

Children's Books and Stamps: Studies in Design

Wendell Minor

By Phyllis Van Orden

Wendell Minor (1944-), a native of Aurora, Illinois, is an award-winning illustrator of dozens of picture books for children, including his own *Yankee Doodle America*; Robert Burleigh's *Into the Woods*; and *Reaching for the Moon*, written by astronaut Buzz Aldrin. In addition to picture books, Minor has created cover art and interior illustrations for novels for young people, including Jean Craighead George's *Julie* and *Julie's Wolf Pack*. He also redesigned the cover for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the Newbery award-winning *Julie of the Wolves*. He has written several of his own books.

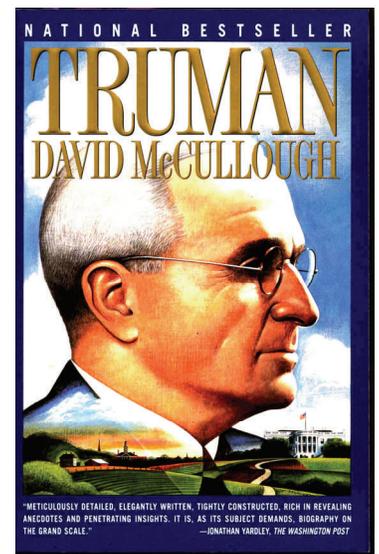
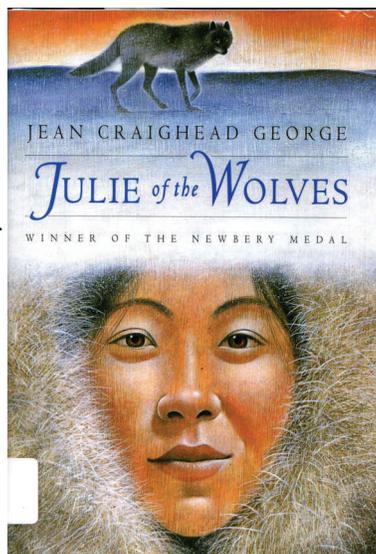
Drawing and painting have always been an integral part of Wendell Minor's life. Raised in the Midwest, both of his parents came from Illinois farm families. His affinity for the environment began when he and his father walked through the woods and corn fields in the country-side near Aurora, where he was raised. Although challenged in school by dyslexia, by the fourth grade, teachers recognized and encouraged Minor's drawing talents. He attended the Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida, for his formal art training, after which he began creating original designs for book publishers in New York City. For twelve years he taught at New York's School of Visual Arts.

Minor is a prolific and versatile artist. He is well known in the publishing industry for the paintings he has done for many best-selling books, including those by James A. Michener, David McCullough, and other highly respected writers. Garrison Keillor writes that "I've been a fan of Wendell Minor's work for years without being aware of it, admiring his book covers and never quite remembering the name. Then he did a cover for

me and suddenly he became unforgettable." Drawing upon his youthful experiences, the art work for his children's books has consistently exhibited Minor's love for the land and environment.

When illustrating books for naturalist authors Jean Craighead George and Diane Siebert, among others, he approaches his art by researching and experiencing each environment he illustrates. He has traveled throughout the United States, including Alaska, where he and Jean Craighead George traveled by dog sled far out on the Arctic Sea ice, picnicked on frozen sandwiches, and climbed blue pressure ridges to look for whales in temperatures well below zero, all to research George's book, *Arctic Son*.

According to his website, Minor enjoys being out in "the field" observing his subjects and gaining the inspiration he needs to create good composition, value, color, and texture. He is a self-claimed romantic about America, observ-



Two of Wendell Minor's better known jacket designs are for the 25th anniversary edition of *Julie of the Wolves* (1995) and David McCullough's *Truman* (1992)

ing as he explores more regions more closely; his love of country grows with a vision that celebrates the beautiful, the lyrical.¹ His research travel has developed a lifelong affinity for environmental issues; he chooses authors who share his sensibilities and interest in a particular subject.²

Minor works primarily with watercolor and gouache. His interest in the values between dark and light is evident in his works. Other characteristics include his care with detail and texture. Minor acknowledges the influence of earlier illustrators and painters, such as Howard Pyle, N. C. Wyeth, Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, as well as several contemporary illustrators of children's books: Chris Van Allsburg, Jerry Pinkney, and David Wiesner.

Knowing this background, it was interesting to learn about the controversy surrounding the design of "Grain Elevator on the Prairie" (United States, Scott 2403), issued on 21 February 1989 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of North Dakota Statehood. Interest and criticism began in the early stages when the United States Postal Service and the North Dakota Centennial Commission had differences over the design of the stamp.

