

Christmas in Philately

Today I'd like to share with you a little of how Christmas stamps evolved, and then show you the Christmas story as displayed on postage stamps from around the world.

The first Christmas Stamp came about almost by accident. According to the GUINNESS BOOK OF CHRISTMAS, a stamp inaugurating the "Imperial Penny Postage" in Canada was scheduled for distribution on November 9, 1898. That date happened to be the birthday of the Prince of Wales.

A postal official, describing the new stamp to Queen Victoria, mentioned that it could also serve as a tribute to the prince. "Which prince?" the queen demanded jealously. Sensing her royal displeasure, the official replied "Why, madam, the Prince of Peace."

By changing the distribution date to December 7 and inscribing "XMAS 1898" on the stamp, the official created the first Christmas Stamp. The new postage rate became effective on Christmas Day.

Since then Christmas Stamps have portrayed classical religious themes, Christmas trees and candles, Santa Claus, gifts, winter scenes, songs and even Disney characters. The artists have ranged from old masters to young children, from serious painters to cartoonists.

Several countries issued stamps with various Christmas images starting with Austria in 1937, but these were all one-time issues, more like commemorative stamps than regular issues.

* Closer to home, Cuba issued Christmas postage stamps in the 1950s

* Postally, there was Christmas on mail even before the U.S had Christmas stamps. Very early there were the Seals on Christmas cards and US seal envelopes. Christmas Florida is a real place, an unincorporated area in Orange County. The original community was called Fort Christmas, named for the time of year the fort was built in 1837. The "fort" was dropped when the first post office opened in 1892, and as they say... the rest is history.

Post office cancellations, across the country and across the years, promoted "Mail Early for Christmas."

* A toy company in NYC had its own cancel, suggesting buying "a Gold Medal toy early."

* More Christmas postage stamps began appearing around the world -

* -- and finally in 1962, the United States issued our first Christmas stamp with a wreath and two lighted candles, all done up in red and green. The envelopes (covers) shown here were decorated for the first day of issue of the stamp - a special feature for collectors. The stamps - and the covers - quietly reflect both the sacred and secular observations of Christmas.

- When a Christmas stamp showed up in 1963, the tradition was set that has continued to this day.
- As time went on, the Postal Service looked for unique places to have the first issue day, and that produced some interesting cancels. Note the 1964 issue took place in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and in 1965 it was at Silver Bell, Arizona. Notice that in 1964, there were four different stamps issued in the same sheet. It was 1970 before there were multiple stamps again (four Christmas toys).

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- Now, let's have a look at some Christmas postage stamps as they tell the biblical Christmas story. Australia opens the book for us with its 1960 five-cent stamp.
- The story begins with the angel Gabriel as he appears to Mary and tells her she will bear a son who will be called Jesus. Stamps here include two famous paintings, a stained glass window and a native depiction of the Annunciation from Africa on a Vatican stamp.

* Mary and Joseph were compelled to make the long journey to Bethlehem after a census was proclaimed by Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor. Joseph hailed from Bethlehem in Judea, and the decree required citizens to register at their birthplaces. The direct distance, as the crow flies, from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 70 miles. Mary and Joseph probably walked more than 90 miles before they reached their resting place at the stable, due to unfriendly terrain or unfriendly people along the way. Here we see stamps showing their interpretation of the journey from Cocos Islands (in the Pacific near Australia), Great Britain, and from a G.B. set of Christmas events. Notice another Annunciation stamp at far right.

- Jesus was born in a stable and his mother laid him in a manger as "there was no place for them in the inn." Several countries designed stamps to picture that unusual location, in unusual ways, including: Belize (formerly British Honduras) Christmas Island, Samoa, and Ireland.
- There must be hundreds of stamps picturing the new-born Jesus, but I chose these as they reflect scenes native to the country of origin. Germany 1969, used a tin figure from 1850 in the shape of Jesus in the Manger as a design for a nativity stamp. Malawi, an African nation, with the babe on a bed of straw, and Gilbert and Ellice Islands found it natural to use a clam shell as a "manger" bed, and shells to create living figures.

- There are also a myriad number of stamps showing the "mother and child." Here are a few.

A Ghana mother in Western Africa would wrap her baby in a bright shawl of Kente cloth; Botswana stamp shows a native mother and child; Malawi mother carries her baby on her back, as does the Canadian Eskimo mother.

(more) A Peruvian Mary and one from Ras Al Khaima worship the baby by kneeling, while the Madonnas from Rwanda and Lichtenstein cuddle the baby close. Painting from L. also has angels hovering around.

- The Holy Family is also shown on a number of postage stamps. Again these reflect the local art or customs. Dominica in the Caribbean, with warm weather clothing, the shell figures of G&E Islands, a wood carving from Katanga in central Africa, the modern art of Malta.

Also in native dress are the Holy Family in Kenya, Peru (on a Vatican stamp) and the Philippines.

Two classic paintings of the Nativity are on Bulgaria stamp showing the Sistine Madonna by Raphael and a US Christmas stamp of 1967 with Memling's "Virgin with Child."

- An angel appeared to local shepherds to announce Jesus birth. Commemorating this event, Christmas Island issued a set of stamps in 1985 featuring favorite Christmas hymns, one for "While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night - -." Others picture the event in national settings, while Malta has its modern art and G.B. uses a medieval scene. NOTE: there is no reference to a star in the shepherds' Biblical story, yet four of these stamps show a star with the shepherds.

The Nicaragua air-mail stamp is from a set telling a story about a shepherd girl, who gets lost, but later is rescued by an angel.

- " - and suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host - -" (Luke 2:13)

Hungary has a "multitude" of two! While the Bahamas and Malta have full choirs.

The shepherds hurried to find "Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger." (Luke 2:16)

Australia's shepherds are from an old wood carving, the Vatican stamp give us an Ethiopian nativity scene, and the Cayman Islands used a classic painting.

- Wise men from the east are significant players on the Christmas story. But no-where is it said that there were three! That number doubtless came about due to the gifts given by these gentlemen -gold, frankincense and myrrh.

- And no-where is it said they rode in on camels, either!
So some stamps picture them on horses - Cocos Is. and on a British tapestry. Zambia, however, has a camel in the foreground of its stamp.

More interpretations of the three kings: Manama stamp - looks like they are dancing! The Bahamas has them dressed in woven straw; striking figures from Malta; the "Approach of the Magi" - Australia; on a mosaic in a Greek monastery; and traditional figures on Anguilla's stamp (in the Caribbean).

- Figures from a crèche take up this strip from the Bahamas.
- A sheet of stamps from St. Vincent gives us the whole story, at least the Nativity, the shepherds and the wise men, and the star. All 3-cent triangular stamps
- The final scene of our Christmas story is that of the family fleeing to Egypt, to escape the murderous intentions of King Herod.
- I'm sure many of you have sat through (suffered through!) the very traditional church or school pageant, where the youngsters are dressed up in costumes to represent the Bible characters in this story. In 1994, Great Britain issued a set of stamp with actual photos of children in the Christmas Nativity pageant. Let's take a look -
 - Mary and baby Jesus
 - The shepherds
 - The angels
 - The wise men
 - Mary, Joseph and Jesus
- I was surprised to see words of a song on this stamp of St. Vincent Grenadines. It is modified from a Creole ballad, once sung by Harry Belafonte. And the words are:
- And that is what Christmas is all about {Peace} isn't it?
