OUT OF THE VAULT BY CHERYL GANZ AND DANIEL PIAZZA

Sharing the magic of Hawaii with the postal museum visitor

By Cheryl Ganz

What is it about Hawaii philately that gets collectors so excited? I needed to understand the larger picture so I could find a direction for how Hawaii should be represented in the new William H. Gross Stamp Gallery at the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum.

To learn more, I asked members of the Hawaii Stamp Study Circle, leading experts of Hawaii philately, for their ideas.

They find Hawaiian stamps and mail compelling because of the rarity and small quantities of the very early issues, and how collectors sought them from the beginning of collecting; the history of the missionaries and the printing of the stamps; the legends of the stamps that continue to today; the iconic imagery; the fakes; the myths of Hawaiian life, the exotic location; and the primitive charm of the designs of the “fancy numerals” stamps known today as the Missionaries.

What I also learned from them was how complicated the rates could be and how much opportu-

nity remains for research. Many of these ideas can deepen the average museum visitor’s under-

standing of Hawaii, as most of it is limited to the idea of the islands as paradise, surfing and luaus, and memories of the Pearl Harbor attack.

Knowing the visitor’s starting point, the next steps for a curator are accessing the museum collection and finding a framework for the exhibit. To assist with the Hawaii project, I invited David Straight to be a guest curator. David has studied Hawaiian postal stationery, such as the 1883 postal card shown in Figure 1.

We examined the museum’s collection to see what we could find. Fortunately, the museum had earlier acquired one of each of the four Hawaiian Missionaries through a very generous donation. We determined that we had nearly all the postage stamps, so the next steps were to determine that the museum’s Numeral issues were genuine and to acquire the missing stamps.

Stanley Piller, a well known dealer, visited the museum and gave Dan Piazza and me a mentoring lesson on how to plate Hawaiian numerals and, in the process, identify forgeries. After that, we had our “want list” and acquired the missing stamps.

In addition to stamp singles of each issue, the museum collection has wonderful Hawaiian stamp archival artwork, die proofs, stamps, stationery, and correspondence donated by the American Bank Note Co. in the 1980s. These, together with early postal history in the collection,

would form highlights to follow the complete stamp collection.

The postage stamps, organized using Scott catalog numbers, follow the evolution of government from kingdom to provisional government to republic, ending at statehood. The stamp imagery will educate about island royalty, history and culture.

To ensure accuracy in research and script writing, David and I made presentations showing highlights to the Hawaii Stamp Study Circle and to all interested collectors at the 2011 American Philatelic Society Stampshow in Columbus, Ohio. Award-winning Hawaii exhibitor Richard Malmy reviewed the museum and reviewed many rare pieces with us.

Figure 1. The 1865 1c+1c Queen Liliuokalani unissued postal reply card from the Kingdom of Hawaii (Scott UP1).

Figure 2. Hawaii’s 1890-91 2¢ Queen Liliuokalani stamp (Scott 52).

The response from experts has been terrific. We exchanged ideas, sources, and information that will be useful for the exhibit as well as for future online stories.

Along the way, I learned that the 1890-91 Queen Liliuokalani stamp was the first to depict a butterfly (see Figure 2, and look at the jewelry in her hair), that a Hawaiian revenue stamp design came from Brazil and Uruguay designs, that Amelia Earhart piloted the first solo flight from Hawaii to California in 1935, that tin can mail to Hawaii was dropped from passing ships, and that coconuts have gone through the mail.

No doubt, the most important fashion advice came from Richard: “Cheryl, a Washington, D.C., power suit is definitely over the hill for Hawaii.” It’s time to buy a Hawaiian shirt to go with those USPS Hawaiian Aloha Shirt stamps!

Cheryl Ganz is the Smithsonian chief curator of philately. The National Postal Museum is devoted to presenting the colorful and engaging history of the nation’s mail service and showcasing one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of stamps and philatelic material in the world. It is located at 2 Massachusetts Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C., across from Union Station. For more information visit the museum web site at www.postalmuseum.si.edu.