

## Mailed Missives: Reflections on Postage Stamps and Life Lived

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### ABSTRACT

In this work, the author reflects on the power of postage stamps through an examination of her personal experience as a stamp collector. This work represents a form of narrative research wherein a story has been constructed to convey what the researcher has learned, placing the researcher at the center.

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Rural northern California had few distractions for a child. I marked the time with going to school, becoming involved with 4-H, or waiting for the mailman to appear. The mail's arrival created excitement, especially on weekends or vacations. Instead of the white United States Postal Service vehicles we see today, our mailman drove a well-worn, maroon, Chevy station wagon down our lonely road with the tires of his car crackling on the gravel to pull up to our mailbox. When he had a package, his loud horn would bellow until someone emerged from the house or yard to take it. I anticipated the mail like I anticipated Christmas, which helped develop my early interest in stamps. Stamps provided an alternate window to view and learn about American reality and beyond. I learned early that stamps are more than small pieces of paper affixed to letters and packages to signify a tax for delivery; they are the way a state visually presents its history, culture, society, people, and its place in the world. The Rural America stamp series is one of my favorites. One of the stamps in the series, a ten cent stamp, Winter Wheat, depicts the wide open fields of Kansas. A train passing through the center of that image evokes feelings of the Wild West. I lived in peach, almond, walnut, and prune orchards far different than those yellow wheat fields of Kansas, and this stamp made me dream about terrain I had never seen, reducing my rural isolation by igniting my imagination.



Stamp collecting was not a family tradition. The finely etched details on stamps intrigued me and helped me find the wonderment of stamp collecting on my own. The first stamp I collected was the blue, five cent George Washington. The stamp, with the engraved image of George Washington, is bordered by a beveled edge panel indented at the sides and ends. Across the bottom are the words U. Postage. In the center of the stamp is the likeness of George Washington taken from a painting by Charles Wilson Pearle made in 1795. Derived from European traditions, the United States uses the head as a principal motif on many postage stamps (Scott, 1995). In the lower corner is the numeral "5" depicting the stamp's value. I learned about Washington telling the truth and I came to know the man merited his legend. In this way, stamps became a vehicle that promoted my citizenship and provided a source for my early reflections on life and country.

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Philately is the proper term for the studying and collecting of stamps. Postage stamps are often taken for granted, with most people not paying much attention to their messages. Stamps have a reputation as a hobby item and are largely ignored as significant socially constructed texts. The messages on stamps are sometimes subconsciously conveyed, and repetition consolidates how the messages are received.

Aesthetic and design features of postage stamps are the creative effort of specialists who participate in a fading art form. Stamps convey a good deal through symbols, colors, words, and drawings. Having two distinct audiences; those within the state and those outside, the stamp designer is first challenged by the physical limitation of size. Within what can be a one inch square or smaller, the stamp designer must comply with all the requirements set forth by a country for its stamps. The minuscule format requires the concentration of component elements. To make a strong statement in such a small area designers use contrast, typography, and creativity.

The study of stamps can reveal a country's history. Chris West (2013), a British crime novelist, uncovers the history of Britain through an examination of thirty-six postage stamps. West inherited a stamp collection from his uncle that included a Penny Black (the first postage stamp issued by Britain in 1840) and became interested in the way stamps reflect history and culture. Although there is little doubt that governments sometimes use postage stamps to further ideological, political and economics ends, stamps carry valuable messages about a nation's self-image. The Apollo space stamps provide an example.



In May 1961, President Kennedy announced to a special joint session of Congress the ambitious goal of sending an American safely to the moon before the end of the decade. This led to enormous human efforts and expenditures resulting in Projects Mercury, Gemini and Apollo which were all focused on executing President Kennedy's goal (Dalleck, 2003). On July 20, 1969, Apollo 11 commander Neil Armstrong stepped off the lunar module's ladder and onto the moon's surface. As a child, I watched this event with my three sisters and the *First Man on the Moon* stamp does more than depict the event, it takes me back in time.

