



Affiliate 133

PHILATELI-GRAPHICS

QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE
GRAPHICS PHILATELY ASSOCIATION ISSN 9739-6198
Volume 29, Number 3 • Whole Number 116 • July 2007



Study Unit

With Pen in Hand—Calligraphy on Postage Stamps

by Margaret Challenger

We know not where or when, dawned upon some mind, the fact that all words which people uttered are expressed by a few sounds. From the confused mass of idiograms and their kin, were selected signs to denote these sounds. That was the birth of the alphabet.

—Edward Clodel

Writing systems, which are used universally on postage stamps, come in many different forms, such as Cyrillic, Persian, Arabic, Asian, as well as the Roman alphabet. Ancient systems, such as cuneiform and hieroglyphics, are also used. Within the Roman alphabet there are different styles and forms of letters in the languages of origin that appear on stamps, often commemorating a country's history.

The term calligraphy means “beautiful lettering,” from the Greek, *kallos* (beauty) and *graphos* (writing). Today's letter forms stem from the great Roman capitals of two thousand years ago. With the perfecting of humanistic script for manuscript books in the 15th century, classic forms were firmly established as ideal archetypes for type design, and the various expressions of the alphabet were divided into three classes—formal, semi-formal, and epistolary, which, when subsequently rendered into type faces, became capitals, lower case letters, and italics.

My collection of calligraphic postage stamps is based on this comprehensive theme, including the expressive handwriting called for by the subject matter, as well as the depiction of tools used by the calligraphic designer. From the reproduction of historic manuscripts to fast-written modern pen lettering, calligraphic

postage stamps have much to tell us.

Consider, for example, national constitu-



Figure 1: Canada Sc916

tions as depicted on postage stamps. Different countries have shown their constitutions in a variety of ways, from historic and formal, to modern and loose. Canada's 1982 stamp (Sc916), designed by calligrapher and type designer Friedrich Peter of Vancouver, is a good example of the latter (Fig. 1). The 1987 issue by the United States (Sc2360), featuring a hand and quill with a reproduction of the handwritten 1786 Constitution as background, shows the historic approach (Fig. 2). Italy (Sc741) commemorated the 10th anniversary of its consti-



Figure 2: United States Sc2360



Figure 3: Italy Sc741

tution by depicting it as a codex, with symbols of Labour, Industry and Agriculture



Figure 4: United States (Sc1312)



Figure 5: United States (Sc2421)

nearby (Fig. 3).

The U.S. Bill of Rights has also been honored in two contrasting styles. The 1966 stamp (Sc1312,) which commemorates its 175th anniversary, shows the hand of “Freedom” warding off the fist of “Tyranny,” and features bold, everyday lettering (Fig. 4). For the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution in 1989, calligrapher Julian Waters designed a much calmer picture (Sc2421), an eagle wrapped in Old Glory and holding a quill in its beak; the text is written in a beautiful, flourished italic calligraphy (Fig. 5).

Then there are writing tools such as the ubiquitous quill, often shown as a feather. The only quill I’ve seen on a stamp capable of actually writing, is held in a strong capable hand (Germany Sc2112), and commemorates

Johann Heinrich Voss (1751-1826), translator of Greek classics. The illustration is a drawing by Jan Van den Velde, published in his book of 1605, *Spiegel der Schrijfkonste*, which includes a chapter on pen-holds (Fig. 6). A recent set of stamps issued by the People’s Republic of China (Sc3526-3529) to honour Four Treasures of the Study shows a wonderful variety of



Figure 6: Germany Sc2112

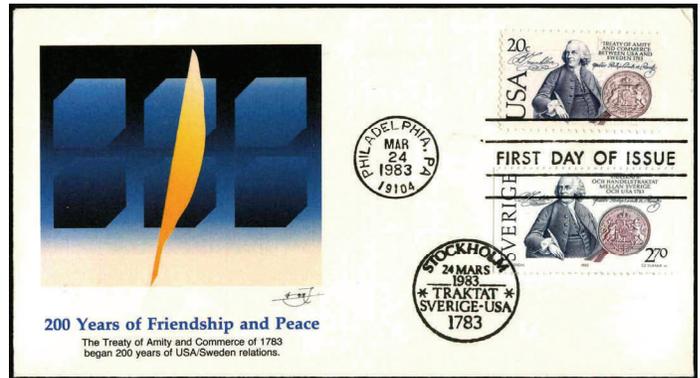


Figure 8: United States Sc2036 and Sweden Sc1453 on a FDC with cache

historic lettering implements (Fig. 7).

