Examining Postage Stamps as Visual Cultural Markers

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Sociologists often make use of so-called “cultural artifacts” to better understand a given culture and its comparative context. Moreover, they often focus on the ordinary objects of everyday life, rather than the exotic or the extreme, so as to gain insight into the experiences of the average person at a given point in time and then to eventually paint a more vivid picture of the larger patterns of “normal” existence within the overall culture. Perhaps ironically, it is the seemingly most ordinary of artifacts that often reveal the most about a culture and a people, and so it is with postage stamps. In one sense, no more than small pieces of ordinary paper that are often cancelled and thrown away without a care (not by philatelists, of course), stamps are in fact extraordinary social objects that reveal much about industrialism, modernism, consumerism, group behavior, Western history (and sometimes hegemony), and the near universal human striving to remain in touch with people physically removed from our immediate presence.

The story of the postage stamp the modern story of humans—a story involving industrialization, mass communication, and globalization. Stamps serve quite readily as revealing Western cultural markers, telling us much about the people we have become and the cultures that we live in. They are arguably much more useful than many other cultural artifacts that might alternatively be examined, in part because they are so ubiquitous and recognized around the world, but also because they are much less presupposing than other universal objects like automobiles or televisions. They hint at Western obsessions with identifying, categorizing, and labeling that define much of our recent history, and the phenomenon of Modernism.1

Amongst collectibles, few items enjoy the history and status of stamp collecting. Although the mass production of postal stamps for daily use dates only to 1840 In Great Britain
with the famous Penny Black, the history of postal service itself goes back to Persian messengers and Egyptian pharaohs. These earlier postal systems dating back to ancient times shared many common similarities: they were limited to the rich, the wealthy, or the enthroned; they were not accessible to the masses; they were dependent on labor intensive and very expensive processes; they did not have access to mechanization or mass transportation; they were primarily aimed at supporting the state, rather than giving individuals access to personal communication across great distances.

So many things have happened in human history since 1840 that it can easily read like a Jules Vernes science fiction story: the advent of telephone, television, automobiles, the Internet, space exploration, railroads, electrical power, refrigeration, wireless communication, etc. Seemingly so harmless and small, the postage stamp none-the-less is a product of the industrial revolution, and modernism. They represent the modernist desire to bring order, progress and convenience to the world; they literally represent the opposite of primitivism.

In more practical terms, stamps are miniature displays of what we prioritize, what we debate over, and what we value, even revealing much about what is arguably human nature. Philatelists are usually aware of this on some level, although personal pleasure and individual interests often obscure the real significance. In point of fact, stamps have become so much a part of our culture (and Western culture in general) that they now hold status similar to other ubiquitous phenomena, like Coca Cola, McDonalds, or the American flag (objects representing American culture that are instantly recognized from villages in Africa to the streets of Tokyo, Japan). Yet few stop to think what they really symbolize.

The situation is easily assessed using visual evidence. A trip to the home improvement store reveals that stamp wallpaper is available. Many stationery items at the office supply store
have stylized or modified artwork representing stamps and stamp cancels, essentially signaling to the user and viewer their purpose for communication and ordinariness. In their 19th century prime, stamps were part of a modern wonder—a hand written letter delivered thousands of miles to another recipient, costing only pennies, and arriving within a matter of days. (It still might be argued that this is a wonder in 2010.)

Today, stamps still represent ordinariness and an absolute acceptance of convenience in our lives. Even Styrofoam cups at convenience stores (Figure 1) can be found with generic stamps and cancellations on them, signaling that getting a cup of coffee as you move about your business is as commonplace as a stamp carrying a message in a letter (or now, one supposes, as sending an email). We are shocked and dismayed on the rare occasion when a letter is actually “lost” in the mail.

![Figure 1 - Convenient, fast, and comforting—the message brought by stamps](image)

Because the industrial age was fostered in part by business tycoons, stamps often portray the tools of the new industrial epoch: trains, automobiles, planes, industrial machines, factories, superhighways, warships, and iconic (often giant) architecture. The famous inverted Jenny
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airmail stamp appears on everything decorative from lamp shades to drink coasters, and even computer wallpaper. They can even be found on men’s silk ties. It is ironic, indeed, that America’s most famous stamp is in fact an error, a plane accidentally printed upside down, perhaps mocking on some level the so-called perfection of mass production and progress, the individual crying out to be recognized as unique in a mass of manufactured sameness.³

Figure 2 - Can you spot the stamp? The message is dependability, uniformity, and delivery

Stamps are also stars in media venues. A recent Indiana Jones video game featured postcards with stamps and cancellations representing every exotic setting Indy traveled to in the
game. In fact, many Lucas films including *Indiana Jones* make blatant use of stamp props (Figure 2). If you account for more subtle uses (which the philatelist in the audience usually catches), hundreds of movies portray the “ordinary” use of stamps as part of daily life. PBS, another American media mainstay, recently aired a documentary on stamps entitled *American Stamps* which explained some of the ubiquity of stamps. In that documentary, it is made clear that stamps are American superstars: “Postage stamps carry the messages most important to us: our declarations of love, our job applications, and congratulations to our friends and family. In depicting and honoring their subjects, stamps play a significant role in memorializing national icons and showcasing important features of our culture and history.”

