Images of Past Futures: World’s Fairs, Postage Stamps and the Impact of Modernity*

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Before the internet, before television, and before radio, there were expositions and worlds fairs. These events were a venue to showcase new ideas in science, art and invention. Millions of people flocked to see the White City in Chicago, the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, the Tryon in New York City and other grand locations throughout the United States. These events often showcased the changes in what we now call “popular culture” and “products”. Beginning in the late 1920’s, these changes included the phenomenon of Art Deco. People not only saw these changes at the expositions, but also at the local department stores, in fashion and in the postage stamps they used everyday, which commemorated these expositions and world’s fairs. This paper will show how the ideas of Art Deco and modernism moved from the art world of expositions and world’s fairs to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing and the subject matter of postage stamps.

The Bureau of Engraving and Printing printed the first ever set of commemorative postage stamps in 1898 to honor the Trans-Mississippi Exposition held in Omaha, Nebraska. At the suggestion of the Postmaster General, the topics of these stamps were intended to illustrate the history, development and present condition of the country lying to the West of the Mississippi. This is shown through images of farming, hunting buffalo, the hardships of emigration and mining. The Bureau continued to commemorate expositions and world’s fair in this way of “illustrating history” for the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York in 1901, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri in 1904, the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition at Hampton Roads, Virginia in 1907, the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle, Washington in 1909, and the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco in 1915. All of these commemorative stamps show the reason or the history behind the exposition with great detail and ornamentation, in most cases, never even printing on the stamp with a phrase what exactly was being commemorated.

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The movement of Art Deco is often attributed to the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925. Within the art world, especially in Graphic Arts, the theme turned away from ornamentation toward functionalism. Although the United States did not participate at Paris, the ideas of art deco and modernity soon became the fashion in department stores from New York to Chicago and San Francisco. Creating commercial displays with completely decorated rooms, these stores gave the public a look at the new face of art and design. The notion of popular taste could be influenced through film, architecture, magazines and fashion. As stated in the book “Art Deco Style by Bevis Hiller and Stephen Escritt, “More common were the literal representations of images of modernity, such as skyscrapers, aeroplanes and streamlined trains, which were used in American trademarks for products as diverse as coffee, needles and shoes”. 1 Between the First and Second World War, artist began to turn their gaze toward sleek simple lines with brief stories instead of the flowery world of art nouveau. This would also seem to be true for the subject matter of the postage stamps that commemorate the world’s fairs between the world wars.

The first exposition to be held after the First World War was the National Sesquicentennial Exposition at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1926. Since planning for the event began as early as 1916, art deco and modernism did little to effect the way the public looked at the exposition or the design of the postage stamp. The postage stamp shows the liberty bell with ornamental pieces to the left and right and the dates for the sesquicentennial. According to John E. Findling in “Historical Dictionary of World’s Fair and Expositions “…while the exposition did little to influence the nation’s concept of its future …, it did much to shape the nation’s concept of its past.” 2
The Century of Progress Exposition, held in Chicago, Illinois in 1933 to acknowledge the centennial of the founding of the city was the first major world’s fair in the United States that began its planning stages following the Exposition in Paris in 1925. In this time period there are many changes which influence the role expositions played in creating the postage stamps they commemorated, such as a change in the Presidency, a change in designers at the BEP, the role the exposition played in creating the designs of the postage stamps and the overall growing trend of modernity in everyday life.

The change for commemorating an exposition through a postage stamp can most easily be seen in the subject matter and designs. First is the change in subject matter of the stamps. For the exposition held in Chicago in 1933, the 1c stamp is an image of Fort Dearborn. It conveys a sense of historical significance to the “Century of Progress” that the city of Chicago has gone through. However, in the 3c stamp, the concept has changed to the stylized Federal building that looks to the future of the city. Secondly, the design that links both stamps and separates it from earlier commemorative postage stamps of expositions is that it names the location and slogan of the exposition, “1833-1933 Chicago Century of Progress”. This design change is seen in all the following stamps that commemorate expositions.

