Stamping American Memory

Brennan, Sheila

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After World War II, postal officials began to rethink the selection process for printing commemoratives. By 1957, the USPOD established the Citizens’ Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC) to assume the task of selecting American commemorative stamps. Citizens had influenced commemorative choices since the 1920s, but the CSAC formalized this relationship. In the process, postal officials created some space between themselves and cultural debates that arose from stamp requests from fellow citizens, collectors, and elected officials. By appointing a body of stamp enthusiasts who weighed proposals and made recommendations to the postmaster general, the Department lifted some pressure from executive-level political appointees, who no longer evaluated every commemorative stamp suggestion.

Giving Americans official procedures for suggesting stamp topics means that identifying commemorative subjects became easier for everyone because the Department articulated clear criteria. For example, CSAC criteria mandate that historic anniversaries may only be considered in multiples of fifty years. By limiting anniversaries, the CSAC reduces the number of eligible requests. The Susan B. Anthony stamp that honored the sixteenth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment’s ratification never would have been approved under these guidelines. Additionally, the committee also only considers subjects with “national significance,” specifically prohibiting local and regional
anniversary commemoratives. Instead, local postmasters may request a special inked stamp to hand-cancel mail dropped at their post office with a seal acknowledging that significant anniversary of a local event.\footnote{Amid the Cold War, local history remained local, and the committee decided what qualified as nationally important and worthy of representing the United States on commemoratives.}

Through the Cold War period, postal services remained central for personal and business-related communications, delivering mail, magazines, and packages, even as the system for moving mail aged and postal workers grew frustrated. As an agency designed to be self-supporting, the postal service always struggled to balance its budget. After years of debate about how to handle postal operations, the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 transformed the USPOD into the USPS, or United States Postal Service, as a semipublic institution. The postmaster general no longer ranked as a member of the presidential cabinet, and the Department’s centrality in government services started to wane. Even with those major institutional changes, Congress still wielded control over postal rates and mandated certain expenditures, making major systemic reform difficult for future postmasters general.\footnote{Despite desires for the postal service to be self-sustaining, postal operations and activities from the earliest days always required some government funding. Lawmakers and federal officials at all ranks believed that facilitating a system of open and inexpensive communications was critical to supporting a sprawling nation. In the United States, operating an accessible, reliable, and affordable postal system was akin to maintaining a public utility. The postal revolution in the 1840s, born out of the needs of empires, gave birth to stamps, some that actually celebrated empire. With prepaid postage based on weight, rather than distance traveled, communicating across miles remained inexpensive, and the post office shaped American life as it facilitated the interconnectness of people across the country and the world. The need for accessible and inexpensive communications remains even in the digital age. As other federal agencies consider regulations that threaten that affordability, we as citizens need to be active defenders of values that the postal service promotes and maintains today. We must not forget that the federal government subsidized the communication and the circulation of ideas from the earliest days of the nation.}

The post office’s influence on our daily lives has diminished, and
stamps do not serve the same functional role they once did, because of the ubiquity of electronic communications. Fewer letters are mailed requiring fewer stamps, and more bills are paid online than through paper remittance. Most mail delivered to our boxes contains indicia, or a stamp that prints the amount paid, and not a colorful stamp. Even with this reduction in mail volume, the USPS prints nearly twenty-five commemorative stamps each year. Other than holiday-themed stamps affixed to seasonal cards, most Americans no longer see stamp imagery of new commemoratives on their mail, and they don’t read about new issues in their daily newspaper. Stamps’ power to naturalize historical narratives is changing in the digital era.

While Americans are not seeing stamps as regularly as they once did, interest in stamps and collecting is not dead. In many ways, the Web reinvigorated stamp collecting for philatelists and enthusiasts. Early stamp collectors joined clubs or purchased philatelic publications to find collectors with similar interests to share, buy, and trade stamps. Since the late 1990s, many collectors have traded and sold stamps on auction sites like eBay, and some create websites to share their personal collections, such as Justine’s Stamps or to create resources for others identifying stamps, such as 1847USA. Collectors can easily communicate with one another in online forums, email groups, and meetups. The Crying of Lot 49 will be livestreamed. Followers of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum (NPM) on social media will see stamps and facts related to the images on each stamp in their stream. Finding, researching, organizing, and discussing stamps has never been easier. Using collected stamps to create art or to decorate furniture, in ways that appeared in the pages of Ladies’ Home Journal in the early 1900s, is also popular. Examples of stamp art can easily be found on Etsy and Pinterest, and the NPM organizes philatelic art programs.

Federal and private institutions of public memory that collect, preserve, and exhibit stamps demonstrate their worth as cultural artifacts. The NPM is a joint venture between the USPS and the Smithsonian Institution, making objects related to postal operations and philately part of our national cultural heritage. University museums are rediscovering their stamp collections and mounting exhibitions to focus on the cultural meanings and designs of stamps. In 2012, the Africana Studies Department at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, developed Blacks on Stamp and in 2016 a museum studies graduate
course at Brown University curated *Thousands of Little Colored Windows* at the Jay Hay Library. Visitors to these exhibits are encouraged to look closely and read stamps like documents containing symbols and meaning within each design. Stamps and the process by which the USPOD selected commemorative subjects remain important and under-examined pieces of evidence that can increase our understanding of the construction of American identities in the early twentieth century. Stamps are coded with racial, gendered, and cultural understandings of the time when they were selected, and have many stories to tell. These messages are legible through imagery and design, and historical research done by historians and philatelists who work to keep these little colored bits of paper accessible to nonspecialist audiences. By collecting something originally designed to be functional, stamp collectors in the nineteenth century influenced postal authorities, who printed commemorative stamps and promoted the philatelic hobby that continues today.

In studying and writing about popular collecting practices, I encourage others to look more seriously at collectors and collecting processes to gain a greater appreciation of the history work performed. Objects collected and saved by individuals often land in museum collections to be incorporated into exhibitions and interpreted as primary sources by researchers. Yet collectors of those objects often are viewed as quirky people obsessed with the minutiae of the things they collect. They have not always been invited to share their expertise with museum staff, but this trend is changing. Some museums embrace collectors and other subject enthusiasts as valuable experts with specialized knowledge who can help interpret the material culture found in artifact rooms. Web platforms that facilitate sharing and co-creation of knowledge encourage historians and curators to invite others to share in the processes of saving and interpreting their own history, or to crowdsource descriptions of digitized objects and records posted online. If historians and museum professionals can see collectors as valued and respected members of the historical enterprise, then this type of collaboration ushered in by the Web may seem less radical.