Stamp collecting has, rightly or wrongly, come to be seen as a “nerdy” pastime or the playground for rich and wealthy, bespectacled millionaires, two stereotypes that stamp collectors occasionally play into inadvertently with their own enthusiasm for the hobby. It probably reinforces the notion to see that doctors, pharmacists, chemists, physicists, writers, artists, historians, and lawyers and other potential “nerds” all have topical collecting groups they endorse or support, and in many cases even have publications about themselves on stamps! The message is clear—if *they* are on stamps, then the overall message must be widely accepted as important. 4

The magnifying glass, a timeless symbol of the hobby, is itself a marker that implies patience, studiousness, and attention to detail. The hallmark tool of fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, a character plucked right out of the positivist revolution, this symbol of the hobby is also a broader symbol of enlightenment. “Under the microscope,” mysteries are revealed and another layer of meaning uncovered. Of course the magnifier is also necessary to see the tiny
errors and imperfections that make some philatelic rarities unique or compelling—those outliers that defy Warhol-like repetition.

The modern era may be broadly defined as occurring from 1750 to 1950, but in terms of speed and impact, the greatest changes to human existence arguably occurred between 1850 and 1950. This so-called modern era, concurrent with the golden age of the postage stamp, brought with it a strong compulsion to organize, to order, and to conquer, in which stamps played a prominent role. The royal visage of King George, to cite an obvious example, has accompanied letters out of the most remote areas of Africa; the Cold War competition has flown on stamps with Soviet rockets and satellites on them; the slogans of revolutionaries have been engraved in marble on stamps quoting everyone from Ben Franklin to Karl Marx. Stamps are openly representative of that order, efficiency, and global economy that we now take almost for granted.

Of course, stamps don’t just remember the revolutionary; they can be revolutionary, too. The newly struggling Soviet authorities attempted to bring order out of the Communist Revolution by using postage stamps and the attendant imagery on them. Stamps of Cuba in the last fifty years portray a stubborn and persistent ideology of revolution. Stamps are, in fact, propaganda items. The Nazis made very deliberate use of stamps and national socialist imagery during the Second World War era.5

Stamps have been world travelers almost from the beginning. Particularly in an era before global satellite television, phones and Internet, they were a primary means of spreading cultural information to new places. According to communications professor Xin-An Lu, “stamps travel and thus may have a dynamic geographic salience.”6 In laymen’s terms, this means that the images and references on stamps change (and educate) the viewer who sees them. Thus, stamps carry their respective cultures literally everywhere around the world. They are like small
advertisements or posters that, instead of being stapled to the telephone pole on the street corner, pass from one region or country to another in waves, disseminating subtle and not so subtle information about the sender and the country of origin.

Stamps are also diplomats. Very often, pen pals begin their correspondence by carefully choosing the stamps they send each other on their letters. Sometimes, pen pals begin stamp collecting as a result of such exchanges. Many countries issue stamps with English and native language phrases side by side, thus spreading greater knowledge of language, as well. Perhaps less so now with the Internet, in previous eras stamps were often a young person’s first initiation to another culture (before they even opened the letter).

Stamps and stamp collecting are used in literature and in Hollywood as a mechanism to portray a character as fastidious, cerebral, or organized and methodical. Laurence Block, a popular author and stamp collector who now appears in Linn’s Stamp News regularly, has used this technique to develop some of his characters. In the music world, John Lennon made reference to stamp collecting while taking a break from recording a version of “A Hard Day’s Night” (and no one called him nerdy). According to National Postal Museum assistant curator Daniel Piazza, President Franklin D. Roosevelt intentionally used postal designs and stamps as a means of subtly addressing Americans and his political opponents about his agenda (and this would be perfectly in keeping with other efforts Roosevelt made to steer public opinion in certain directions).7

Taken as a whole, stamps must be seen as unique artifacts of our modern era (though they have predecessors such as tax stamps, postal markings, etc.), and “Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” Herodotus originally said. When computerized postage, or email, or other changes
threaten to change the way mail is delivered, collectors should not be too nervous about the fate of philately. Stamps are literally stamped into our popular culture, and will not be going away any time soon. In fact, many email software programs show an animated icon when you send an email of . . . an envelope with a stamp on it.

Postage stamps are subtle reminders that we are all (in the West at least) products of a modernist paradigm which takes for granted convenience, speed of communication, and an egalitarian right to freedom of speech and communicative connection. These assumed rights are relatively new concepts in the grand scheme of history, unique to the modern era, and like postage stamps, subject to the possibilities of an uncertain future. As such, postage stamps are not only collectible, but memorable and significant cultural artifacts that provide a constant reminder of the privileges we enjoy.

Notes

Selected Bibliography