With these commemorative stamps there is also a change of designers at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. For most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Clair Aubrey Huston was the lead designer. In 1902, Mr. Huston had begun his career at the BEP, after graduating from the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts and working for the jewelry and stationery store Bailey, Banks and Biddle. However, this changed in 1933 when Mr. Huston resigned and various other designers took charge, including Victor S. McCloskey, Jr. Studying art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Mr. McCloskey began his career at the BEP in 1926 as an apprentice engraver and shortly thereafter changed careers towards design. These men must have been influenced by different types and styles of art given the time difference in their schooling.

Mr. McCloskey is credited with designing both postage stamps for the “Century of Progress”; the 1c depicting Fort Dearborn and the 3c showing the Federal Building. For the 1c stamp, he consulted a book entitled “History of Chicago” from which he took at least two images. Also, an image of Fort Dearborn was supplied by Lenox R. Lohr, the general manager of the Chicago Century of Progress International Exposition via the Post Office Department. Three models were made using the image provided by the exposition, but none of these were approved by the Postmaster General (however, written in pencil on one model is “2nd Choice”).
In the case of the 3c postage stamp, the design source photograph was submitted by Lenox R. Lohr. Within a letter he states, he also submitted “a set of photographic prints, which we (the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition) believe are suitable for use in working up designs. These prints illustrate the outstanding buildings of the expo…” Within three days, the BEP was working up models. All models submitted to the Post Office Department use the image of the Federal Building as the subject matter of the stamp. The original artist responsible for the drawing of the building is unknown; however, the simplistic lines and modern look of the building reflect the ideas of art deco.

The 50c air mail postage stamp combines the earlier designs of Graf Zeppelin air mail postage stamps of 1930 with the futuristic view of the Federal Building. Victor S. McCloskey designed several versions of this stamp with suggestions from Alvin R. Meissne, lead designer at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Mr. Meissner even created the most futuristic and modern artwork, which included the Chicago World’s Fair as a planet with rings to the sky and the Zeppelin headed directly toward the “future”. The border text even states that the flight will carry you “to the Century of Progress”. This model was submitted to the Post Office Department but was unaccepted, perhaps it was too modern, too stylized, or too contemporary, we shall never know.
During the time the designs for the “Century of Progress” were being considered by the World’s Fair and the Post Office Department there was a change in administration from the presidency of Herbert Hoover to Franklin D. Roosevelt. The exiting Postmaster General stated that he would not comment or approve any designs that would be printed under the new administration’s term. Although a set of photographs were sent to the Post Office Department from the exposition in February, no work was done until March. With a new Postmaster General in place on March 4th, more photographs were sent and a week later the BEP was creating models. By March 23rd, FDR had seen the models and commented on the designs. He even recommended to keep the background simple, which is a tenet of Art Deco designs.

Only two years later in 1935, the California Pacific International Exposition was held in San Diego, California. The designer for the Bureau, Alvin R. Meissner used designs submitted from the Post Office Department by a Mr. Larrinage, an artist who worked for the exposition. All of his sketches show different views of the exposition grounds. From the Post Office Department were aerial views of San Diego Harbor with the exposition in the background. Other images were used as possible subject material, views of the lighthouse at Point Loma, the San Diego Museum and Palace of Science. Of the seven models created, all the vignettes created were supplied by the Post Office Department and six of them featured the drawings of Mr. Larrinage. Ironically several years later, Mr. Meissner attempts to update the stamps history card by stating that he had to redraw the image, therefore he should be given credit for the stamps design. On the card, he was already given credit for designing four models and the approved model. However, if you look at the original artwork and that created by the BEP designer there are only slight differences in perspective and detailing.
In 1939, both the east coast and west coast of the United States were holding expositions. In San Francisco, the Golden Gate International Exposition displayed western unity and diversity. In New York City, the theme of “Building a World of Tomorrow” promised to build toward the future with the tools of the present and the experience of yesterday.