Joint issues occasionally include a calligraphic component in their design. The 1983 U.S. (Sc2036) and Sweden (Sc1453) joint issue, which commemorates the bicentennial of



Figure 7: People’s Republic of China Sc3526-3529

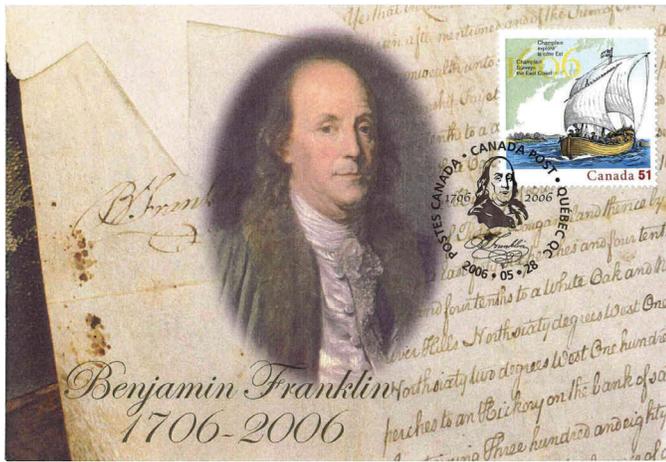


Figure 9: Canada Sc2155 on a FDC with cache

the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the two countries, shows a smartly dressed Benjamin Franklin holding a feather as if preparing to sign it (Fig. 8). Franklin's penmanship is actually featured on the FDC cachet of a 2006 joint issue by Canada (Sc2155) and the United States (Sc4073, not shown) that recalls the 400th anniversary of the exploration of the eastern coast of North



Figure 10: Hungary Sc3864 & Sc3863 (top), and People's Republic of China Sc3309 & Sc3310 (bottom)

America by Samuel de Champlain (Fig. 9). The People's Republic of China and Hungary produced a joint issue of two stamps in 2003 that featured both the Ritual of Zhou (Hungary, Sc3864; PRC, Sc3309), and the Hungarian Illuminated Chronicle of 1358 (Hungary, Sc3863; PRC Sc3310). The set from the PRC naturally has Chinese script, the complementary set from Hungary, an uncial-type script. (Fig. 10).

The subjects illustrated on stamps that feature lettering are numerous, and include

literacy and writers, stories and celebrations, wars, religion and festivals, even love. Various children's stories provide comic relief, such as



Figure 11: Great Britain Sc1530

the 1993 issue from Great Britain that features *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (Sc1528-1532). A skinny, mean-looking Scrooge, and footprints in the snow that traverse across all five stamps, lead ultimately to the happy butcher, fat turkey, and Scrooge's nephew. No ghosts in this set! I think the wobbly writing is meant to be that of Scrooge, but, remember, he was a clerk in the office of Fezziwig and must have had perfect penmanship in those days before clerks used typewriters (Fig 11).

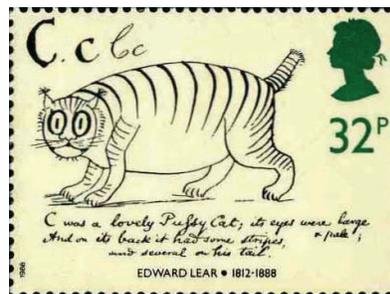


Figure 12: Great Britain Sc1228

Edward Lear's crazy poetry and nonsensical drawings appear on a 1988 issue from Great Britain (Sc1226-1229a). All stamps in the set feature Lear's own drawings and handwriting, including "C" is for cat (Fig. 12), which reads:

*C was a lovely pussy cat,
his eyes were large and pale;
And on his back he had some stripes
and several on his tail.*

The bicentennial of the birth of Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1895) prompted many countries to issue commemorative stamps. Those issued by his native country, Denmark, may be among the best (Sc1323-1326). The 6.50 krone value shows a very realistic depiction of Andersen's pen and inkwell, along with a handwritten text by the au-



Figure 13: Denmark Sc1325



Figure 14: Canada Sc1994-1997

thor (Fig. 13). Canada's 2003 issues (Sc1994-1997) to commemorate the National Library's 50th anniversary feature portraits of four authors and use a holographic manuscript as background (Fig. 14).



Figure 15: Germany Sc1395



Figure 16: Germany Sc1434

Germany seems to do the best job recognising in picture and script its many authors, from the dramatic signature of Franz Kafka (Sc1395, Fig. 15) in 1983, to the 1985 issue showing a photograph of Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm with roughs of a story outline in the background (Sc1434, Fig. 16). Earlier this year, Finland marked the 450th death anniversary of Mikael Agricola, the reformer of the Finnish Lutheran

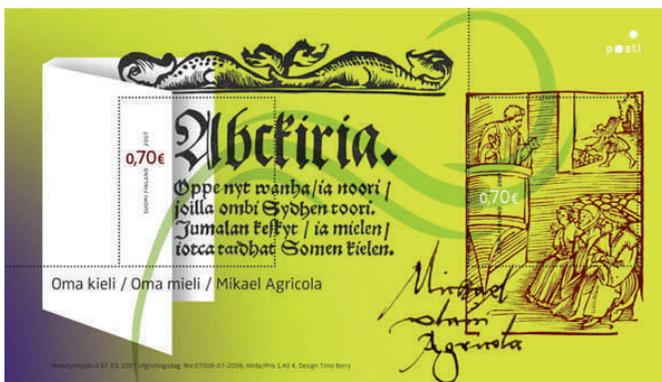


Figure 17: Finland Sc1286

Church and the father of written Finnish. The sheet depicts Agricola's Primer (1542), an ABC book printed in Stockholm in Fraktur script by A. Laurentsson, the first book printed in Finnish, plus the title-page from Agricola's Fin-



Figures 18 & 19: Great Britain Sc1879 & 1880

nish translation of the New Testament (Fig. 17).

