Hermes: Message and Messenger

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Abstract

The figure variously identified as Hermes or Mercury has appeared in the design of many countries’ postage stamps – with one or all of his three winged attributes: sandals, cap and staff. These designs are found to be identified with the dimensioning principles of postal service: celerity, security and certainty. Alternatively, and often in conjunction with a female figure, Hermes is conditioned for a social function in the forum or the market.

Introduction

The Greek God Hermes, whom the Romans called Mercury, was the general messenger of the Gods of Olympus and, specifically, the courier for Zeus.¹ In iconography, he has three attributes: a Petasus, or protective traveler’s hat which sometimes is given wings; a Caduceus, or herald’s staff (with two snakes ² and sometimes surmounted by wings); and Talaria, or winged sandals (sometimes winged feet). The latter come specifically from classical literature: both Homer and Virgil give Hermes golden wings that he straps onto his feet.³

Various myths linked Hermes with safe passage (transportation, translation, transaction), making him a ‘natural’ icon for the postal service.⁴ Moreover, the era of postage stamp design beginning at mid-19th century corresponded with a renewal of interest in classical art and architecture. Although Hermes as icon is often quoted on the early postage stamps of many countries, as a special messenger he was appropriate for special services: Private Posts, newspaper stamps, Special Delivery, Air Mail.

Hermes, like his Olympian complement, Hestia, was described by Homer as a Deus Penetralis – protecting the works of man. Both Gods were deified objects: the Herm was a road signpost, and Hestia was a hearth. Hermes embodied safe travel; Hestia a warm home. The two were rarely depicted together, but the complementarity of the roles was expressed by a variety of female companionship in postal images that paired Hermes with Fortune, Liberty and Peace.

The three attributes of Hermes, besides accommodating the postal service, also invested the imaginary community with its progressive hopes for a more global understanding (see figure 1).
FIGURE 1. Hermes the embodiment of Philately (The Empire State Philatelist was also the official publication of the National Philatetical Society, May 1886), and of the Universal Postal Union (a common design for British colonies 1949).

The First Seals of the United States Post Office

The first seal of the United States Post Office Department predates the Constitution of 1789, appearing upon a postmaster commission given in 1782. The image depicts Hermes holding a classic Caduceus in his left hand, a money pouch in his right, and resting his left foot on a graticulated globe (see figure 2, left). Although this Special Messenger had already thereby been enlisted on behalf of the scheduled transportation services of the postal system, the first laws of 1792 and the Bill of Rights ten years later acknowledged that, whatever the monopoly of the state with respect to the carriage of letters, “it shall be lawful for any person to send letters or packets by a special messenger.”

The post office seal that replaced the first design again depicted Hermes, in a more energetic pose striding across a graticulated globe (labeled “Americus”) with a caduceus in his left hand and a money pouch in his right (see figure 2, right). In adopting Hermes as icon of the fledgling Republican postal system, the designers looked to his association with news. A woodcut of his figure appeared at the head of a 1735 Carriers’ Address broadside for the Philadelphia newspaper, the American Weekly Mercury.

FIGURE 2. The first two seals of the United States Post Office Department, shown on postmaster commissions from 1816 and 1820.
By English custom, the press and the posts had enjoyed a symbiosis, continued in American policy, which sustained the convergence of the daily newspapers with the daily mails. By the early 1830s, 90% of the weight of the mails was the news. Hermes as icon continued to sustain the news for the public sphere, as he also served the private sphere and the governmental postal service in between.

In 1792, Simeon Skillin executed a statue in wood of Hermes, commissioned by Thomas Russell to be placed above the entrance to the Boston post office. In the figure’s left hand was a caduceus, and in his uplifted right hand was a letter addressed to “Thos. Russell, Esq., Merchant, Boston – per post.” The merchant’s generosity reflects commercial reliance on the mails. And the choice of Hermes/Mercury is at once a tribute to his representing both Commerce and Communication.

The money bag that Hermes carries as a symbol of commercial transactions was added to his iconography in the 16th century – to emphasize the newly confident connection between trade and civility. The pose of Hermes that was most copied by stamp designers was a bronze statue by Giambologna, commissioned by the Medici family of Firenze. Usually ascribed to 1576, the Mannerist figure was originally part of a fountain – the water flowing of the Zephyr’s column of air at Hermes’ feet adding to the illusion of weightlessness. The statue, now at the Bargello museum, has a separate caduceus in the left hand but is missing what is assumed was a money pouch in the uplifted right (see figure 3).

Though the United States Post Office Department placed a money pouch rather than a letter in Hermes’ outstretched hand, this was not to be construed as an invitation to send cash through the mail – such practice was, from the beginning, discouraged and both Registry and Money Order services were developed to provide alternatives.