Soon after President Kennedy's assassination, the United States Postal Department decided to issue a postage stamp by the President's next birthday. This was a challenging deadline, requiring in just a few months for

the stamp to be designed, approved by his widow Jacqueline Kennedy, and printed in large quantities (Dalleck, 2003). The overall shape of the stamp is a horizontal rectangle. The design consists of two side-by-side squares, the left one with a depiction of the eternal flame on President Kennedy's grave, and the right is a portrait of Kennedy adapted from a photograph taken by Bill Murphy in 1958. Forming a frame around the central design, textual inscriptions include a quotation from Kennedy's 1961 inauguration address, "... And the glow from that fire can truly light the world." Kennedy's full name and the years of his birth and death are included. The required U.S. Postage inscription is positioned inconspicuously in small letters vertically next to the eternal flame, while the denomination is in the frame text. The stamp is printed in a single blue-gray color. I was six years old when President Kennedy was assassinated and I remember his death and the aftermath of grief. As a result, Kennedy stamps, as well as the Kennedy half dollar, were also a focus of my early collecting.



World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War have all been depicted on stamps recasting the American image in yet another way. Although the 9-11 terrorist attack has been depicted on stamps, the more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not portrayed to date. I believe this to be symbolic of a lack of united nationalism behind those war efforts. The Vietnam Veteran Memorial stamp depicts a veteran at the wall of names in Washington D.C. and evokes the pain and sorrow of the war. The U.S. government viewed American involvement in the Vietnam War as a way to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam. Many died in that bloody war. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was designed by Maya Ling Yin who won the design contest for the memorial (Andersen, 2014). The walls of the memorial have a polished black granite surface reflecting mirror images of the surrounding trees, lawns and visitors. The wall seems to stretch endlessly toward the Washington Monument in one direction and the Lincoln Memorial in the other. The camouflage clad soldier on the stamp creates an emotional image as he leans over names of fallen soldiers. This stamp takes me back to another piece of our country's and my history. I remember the draft lottery for the Vietnam War. Although I was slightly younger than those going to war, this war frightened me deeply, and it impacted my generation in a huge way.



Stamps have been used to document social movements of all types. The Revolution of 1776 ended in the founding of our nation and a series of thirteen cent bicentennial stamps were issued in 1976 to celebrate our

nation's birthday. One of the stamps featured in that series is the well-known painting of George Washington by John Trumbull. The use of art on stamps has been popular, but the challenge in using a painting is to print the image in a way that does not distort the artist's original intent. Like the five cent George Washington stamp, both succeed in conveying a strong message about our nation's leadership and identity.



Stamps can teach about the diversity of people and the challenges they face. Stamps depicting Martin Luther King, Jr. serve as wonderful examples. Best known for advancing civil rights through nonviolent civil disobedience, Dr. King led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, serving as its first president (Carson, 1998). With the SCLC, King led an unsuccessful struggle against segregation in Albany, Georgia in 1962, and organized nonviolent protests in Birmingham, Alabama, that attracted national attention following television news coverage of the brutal police response. King also helped to organize the 1963 March on Washington, where he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. On October 14, 1964, King received the Nobel Peace Prize for combating racial inequality through nonviolence. He was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. His birthday is now recognized as a national holiday just like the birthdays of Presidents Washington and Lincoln. The thirty-three cent stamp honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. places his somber image in the center. The Washington Monument is in the background with the words, *I Have a Dream*, in small letters along the right side.



Cesar Chavez was an American farm worker, labor leader and civil rights activist, who, with Dolores Huerta, co-founded the National Farm Workers Association, which was later called the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) (Levy, 1975). A Mexican American, Chavez became the best known Latino American civil rights activist. His outgoing approach to unionism and aggressive, but nonviolent tactics, made the farm workers' struggle a moral cause with nationwide support. By the late 1970s, his tactics had forced growers to recognize the UFW as the bargaining agent for field workers in California and Florida. After his death he became a major historical icon for the Latino community and organized labor, symbolizing support for workers based on grass roots organizing. His slogan "Sí, se puede" (Yes, one can or, Yes, it can be done) was adopted by President Obama's first presidential campaign. His birthday, March 31, has become Cesar Chavez Day, a state holiday in California, Colorado, and Texas. The thirty-seven cent Cesar Chavez stamp was issued on the tenth

anniversary of his death. The stamp places a smiling Chavez at the center of a vertical rectangle against a backdrop of empty grape fields which is symbolic of the strikes and boycotts he organized to gain better working conditions for farm workers. My brother-in-law, Jack, worked as Cesar Chavez's attorney for a time and that caused me to feel connected to the UFW and the rights of farm laborers. To me, this is a stunningly beautiful stamp.