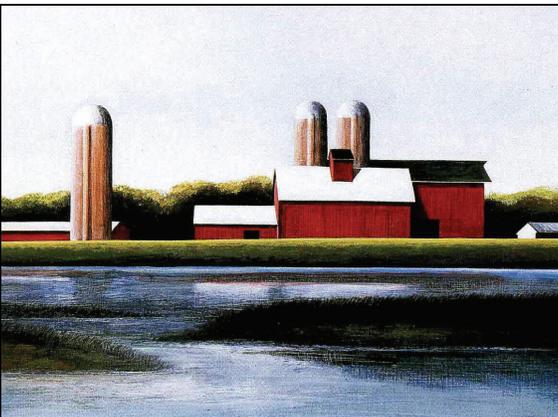
The primary issues involved the different expectations held by the Commission and the U.S.P.S. The Commission wanted a stamp designed by a local artist; it submitted winning entries from its design contest. The U.S.P.S. rejected these; it saw promise in a drawing by a Minnesota artist. That artist had submitted a design to the U.S.P.S.,

which gave him a "concept contract." The design featured the bronze statue of a pioneer family located in front of the North Dakota State Capitol, a prominent element in the state's official centennial logo.

Following its practice of commissioning designs from at least two artists, the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee assigned a North Dakota artist to prepare a concept sketch, a vertical design showing a grain elevator. The Committee was dissatisfied, however, so Jack Williams, art director and project manager, called upon Wendell Minor, whose Western landscapes Williams liked. Working from photos provided by the North Dakota Historical Society, Minor prepared a colorful horizontal painting of a red grain elevator standing on a golden prairie under a blue sky with birds and billowing white clouds. *National Geographic Magazine* described such buildings as North Dakota's trademark. CSAC liked the design, which passed production requirements. Minor eliminated the birds, which would not survive the reduction to stamp size.

An earlier publication of the design brought the headline "No Stamp of Approval!" from the *Bismarck Tribune*, which questioned this image of their state. At the first-day ceremony, Governor George Sinner expressed his opinion that "the stamp does not represent the future," the first time a governor had publicly used this forum to criticize a stamp.

An editorial in the *Bismarck Tribune* defended the design: "Frankly, we like the stamp. It emphasizes the pastoral calm of North Dakota, the clear, sunny skies and, of course, our agricultural heritage. The design is bold, the colors rich and vibrant. . . . Stamp designs



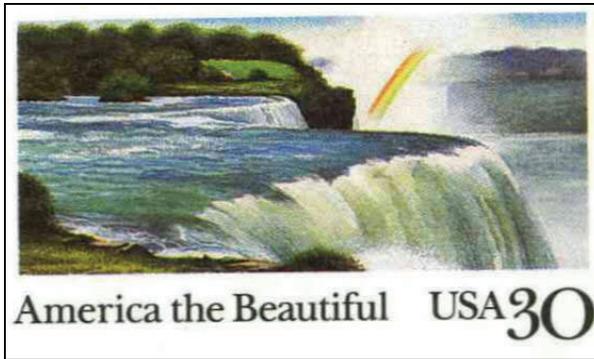
A detail from one of several illustrations by Wendell Minor depicting barns in Diane Siebert's book, *Heartland*



North Dakota Statehood Centennial (Sc2403), designed by Wendell Minor

must be simple to be effective. Our new stamp is both, and attractive to boot."³

This same vibrant color and photorealistic style is found on Minor's postal card "Red Barn" (United States, Scott UX



The two U.S. postal cards designed by Wendell Minor are Scott UX158 (on the left), issued on 21 August 1991, and Scott UX198 (right), issued on 3 January 1995

198), similar to his red barn in Diane Siebert's *Heartland* (HarperCollins, 1989). For the postal card, Minor's based his watercolor paintings on a number of his photographs at the Brandywine State Park at Chadds Ford in Pennsylvania.

For "Niagara Falls" (postal card, Scott UX 158) Minor did a variety of concept sketches in color and from different perspectives—from both the Canadian and United States sides, during the daytime and nighttime. The CSAC preferred another perspective that showed the American Falls as viewed from the New York state shoreline, with Goat Island in the background and Horseshoe Falls in the distance.

Wendell Minor is a Past President of the Society of Illustrators in New York. His works have appeared in many exhibitions and are collected by museums and other public collections throughout the United States, such as the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art and the Library of Congress. He lives with his wife, Florence, in rural Washington, Connecticut, where he continues to contribute to our visual experiences.

U. S. Postage Designed by Wendell Minor

"Grain Elevator on the Prairie," Scott 2403, issued on 21 February 1989.

"Niagara Falls" Postal Card, Scott UX 158, issued on 21 August 1991. Part of the Amer-

ica the Beautiful series. The 30¢ was the air postcard rate to Canada and Mexico.

"Red Barn" Postal Card, Scott UX 198, issued on 3 January 1995.

NOTES

1. "About Wendell," www.minorart.com/about/htm, p. 1.
2. Ibid., p. 2.
3. George Amick, *Linn's U.S. Stamp Yearbook 1989* (Sidney, Ohio: Linn's Stamp News, 1990), p. 26.

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