As Hermes had been claimed in public, private and governmental agency at the beginning of the republic of letters in the new world and the old, so, too, he proliferated on behalf of a succession of successive technologies and service options throughout the world.
The First Appearance on a Postage Stamp

Austria was the first country to place Hermes on a postage stamp – a January 1, 1851 issue intended for the carriage of newspapers. As in America, this use was particularly appropriate, as the European periodic press had long used Hermes/Mercury in the title or iconography of the product. In the service of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Hermes stamp broadly delivered the news in terms of distance. But his image also persisted over time – until well after the dissolution of the empire. The 1851 Hermes head was superceded by another Petasus-wearing bust facing left in 1867 (appearing in several denominations and shades), and by yet another in 1900. The fourth Hermes head series was more stylized and faced right in 1908, but the fifth in 1916 reverted to facing left. A series of Military Newspaper Stamps appeared in 1916 with a different Hermes head facing left and showing a muscular shoulder. J.F. Renner designed a large series for 1920-21, with a Hermes head facing front and including his caduceus. And the well-known poster designer, Wilhelm Dachauer, presented a seventh Hermes head, facing left and surmounted by a caduceus. For over seventy years, Hermes was the face of news in Austria.

FIGURE 4. Hermes, the bearer of news, left to right: The Mercury and New-England Palladium published in Boston 1801; Austria 1851 newspaper stamp; Altonaischer Mercurius published in Altona, Holstein, mailed to a Danish subscriber 1836.

The First Appearance on Letter Mail

Just six months after Austria’s first newspaper stamp, on April 1, 1851, Denmark’s first postage stamp featured Hermes – but in a subtle way.

The Danes already were familiar with Hermes/Mercury as an icon. The first Danish newspaper was the Mercurius, from 1666, and the Altonaischer Mercurius circulated in Denmark from 1698 – by the 19th century with a woodcut that portrayed Hermes as a post rider, linking postal service with news delivered with safety and dispatch.

The first post office in Copenhagen, from 1624 was in the stock exchange. When that building was renovated in 1744-45 it acquired a large marble statue of Hermes, caduceus in his left arm and money pouch in his right, executed by Johan Christoph Petzold. So, for the Danes, Hermes a daily icon of both Commerce and the Post.

Moreover, the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen had, in 1838, returned to Copenhagen, bringing with him hundreds of examples of his classical statues which were exhibited in Denmark’s first purpose-built museum. Chief among the works were influential images of Hermes.
In Denmark, the introduction of a postage stamp represented at once a drastic lowering of the costs of sending a letter, an administrative way of making the handling of letters easier, and a symbolic manifestation of a nation-building process – and was a culmination to a plan of postal reform drafted in 1841. One of engraver Martinus William Ferslew’s 1849 essays for the stamp featured the head of King Frederick VII. But the monarch had, in 1848, given in to pressure from Danish national-liberals and introduced a democratic constitution, the duchies of Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenberg having proclaimed an independent government. In November 1850, this rebel government issued their own stamp, with a design of the two German eagles which signaled a pan-German ideology. It became an urgent matter for the Danish government to manifest sovereignty over re-conquered Schleswig territory and demonstrate Danish territorial unity, and a suitable postage stamp design – playing down the monarch but asserting nationalism – was pushed to completion.

During the period of unrest, the Danish monarchy had relied heavily on Russia as an ally against Prussia. As a strongly conservative state, Russia had used its influence to ensure that the Danish state did not go too far in its democratic experiments. So the final stamp design, although it eschewed the visage of the King, included several other icons of imperial rule: the crown, the crossed sword and scepter within a laurel wreath (see figure 5). Over all, it was a conservative design borrowed, according to Anders Monrad Møller from shilling coins in circulation since 1841 and 1842 which in turn were inspired by the obverse of an 1840 coronation medal of King Christain VIII engraved from a plaster relief by Bertel Thorvaldsen.

In the four corners appear posthorns, but flanking the word “post” are two caduceus’ of Hermes – something that Møller sees as a “discrete small message to the businessmen, one of the postal service’s very important customer groups.”15 Perhaps, but it also carried the multiple meanings of news, trade, money and travel evident in an emergent modernizing society.

In 1852, Ferslew essayed a stamp for local mail with a Hermes head as the single major design element, along with a similar design that featured the democratic monarch (no crown) on a stamp that would frank foreign mail. But these designs were discarded in favor of continuing with the emblems of state power.