The United States stamp selection process takes place in the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee, which receives about thirty thousand stamp themes suggestions each year. The committee was established in the 1950s to put some distance between the postmaster general and those requesting themes (Child, 2008). The twelve member committee is appointed by the president and works in secrecy, reviewing the thirty thousand suggestions and selecting about two dozen themes to be presented to the postmaster general. Lobbying for postage stamps occurs and can come in the form of endorsements from the submitter's representatives or administrative officials. The Pulitzer Prize winning author, James Michener (1992) served on the selection committee from 1979 to 1986. Michener described the intense lobbying that went on for an Elvis stamp immediately following Elvis' death. At that time there were appeals to waive the "10 year rule" which requires 10 years to pass after death before the issuance of a stamp. The lobbying was unsuccessful and the Elvis stamp was ultimately issued in 1993. The twenty-nine cent Elvis stamp is electric with color and excitement. A unique feature is the emphasis on Elvis' hair. It is unusual for stamps to have sex appeal, but Elvis' unique manner was captured in this tiny message.

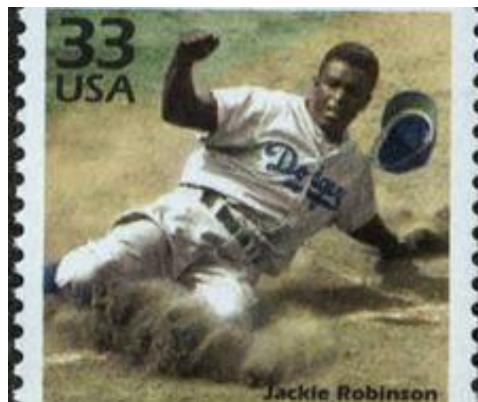


Stamp selections can sometimes be full of controversy. A stamp honoring the Mexican painter Frieda Kahlo was designed to be a joint venture with Mexico, intended as a gesture of United States-Mexico friendship. Kahlo had done some painting in the United States, and the stamp was viewed as important to the Mexican American community. The stamp was the first to honor a Mexican woman, acknowledging Kahlo's work

significantly influenced Chicana artists in the United States. However, it did not take long for Kahlo to be declared an unfit subject for a stamp by those who denounced her as a Communist, drug addict, and bisexual. *The Wall Street Journal* weighed in against the stamp with an essay titled, "The Stalinist and the Stamp: The Wonders of Postal Diversity" (Miller, 2001). The thirty-four cent Frieda Kahlo stamp was ultimately issued on June 21, 2001.

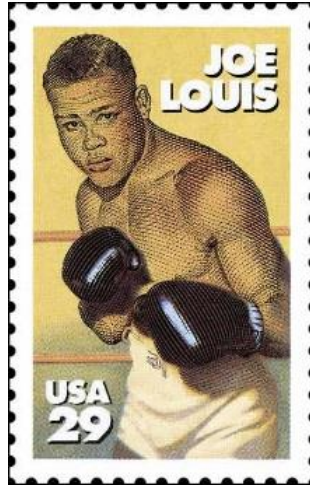


Sports are a popular and familiar focus of stamp material. My favorite baseball stamp is the thirty-three cent stamp of baseball great Jackie Robinson sliding into base. It was issued on February 8, 1999. There have been many stamps issued honoring Jackie Robinson, who is most remembered as the baseball player who broke baseball's color barrier (Rampersad, 1997). Stepping into the white baseball world, the Black Robinson changed the face of the game. Robinson integrated baseball when schools, buses, restaurants, hotels, and drinking fountains remained segregated. His actions helped touch off the Civil Rights movement. After joining the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, he faced death threats, insults, and hate-filled fans. Despite the pressure, Robinson earned a reputation as a solid ballplayer through his fielding and mastery of a tricky steal of home. After baseball, Robinson committed his life to ensuring fairer chances for African-Americans. He marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., raised funds for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and politically supported candidates he thought would help the cause of his people. This stamp, with dirt and cap flying, presents a man who understands how to take risks in the face of danger.



Joe Louis is another sports figure honored on a stamp. Louis was an American boxer and the Heavy Weight Champion of the World from 1937-1949 (Mead, 1985). His nickname was the Brown Bomber and he fought twenty-six championship fights. Louis' cultural impact was felt broadly inside and outside the ring. He is regarded as one of the first African Americans to achieve the status of a nationwide hero. Surprisingly, he was instrumental in integrating the game of golf, breaking that sport's color barrier by appearing under a sponsor's exemption in a Professional Golf Association event in 1952. This twenty-nine cent stamp has Louis staring the viewer down with boxing gloves positioned forward. The first time I saw this stamp I almost felt I should get out of the way or be knocked out. My father was a boxer in the Navy and I used to watch the Friday

Night Fights with him on our black and white Zenith television. I am not old enough to have seen Joe Louis fight, but my father told me all about him.



