his investigation into a seal for the city: "The inception of this design came about while I was modeling the new light standard for the City. Upon the base of the standard was a suitable place for such as design. Upon investigation it was found that the City had no seal other than the notary seal type."

In a November 18, 1962, Seattle Times interview, Wehn related that the design submitted to Barkhuff for consideration in December 1928 languished in the mayor's office. It was another five years before the existing city seal again came under scrutiny by Seattle's elected officials, this time at the prompting of another Wehn ally-arts patron and advocate Richard E. Fuller.

The year 1933 saw the successful completion of a new Seattle Art Museum at Volunteer Park, another milestone in the development of the city as a center for artistic and cultural activity. Carl Gould designed the new museum and Richard Fuller provided financial backing. While not directly involved with the museum's design, Wehn approached Fuller and Gould with the observation that the cornerstone of the new building would be an excellent place for a city seal.

Further discussions about the prospect of a cornerstone seal amongst Wehn, Fuller, and other members of the Seattle arts community proved fruitful. Both Gould and James Delmage (J. D.) Ross-often called "The Father of City Light"-became instrumental allies in Wehn's continued effort to provide the city with a design worthy of an official seal designation, both in terms of its artistic merit and emblematic authority. To this end, in the spring of 1933 Gould organized an art committee made up of five local artists and prominent Seattle citizens whose job it would be to study the issue of an official city seal, review designs, and make a recommendation to the mayor's office and the city council. J. D. Ross was on the newly formed committee, which was nearly identical in purpose to the Civic Arts Committee of 1928.

Wehn's design for a city seal was similar to the one he had proposed in 1928. At its center was a profile of Chief Seattle, whom the artist continued to regard as central to Seattle's founding and historical identity. J. D. Ross had suggested to him that the figure should be "a noncontroversial subject" and that "one pioneer could not be singled out without offending others." From this standpoint, a profile of the Suquamish chief was an excellent choice. Beyond all that, the image of Chief Seattle was stamped in Wehn's memory from the time when, as a young boy in 1896, he took a trip with his father and mother to visit Suquamish, "where a great number of Indians lived and where Chief Seattle is buried."

The figure of the chief was not the only element to receive scrutiny by the art committee in 1933. One element that drew the members' attention was the pair of dolphins. Committee members wondered whether salmon or even trout might be more appropriate and whether the dolphin designs looked too modern or abstract. In defense of the design, Wehn reiterated his former validation of the dolphins as representative of a seaport community and stated that the dolphin design reflected an effort "to keep up with the times."

In all, the art committee reviewed five drawings by Wehn, each with slight variations, over a two-month series of meetings. By mid 1933 the group's members agreed that the design was ready for consideration by the Seattle City Council. Once again Richard Fuller was to be the emissary for initiating communication with the mayor's office. In an April 28, 1933, letter to Mayor John Dore, Fuller wrote:

As you may remember, beneath the date on the cornerstone of the Seattle Art Museum, there is a circle in which it is hoped that the seal of the City of Seattle may be set. Unlike most cities of our size, we have no decorative corporate seal. Mr. James Wehn, our leading medalist, has, however, recently shown me a design which I think would be excellent for the purpose. He will get in touch with you in a few days, with the hope of receiving your approval.

Fuller urged the mayor to present the design to the city council. Fuller's public status as president and director of the new Seattle Art Museum was not lost on Mayor Dore. However, other interests at the city council level were also at play with regard to an official seal, and long-time city comptroller Harold Carroll was beginning to weigh in on the matter.

The idea of having an official Seattle seal with which to adorn the cornerstone of the art museum was indeed raised in city council sessions, according to a 1933 Post-Intelligencer article that covered council proceedings. Councilman Frank J. Laube called for a proposal to invite local artists to submit designs and form a city council committee tasked with reviewing submissions and making a recommendation. Laube said he initially called on Harold Carroll for an official copy of the city seal to place on the art museum's cornerstone, only to be informed by Carroll that no such design existed. The councilman had his own idea for a city seal, preferring "a design recently used by a local publisher which featured a bust of Arthur A. Denny, the city's foremost pioneer."

It is clear from the 1933 record that, despite the offer of Wehn's design and the appealing prospect of having a city seal to affix to the art museum's cornerstone, the city council chose not to spend time reviewing prospective seal designs-by James Wehn or anyone else. Some council members felt it was not advantageous to have Wehn's design presented at that time and argued against diverting city funds from street repairs, sewer projects, and other city public works to pay for a seal. This proved to be a major point in favor of Carroll's proposal, for which he sought city council approval three years later.

Wehn, meanwhile, was busy with other projects. Between 1933 and 1936 he produced a sculptural piece for the Longview Post Office, a bust of Dr. David S. Maynard for Harborview Hospital, and a memorial to his friend J. D. Ross for the Seattle City Light Building. In 1935 the University of Washington commemorated the centennial of the death of Lafayette (the French general who served under George Washington during the Revolutionary War), and Wehn, an admirer of French art, contributed a medallion of his own design to the celebration.