FIGURE 5. The first stamp of Denmark: on the left, a 1976 souvenir to honor designer, M.W. Ferslew, shows the royal crest and King’s head essays of 1849 as well as the King’s head and Hermes head essays of 1852; on the right, the final product with its subtle reference to Hermes, as shown in a centennial reproduction, and a detail from the actual stamp).
Greece and the Classics Rediscovered

The modern Greek state had an imported constitutional, but authoritarian, monarch in 1861 when its first postage stamp was issued – not with the King’s head but with Hermes. The design was also an obvious import from France (see figure 6), where the stamps were first printed, and the different colors of the regular issues of 5, 20 and 80 lepta stamps in green, blue and red paralleled the French antecedents. Hermes, as a Greek God, was an appropriate choice, and the first design continued until 1886, when a second Hermes head was introduced, also facing right, which lasted until 1892.

FIGURE 6. The first postage stamp of Greece 1861 was designed by French engraver Albert Désiré Barre and printed in Paris by Ernst Meyer, bearing a close resemblance to the 1853 issue of France.

With the birth of the modern Olympics in 1896, Greek postage stamps quoted the Olympian mythos – and the fruits of archeology. The site of the original games at Olympia had been excavated by a team under Ernst Curtius, with backing from Germany, from 1874 to 1881. Among the treasures revealed was a fine marble statue of Hermes in the Temple to Zeus, which was attributed to Praxiteles and immediately became the most popular interpretation of the God. He is modeled without winged attributes, in the role of escorting the infant Dionysus safely to his mother Persephone in the underworld. Although the right arms of both Hermes and Dionysus were not found, artists often filled in the appendages, sometimes even inventing a bunch of grapes dangling from Hermes’ upraised arm to tease the child. When just Dionysius’ disconnected right hand resting on Hermes’ shoulder is included, it adds to the poignancy of the grouping.

In addition to a stamp with the Praxiteles Hermes, a series of 1911 featured images from ancient coins and Hermes with Dionysus makes another appearance, as well as a Cretan Hermes with wingless Petasus and Attic stylized caduceus (see figure 7).

FIGURE 7. Greek stamp design to honor archeological evidence of ancient myths, left to right: Praxiteles statue of Hermes and Dionysus 1896, the same myth with image copied from a coin, a Hermes head from a 4th century BCE coin of Crete.
Modern Greece adopted a stylized Hermes head as its emblem, and continues to feature the Gods of Olympus, and classical myths, on postage stamps, so Hermes is rarely not on view.

**Special Messenger: Security**

In the 1860s, Adams Express Company used a Hermes with a protective Petasus that resembled a Liberty Cap to promote its services in New York City, where Boyd’s City Dispatch had roots back to 1830. Boyd’s issued an adhesive stamp in 1878 with Hermes in a Giambologna pose (see figure 3). The company’s Hermes logo floating over the East River acquired images of the Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty after these two architectural icons were completed. The visual implication was that the special messengers linked Manhattan with the Eastern Boroughs of New York.

The United States Post Office Department adopted Hermes’ Petasus for the Special Delivery stamp of 1908 (nicknamed “The Merry Widow” for the Petasus resemblance to the stage chapeau of an operetta star of the same year).²⁰

Austria, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, used Hermes designs for their Special Handling stamps of 1916 and 1917 that showed him flying flat out, accompanied by Zeus’ lightning bolts. Whereas Italy used just the winged Talaria for Special Delivery in 1945-51.

**New Forms of Transportation: Celerity**

Hermes appears, in winged flight, to celebrate the more rapid transit of mail by steamship and railway. Belgium used the iconography particularly effectively to celebrate parcel post by railway beginning in 1946.

Hermes’ promise of speedy delivery also made his image popular in the advertising of the telegraph (and, in fact, of all things electrical – from light bulbs to television).

But, given his wings, Hermes is most invoked for air mail (see figure 8).

Hermes in Repose: Certainty

In the iconography of business paper (bills of lading, bank drafts, stock certificates) Hermes is often shown in repose– sitting with, or even on, packing crates on a wharf (see figure 9). He became the embodiment of an orderly economy, involved with vessels, cargo, risk, markets, and money altogether. Sometimes just his caduceus is present, leaning on a parcel. In this pose, that also appears on postage stamps, he assures that all has been done than can be done to assure success of the transaction.

FIGURE 9. All’s well with Hermes, left to right: at rest with the still to certify internal revenue, Vignette from a United States Internal Revenue Case Stamp 1933; at rest with the goods, Liberia 1894; reaching for peaceful communication, Esperanto poster stamp ca1900.

