Museum’s first-day cover exhibit will feature Owney cachets

By Cheryl Ganz

When the William H. Gross Stamp Gallery opens at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum in 2013, more than 50 contemporary cachet artists will have their artwork on exhibit in the gallery’s National Stamp Salon.

Their cachets — the artwork illustrating covers — tell the story of Owney, the postal dog adopted by railway mail clerks. Owney traveled the rails throughout North America after he first appeared in 1888 at the Albany, N.Y., post office. Postal workers and well-wishers attached commemorative tokens to his collar, and later to his harness.

Last year on July 27, The United States Postal Service honored this postal mascot with its own stamp and special first-day cancels. As curators, we brainstormed a first-day cover exhibit, knowing we wanted to tell a good story, feature contemporary artists, add covers to the museum’s permanent collection that would enhance its holdings, and inspire new collectors who would view the exhibit panels.

Katie Burke, a member of the museum philately department who recently accepted a position on the Arago web team, organized the covers into three themes: Owney the Postal Dog, Riding the Rails with Owney, and Owney’s Tags.

The variety of cachet art and design is fantastic. The media, images, and stories are thoughtful and creative. Several artists created unique handpainted cachets for the museum.

The New Initiatives committee had the difficult decision of collecting its top 23 favorite cachets to be featured in an online story about Owney first-day covers.

In a close vote, the top choice was the handpainted cachet by Fred Collins illustrated here. Second place was a three-way tie for cachets by Bob Emrick, Doris Gold and Art Kober. Third place was a three-way tie for cachets by Helen Fowler, Denise Lazaroff and May Day Taylor.

This online story will launch closer to the opening of the new gallery in 2013, but you can see other examples of their cachet art at stamp show cachet bourses, on the AFDCS web site at www.afdcs.org, or search online.

The museum staff is excited to add modern cachet art to enhance the collection. The collaboration of organizations and the generous donations by the artists made this project a win-win.

All of the artists should be proud to have their work in the Smithsonian Institution and on display for millions to view in upcoming years. We expect these covers will inspire seasoned collectors and newcomers to collect and even design their own future cachets.

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.