By 1936 the topic of an official seal was once again gaining momentum in city government. At the forefront of this renewed effort stood Harold Carroll, who had previously supported Wehn's seal design. This time, however, Carroll had enlisted the design skills of one A. J. Mahoney to generate a new seal design. Carroll approached the mayor's office with the initial Mahoney design in the spring of 1936. The media now referred

to the recurrent subject of a corporate seal as an "intermittent agitation of many years." An article in the June 18, 1936, *Seattle Times* noted that Mayor Dore gave the Mahoney design a warm reception:

The mayor had before him today an attractive design for the proposed official ornament, with a picturesque etching of old Chief Seattle in the center. He plans to send it to the city council for consideration. This design was prepared by A. J. Mahoney, structural draftsman in the City Engineering Department, at the request of City Comptroller Harry W. Carroll, who said he had been urging adoption of an appropriate seal for about twenty-five years.

The article made no mention of the seal designs James Wehn had previously submitted. It appears that Mahoney's design had the mayor's tacit endorsement and only lacked the city council's official approval. In his 1962 history of the City of Seattle seal, Wehn noted that, "while there was a competition, to everyone's surprise only one other design was submitted: this was from the City Engineer's Office." Wehn's design continued to receive support from members of the Seattle art community, including Fuller and the art committee members who had reviewed his designs in 1933. Fuller, in particular, maintained close ties with Judge Austin E. Griffiths, who was city council president in 1936. Wehn would need the judge's support if he were to pose a challenge to the Mahoney-Carroll design.

Carroll's plan for submitting the Mahoney design to the city council moved forward, with a meeting of the council's Finance Committee scheduled for June 24, 1936, to review designs. This would be Wehn's next opportunity to present the case for his design, as Mayor Dore acknowledged in a June 22 letter wherein he advised the council members that "the need for it [a city seal] can be discussed more fully and more intelligently by Mr. Carroll than anyone else." Dore added that "this office has been informed that persons interested in the artistic life of the city want an opportunity to furnish other designs for the city seal."

Mahoney's drawing presented a full-face view of Chief Seattle in the center with "Seal of the City of Seattle Washington" around the outer border and the words "Incorporated 1869 / Chief Seattle" around an inner border. Wehn's design, the one approved by the art committee in 1933, offered a profile view of Chief Seattle in the center with the twin dolphins at the bottom. The border text read "Corporate Seal of the City of Seattle - 1869." The differences between these two designs became a major element in the city council's seal selection deliberations.

Present at the council's June 24 meeting to discuss the seal designs were James Wehn and long-time friends and supporters Milton Dix and E. L. Gale. Nine "city fathers" also attended, including Judge Griffiths, presiding. Neither Carroll nor Mahoney attended this meeting. The "perturbed committee of art lovers," as they were called in a follow-up *Post-Intelligencer* story the next day, was allowed to make its case before those assembled. Each spoke in turn beginning with Wehn, who had brought a copy of the Mahoney-Carroll design to the meeting to illustrate his points. The fact that the city council had received the Mahoney-Carroll design prior to the meeting, along with the mayor's endorsement, meant that Wehn and his supporters would need to make a compelling case.

In his remarks to the assembled council Wehn stressed that his design offered lasting value in terms of its composition and its realistic and dignified rendering of Chief Seattle's features. He pointed to his earlier studies of Native Americans as well as his many public works of Indian figures—including the Chief Seattle statue at Tillikum Place—as indicative of his knowledge and artistic abilities in this regard.

Both Dix and Gale then spoke in turn, reemphasizing the need for a seal design of artistic merit that rendered the central figure in either three-quarters or full-profile. The Mahoney-Carroll design, they noted, showed the face of Chief Seattle in full view. Not only did it not adhere to artistic conventions for such a design, they argued passionately, it was also imperfect: the nose was askew. They pointed out that the

Mahoney-Carroll design was actually based on photos of an earlier seal James Wehn had done as a mold and therefore not an original design. Above all they stressed the need to have a unique design that would stand out for Seattle visitors and residents alike.

One argument in favor of the Mahoney-Carroll design was that it would incur no financial cost to the city, having been crafted by a city employee. In a September 18, 1962, Post-Intelligencer article Wehn related that one of the city fathers had declared in 1936 that he did not see the need for outside assistance and that "any one of the city's employees could make a good design, and for nothing, too." The art committee members were prepared for this objection, however. Richard Fuller, they stated, was prepared to cover any expense involved in creating the seal from Wehn's design. Furthermore, they offered to have two plaque models made for the city-one to hang in the mayor's office and the other to be applied to the Seattle Art Museum's cornerstone. Fuller confirmed this offer in a letter to Judge Griffiths dated June 24-the same day as the meeting.