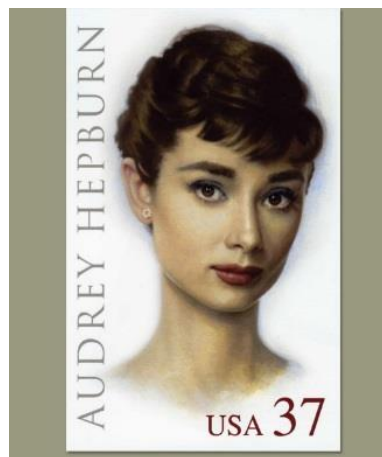
Women have also been featured on stamps. For example, there are many stamps depicting Clarissa Harlow Barton, better known as Clara Barton. Born in 1821, Clara Barton was a pioneering nurse who founded the Red Cross (Pryor, 1987). In the August of 1862, Barton gained permission to work on the front lines during the Civil War. She worked to distribute food, clean field hospitals, apply dressings, and tend to wounded soldiers in close proximity to several battles, including Cedar Mountain, Second Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. In 1864 she was appointed the "Lady in Charge" of the hospitals during the war. Among her more harrowing experiences was an incident in which a bullet tore through the sleeve of her dress without striking her and killed a man she was tending. The vintage three cent Clara Barton stamp features the woman who broke glass ceilings before they were called such. This horizontal stamp places Clara Barton's head in juxtaposition to a red cross. This stamp was issued September 7, 1948, and serves as a reminder of Barton's place in history. My early exposure to Barton planted a seed of how a woman could live her life embracing danger in the face of care.



Poets and writers have been honored on the face of postage stamps. Emily Dickinson, an American poet was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830 (Kirk, 2004). She went into seclusion at age thirty, some think because of an unrequited love. Although a prolific private poet, very few of her poems were published in her life time. When she died at age 54 her poems were made public and greeted with immediate acclaim. The eight cent Emily Dickinson stamp was the second stamp issued in the American Poets series. The stamp portrays Dickinson looking at us directly with her hair neatly tied back. The stamp calls to mind lines from one of her poems: *This is my letter to the world / That never wrote to me* (Dickinson, 1955).



Performers of all types have had stamps issued in their honor. Audrey Hepburn, born Audrey Kathleen Ruston in 1929, was a British actress and humanitarian. Recognized as a film and fashion icon, Hepburn was active during Hollywood's Golden Age (Ferrer, 2003). She was ranked by the American Film Institute as the third greatest female screen legend in the history of American cinema. She is also regarded by many to be the most naturally beautiful woman of all time. Hepburn played the Academy Award-winning lead role in *Roman Holiday* and she went on to star in a number of successful films like *Sabrina*, *The Nun's Story*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *Charade*, and *My Fair Lady*. *Wait until Dark* is my favorite. Hepburn remains one of only a few people who have won Academy, Emmy, Grammy, and Tony Awards. The thirty-seven cent stamp of Hepburn was issued in 1986. Hepburn died in 1993, making her a rare example of an individual who had a stamp issued before death.



As the world changes, postage stamps tell the story. As a child I learned about people and places through stamps and now the magical messages take me into spheres in and outside myself. I find comfort in stamps. When the flurry of change around me makes me want to scream, "Stop! No more!" I turn to stamps. My small collection is a refuge, a place of reflection and contemplation. Stamps reflect all forms of popular (and unpopular) culture and remain a way I learn about people, places, events, monuments, professions, flowers, tress, artifacts, art, associations, automobiles, physical fitness, popular science, the supernatural, death, comics, games, movies, animation, toys, popular music, radio, architecture, industrial design, sports, and science fiction. Stamps can transport me to other times and places in an attempt to affirm or challenge my national and self-identity as well as my place in the broader world.

Some stamp collectors complain about the decline of the postage stamp in the face of email, Twitter, Facebook, digital communications, and social media. I have had no luck interesting my son, who is twenty-eight years old, in stamp collecting. He prefers to learn about the world online. Despite lack of interest and new forms of



communication, I think for many reasons, including nationalism, postage stamps will continue to be produced, purchased, and used. I also predict that these small, lovely messages reflecting memories of all kinds will continue to go mostly unnoticed by some, but will be deeply cherished by others, as evidenced by the 30,000 suggestions for stamps received by the United States Postal Service each year.

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