The image on the 3c postage stamp for the Golden Gate International Exposition held on Treasure Island in the middle of San Francisco Bay is the Tower of the Sun, an architectural feature of the exposition. According to BEP records, a photograph of the Tower taken by Gabriel Moulin was submitted to Third Assistant Postmaster General Ramsey S. Black by the Golden Gate Commission. The Honorable Mr. Black turned over the photograph to the designers of the BEP, who did not even consider any other image for the stamp. The photograph is of a drawing by Chesley Bonestell, a Berkeley artist who later became well known for his conceptual drawings of outer space. What is not in the BEP files, but at the National Postal Museum Library are the three other images from photographer Gabriel Moulin related to the Golden Gate International Exposition to be submitted, which included another drawing by Chesley Bonestell. This stamp is also the first time that primary text of the postage stamp is outside the borders of the vignette. Also, like the previous stamps the name of the exposition is part of the text. As stated in a newspaper article “the design proves to be something quite unlike anything hitherto produced at Washington”. This may be the height of Art Deco design in postage stamps.

The Trylon and Perisphere were symbols of the World’s Fair hosted by New York City in 1939. They are also the subject material of the postage stamp that commemorates the exposition. Once again, drawings by an employee or someone associated with the world’s fair were used. In this case, the entire design, including the borders and text
were given to the Post Office Department and forwarded unto the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The only adjustment was to reverse the colors making the Trylon and Perisphere light and the background dark. According to BEP records, C. Dale Badgeley is credited as the designer of the postage stamp.

![Design Source Artwork for Trylon and Perisphere, New York World's Fair Issue, 1939](image)

When several citizens (possibly even stamp collectors) sent letters to the Postmaster General regarding the poor design and lack of artistic themes in the stamp, the 3rd Assistant Postmaster General gave an uncharacteristic response. He stated in a letter “It is customary in preparing commemorative stamps, ..., to accept suggestions from the organization sponsoring the event being celebrated, and in this case we used the design submitted by the New York World’s Fair Authorities.”

I am not sure what Ramsey S. Black was speaking of, while it was customary to consult, get advice and request images from the organizations, it was usually the responsibility (and often blame) of the designers of the BEP to create the subject matter. It is unclear why the Post Office Department or the Bureau of Engraving and Printing never looked into any other images to create other designs for the World’s Fair. I don’t believe it is due to lack of preparation at either the POD or the BEP since the idea of a commemorative stamp had been mentioned and approved months before the opening day and first day of sale for the stamp. I believe that there was a break down at the exposition company regarding how to best represent the event. By the time they submitted the drawing of the Trylon and Perisphere there was little time for discussion or alternatives for the design of the postage stamp.

Since the Bureau of Engraving and Printing started printing stamps, it was primarily the designer’s responsibility to find images or create artwork to use as the central design for the postage stamp. However, in 1932, the Post Office Department submitted a photograph of the insignia of Air Post Pilots, the Winged Globe. From that point forward the Post Office Department would occasionally and later with more frequency, submit ideas for postage stamps as seen with the exposition commemorative postage stamps.

The art deco ideas of anti-ornamentation, simplicity and modernism seem to carry through to many of the postage stamps after 1933. The presidential series of 1937 lacks any ornamentation with just a portrait, title and denomination; the famous American series has a portrait, title and only one ornament to represent each of the sections of renowned Americans. Is this due to the influence of Art Deco on American art, the change in designers at the BEP in the 1930’s or both?? It is hard to determine
conclusively, but the days of filling every corner with an ornament or text in highly stylized banners is long gone.

1 Hiller, Bevis and Escritt, Stephen; Art Deco Style; Phaidon Press, London, 1997, p. 76-77
3 Manuscript material, National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution, material related to Scott # 728
4 Manuscript material, Bureau of Engraving and Printing, Historical Resource Center, material related to Scott # 852
5 Manuscript material, National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution, material related to Scott # 853