It was the council president, Judge Griffiths, who first voiced a response regarding whether the Mahoney-Carroll design was as flawed as the Wehn contingent argued. He agreed that the features of Chief Seattle appeared to be off-center. Now that the Wehn and the others had pointed it out, the full-on view of the chief's face was seen as a drawback. At this point the city fathers inquired into Wehn's design. When they examined the medallion design provided by the art committee, they were impressed with the classical profile of the central figure and the stoic rendering of its features. After confirming that the figure was indeed Chief Seattle, the council members unanimously voiced their adoption of the design as the city government's official seal. A formal ordinance of adoption for the seal design would be pending, they said.

Carroll was undeterred by the outcome of the June 24 meeting. He wasted no time afterward in having Mahoney prepare another drawing, this time with a three-quarter profile of Chief Seattle. With the submission of this revised design, he also petitioned the city council to postpone voting on an ordinance adopting Wehn's seal in order to allow time for consideration of this new design. Wehn's personal notes from this time regarding the ongoing seal debate include a handwritten quote attributed to Woodrow Wilson as to the official function of a comptroller: "to regulate the assessments, collection, and disbursement of the public money."

The comptroller succeeded in prolonging the city council debate. As a result, a second meeting took place to bring about a final resolution to the issue. It was held July 13, ostensibly for the purpose of making a formal motion to accept the Wehn design. Richard Fuller himself attended along with Milton Dix and E. L. Gale. Wehn was not present, but both Carroll and Mahoney were there to present a case for their revised seal design.

Once again Dix and Gale spoke of the Wehn design's artistic merits, which had already been approved unanimously in the previous council meeting. They also pointed out that Carroll's proposed design, given its overall composition, would be less practical for engraving on official papers. Fuller addressed the matter of financial backing for the seal project, and reiterated his earlier offer. Mahoney and Carroll were given an opportunity to make a case for their design. Neither of them refuted the earlier claim that Mahoney's first submission was not an original design. The city council adopted Wehn's design on the spot, by a vote of 8 to 1; council member Robert H. Harlin's was the lone dissenting vote.

In the end, press reports paint a picture of Carroll as a good sport following the city council's final decision. He immediately went over to the opposing group, shaking hands with each of them and commending them "on their clean, ethical fight in the interest of their artistic ideas." As Fuller had promised, one seal was cast in bronze, mounted on native wood, and presented to Mayor Dore in a public ceremony commemorating the

Chief Seattle monument at Tillikum Place. The other plaque was cast in aluminum and installed on the Seattle Art Museum's cornerstone on January 14, 1937.

On January 11, 1937, ordinance no. 67033 repealed the old notary-type seal by adopting James Wehn's seal design. Mayor Dore approved the ordinance the following day and sent the sculptor a letter the day after that expressing his thanks for the final design. Wehn, in his turn, sent a letter to his friend E. L. Gale thanking him for his timely intercession and for lending his support to the greater cause:

What I have expressed to you before, I wish to repeat-that regardless of the artistic merits of the Seal, which I designed and modeled, without your wonderful cooperation and loyalty during the struggle with the city council for the adoption of this work of art, it may again have been delayed for a period of years, as has happened in the past. Generally, the business man's soul is so steeped in commercialism that to arouse his interest in art is next to impossible; seldom has it been my lot to associate with one who's [sic] finer nature so generously responded to the struggle of art to hand on to posterity some worthy work.

James Wehn died on October 2, 1973. For 66 years the "first sculptor of Seattle" created monuments, bronze and stone busts, and architectural enhancements; many of these are now scattered throughout the city. Wehn left a legacy in Washington of over 100 public works plus close to 1,000 other studies, sculptures, sketches, and assorted media works now housed in the Washington State Historical Society's permanent collection. The artist's death coincided with a renewed effort by the Seattle Board of Public Works to create a new city symbol and develop a "corporate identity program."

In response to this perceived need for city government to have a cohesive look throughout its various departments, the David Strong Design Group unveiled a trio of new logos in July 1974. One of these, based on Wehn's official seal design, presented a silhouette profile of Chief Seattle, albeit rendered with highly stylized lines and curves. The other two logos, made for Seattle City Light and Seattle Parks, featured simplified designs of a sun and a plant, respectively. The Strong Group intended that the department logos would offer unique identity for the individual city departments and the Chief Seattle logo would find more general use "on such things as standard memo forms."

Today an aluminum plaque of the Strong Group's 1974 Chief Seattle seal design and a wood carving of Wehn's original 1936 design adorn the Seattle City Council chambers and the Office of the Mayor, respectively. That James Wehn created a design of both unique character and controversy is demonstrated through the historical process of its acceptance and its pervasiveness as an enduring symbol for the City of Seattle. The artist's own commentary on this is given voice in this revision of a Gautier quote: "All passes except Deathless art alone-the Bronze survives the ruined throne."

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