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America’s National Postal Museum

A Walk-Thru of the New William Gross Gallery.

Notes from one of stamp collecting’s great treasures

William H. Gross’s block of four Jenny inverts will be on permanent display in Gems of American Philately. It will become an iconic, must-see object for tourists on the Smithsonian itinerary—the Wizard of Oz ruby slippers, the Hope Diamond, the Wright Flyer, and the Inverted Jenny.

The Smithsonian’s 1765 Stamp Act red proof on thick laid paper was donated by John A. Brill in 1889.

George and Barbara Kramer pose with their July 4, 1776, cover to John Hancock before presenting it to the National Postal Museum for the Gems of American Philately gallery.

The William Gross Gallery under construction.

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The Gems of American Philately gallery.

Last time, I took you through World of Stamps, one of six permanent exhibit galleries within the new William H. Gross Stamp Gallery. This month we look at Gems of American Philately, where visitors can see thirteen of the most historically significant stamps and covers in the world on permanent display.

Eight of the objects on view—the 1765 Stamp Act tax stamp, three Hawaiian Missionary singles and a cover, and the original models for the stamps of 1847—are jewels from the National Postal Museum’s own collection. The five remaining pieces were provided by generous benefactors who share our vision of making this exhibit truly memorable. William H. Gross loaned an Inverted Jenny block of four; the earliest use of the 1847 issue; and a rare Pony Express “interrupted mail” cover from 1860 (one of only two known). George Kramer donated his July 4, 1776 cover addressed to John Hancock at Philadelphia. The U.S. Postal Service has loaned their cover postmarked on the Moon during the 1971 Apollo 15 mission.

I really want you to see this gallery once it opens. It will be a “close encounter” with two centuries of American history as seen through stamps and mail. In particular, the Inverted Jenny is our most requested stamp, but until now we have not had a gallery with the right environmental conditions to place one on long-term exhibit.

This gallery went through a long design process. An early concept by Gallagher & Associates, shortly after we brought them on as designer in 2010, featured the Inverted Jenny in a central pillar flanked by other rarities and a film projected on the gallery walls. However, we found a structural beam that could not be removed to create the open space, and our conservators and curators expressed concern that long-term light exposure from the film could affect the stamps and covers. Gallagher created a new design that incorporated the structural beam, contained the film (and its ambient light) in a small theater, and softened the lighting considerably to protect the paper objects on display. That second rendering became our final design. A similar story could be told about all of the exhibit spaces in the Gross Gallery and, really, any museum exhibit that you visit anywhere. Years of planning, designing, and then redesigning are what makes it happen.

Before I go, I want to share with you a photo of the Gross Gallery taken during the week of December 5, 2012 (which was my deadline for submitting this column). Work has begun on the shaft for a new elevator linking all three levels of the National Postal Museum: the existing museum on the Atrium level, the William H. Gross Gallery at street level, and the learning lofts and educational spaces in the mezzanine above the new gallery. In addition to opening the shaft through the three floors, a pit is being excavated below the lower level to accommodate the elevator’s machinery.