The Millennium brought a plethora of commemoratives, many with calligraphic aspects. Royal Post of Great Britain, for example, must have kept designers very busy! Calligrapher and artist Brody Neuenschwander created a joyful "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing" (Sc1879) in memory of John and Charles Wesley, founding Methodists and hymn writers (Fig. 18). To accompany this stamp, C. Melincky drew a depiction of King James I with his 1611 Bible translated into English "out of the original tongues with the former translations diligently compared and revised by His Majesty's special command" (Sc1880, Fig. 19).

In 1988, a beautiful British set (Sc1205-

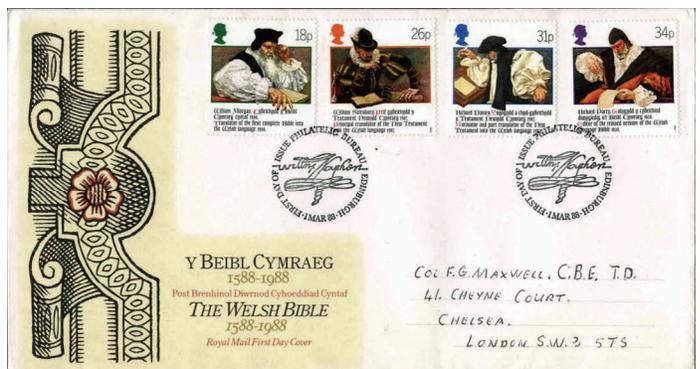


Figure 20: Great Britain Sc1205-1208 FDC

1208) commemorated the 400th anniversary of the translation of the Bible into Welsh, with illustrations of those responsible, all rendered in a neat gothic calligraphy in both English



Figures 21, 22, & 23: Switzerland Sc281, Sc282, and Sc283

and Welsh (Fig. 20).

Wartime frugality is suggested in a 21 March 1942 Swiss set, which is especially interesting because it was issued in the three languages spoken in Switzerland. The French version (Sc281), in Roman capital letters, is translated as “in order to endure, reclaim used materials.” The German version (Sc282), written in Fraktur script, translates as “To survive, collect second-hand goods.” This sentiment was also issued in an Italian version (Sc283), and is maybe a useful thought today in our concern for the envi-

ronment (Figs. 21, 22, & 23). of a letter by John Adams to Abigail Smith, who became his wife, and another shows the same treatment of a rose over her love letter in reply (Fig. 25, Sc3499) .

This article is a brief glance at selected



**Figure 24:
United States Sc3497**



**Figure 25:
United States
Sc3499**

ronment (Figs. 21, 22, & 23).

Other stamps may simply say “Love,” a popular theme of many countries in recent years, and designed in many inventive fashions. A U.S. 2001 issue (Fig. 24, Sc3497) shows a rose over the text



**Figure 26:
Denmark Sc1196**



**Figure 27:
Bulgaria Sc7255**

stamps in my calligraphic collection, but you may now further appreciate not only the printing and mechanical points of interest on stamps in your own collection, but the hands that did the lettering over the years. From “a” (Fig. 26, Denmark, Sc1196), where we are told to “use the language” while showing a poem about an anemone, to “Z” (Fig. 27, Bulgaria, Sc7255), which shows a 12th-century illuminated manuscript begun with the Versal letter Z, calligraphic communication on postage stamps is as varied as it is interesting.

About the Author of “With Pen in Hand: Calligraphy on Postage Stamps”

In the late 1980s and early '90s, Margaret Challenger, a GPA member who lives in Canada, decided that knowing calligraphy might be useful; she took night classes and got hooked. The hook sunk deeper when Donald Jackson, one of the world’s foremost Western calligraphers, visited Toronto and presented a program to the “Handwriters Guild,” which later became the Calligraphic Arts Guild of Toronto. Using the name “Design Calligraphy,” Margaret did commercial and private jobs, taught locally, and, until computers took over, ran a correspondence course. Later, inspired in part by her brother, who had a stamp business in Covent Garden, she combined her interest in calligraphy with philately, a life-long interest, to focus on lettering on stamps. More recently, her stamp collecting efforts have become more serious as she learns more about the history, geography, and art that are all “rolled into one wonderful hobby!” We thank Margaret for her contribution to this issue of *Philateli-Graphics!*