The presence of a globe in these images emphasizes the international potential of communication, commerce – and universal understanding (see figure 9). Where an otherwise blank globe is shown with the graticulations of longitude and latitude necessary for navigation, we infer at least the certainty of fixed schedule. A single globe showing land masses signifies unity, two hemispheres are then joined by Hermes, as with an Australian stamp of 1947 (see figure 10).²¹

FIGURE 10: Hermes links the hemispheres, Australia airmail 1937

The classical female social counterpart to Hermes was Hestia, but he rarely appears with her in iconography. Instead, her complementarity is represented by other feminine idealizations (see figure 11). Peace (with a laurel branch) is one – the desire to link with Communication / Commerce is expressed by Hermes holding hands with the feminine deity across a globe. Fortuna (Latinized Tyche) appears with her attribute, the cornucopia or horn of plenty. She was often shown at the helm of a ship in medieval art ²² and, in the company of Hermes adds a grace note to his messenger service.
Summary

Postage stamps incorporate elements from three symbolic registers – glyphs, numbers and words – whose mutual intelligibility is embodied by Hermes. On behalf of the postal service, Hermes will carry any message. With a complementary female – Hestia for the home hearth, for instance – Hermes is identified with the path, and together they exemplify a social framework for the human values of that message.

2 One snake is the attribute of Aesculapius, and has become the icon for all things medical.
3 The Aeneid of Virgil: Translated into English Verse, John Conington 1865, Book 4, when Zeus sent Hermes to Carthage, “And first around his feet he ties / His golden wings, that take the Breeze / And waft him high o’er earth or seas.” The Odyssey of Homer: translation by Alexander Pope 1828, Book V: “The god who mounts the winged winds / Fast to his feet the golden pinions binds, / That high thro’ fields of air his flight sustain / O’er the wide earth, and o’er the boundless main.”
4 In 1984, philatelist Zaven M. Seron published From the Winged Heels of Mercury (Collectors’ Club of San Francisco) as a general history of stamps, but without attention to iconography. He does, however, give Hermes the status of first postman, fantasizing that his winged heels were jet-propelled: “with vapor trails streaming outward into Time, the portent of things-to-be.” Page xiii.
5 The earliest recorded example of the first seal is on the April 30, 1782 partly-printed commission for Albany NY postmaster Abraham G. Lansing signed by Eben. Hazard, “Post-Master-General of the United States of North-America” (collection of the Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany NY); the earliest in the authors’ collection is the 1804 commission for Middletown NY postmaster John Grant signed by Gideon Granger. The earliest example of the second seal design in the authors’ collection is an 1820 postmaster commission.
The size of the pouch indicates it is for coin, but it is interesting to note that the word “mail” derives from a Teutonic word for a travelers bag, and that the English postal use in print dates to 1654 as a “mail of letters” – shortened to mail (Oxford English Dictionary).

With a complete reorganization of the post office in 1836 came a new seal (according to the February 1923 supplement to the Official Postal Guide, under Postmaster General Amos Kendall, though a definite date is not known) – a postrider and his mailbags on a galloping horse. Gone are the classical allusions. Even as the celerity of the mail was actually being shifted from stagecoach to railway train, the image of man and horse emphasized the potency of federal communication.

A Checklist of American Newspaper Carriers’ Addresses 1720-1820, compiled by Gerald D. MacDonald, Stuart C. Sherman and Mary T. Russo, Worcester 2000. The compilation, based on the collection at The American Antiquarian Society, includes evidence of seven newspapers with Mercury in their title to 1820; the on line catalog of the collection adds three more to 1855.

Richard John, Spreading the News, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1995, quoted coverage of the statue’s erection in the Massachusetts Gazette July 28, 1792, originally published in the Columbian Sentinel.

Both Mercury and merchant derive from the Latin “merx” for merchandise. The name of the closest planet to the sun, Mercurius, comes from classical Latin, and its application to quicksilver, or hydrargyrum (Hg, elemental Mercury), was first recorded in the late 14th century.


As a sampling: the first appearance was on a Greek stamp of 1901 Scott 165; Uruguay 1921-28 Scott 238-249, W 31-34; Brasil 1922; Danzig Semi-Postal 1937; South West Africa 1949 Scott 109-111

Registry in 1855; Money Order in 1864.


Otto from Bavaria, who was dethroned in favor of a Danish import.

See complete details of the stamp production in Hermes ’96: Stamps of Greece 1861-1995 and Cyprus 1880-1995 and Postal History, Athens 1995. The introduction to this volume, prepared for the 100th anniversary of the modern Olympic Games, emphasizes the primacy of Hermes as an icon to the modern Greek postal system: part of a panoply of ancient symbols that haven’t been superceded.

This concurrence of colors presages the standardization of stamp denomination colors under the Universal Postal Union.

Crete 1908, Scott 96.

The so-called “Mercury Dimes,” featuring what appears to be an image of Hermes but is actually Liberty wearing a winged cap, were introduced in 1916, and could pay the special delivery rate. See also discussion of the “Merry Widow” stamp, American Philatelist, November 2010, page 1036.