



## Eying the Artistic Elements on Modern U.S. Postage Stamps

by Dr. Phyllis Van Orden

If you ask another philatelist to identify the best designed U.S. postage stamp, the answer might well be the \$1 black "Western Cattle in Storm," designed in 1898 by Raymond Ostrander Smith of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, one of nine stamps in the Trans-Mississippi Exposition Issue (Figure 1). To understand the reasoning behind this response, one can examine how this stamp and others, through their format and design, visually communicate their function, often in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Some definitions may help our examination of philately's artistic elements.

**Format** includes the size and shape of stamps (their external structure); the frames, borders, type fonts, and styles of lettering used (their internal structure); and the vignettes that create centers of interest and help define the use of the space.

**Design** refers to the pictorial elements and how they are organized into a composition. The artist organizes shapes, lines, spaces, edges, colors, proportion, and detail within vignettes to create compositions with unity, balance, rhythm, perspective, and proximity.



(1) \$1 "Western Cattle in Storm" from Trans-Mississippi Expo issue, 17 June 1898 [Sc 292]. Shown @ 150%.

**Function** refers to how well a stamp communicates its official nature, its value, and the year it was issued.

### Format

Designers first consider the size and shapes of the stamps they are creating. The creators of the tiny classic stamps used careful detail that was

achieved through the use of microscopically fine engraving machines. For today's U.S. stamps, however, the use of engraving is rare; more often designers use photographs that have been electronically reduced.

Stamps vary in size from the tiny "Indian Head Penny" stamp (Figure 2) and "Dolley Madison" stamp (Figure 3), designed by Esther Porter, to the "Eagle and Moon" stamp (Figure 4), which is nearly 2 inches square.

The shape most commonly used for U.S. postage stamps is a rectangle with the design either horizontally or vertically positioned. The "Western Cattle in Storm" stamp (Figure 1) is a good example of a horizontally posi-

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(2) top left, Indian Head Penny, 11 Jan 1978 [Sc1734]. (3) top right, Dolley Madison (1768-1849), First Lady, 1809-1817, 11 Jan 1978 [Sc1822]. (4) left, Eagle and Moon, Express Mail stamp, 12 Aug 1983 [Sc1909].

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(5) Desert Plants, 11 Dec 1981 [Sc1942-1945].



(6) Pacific 97, 13 Mar 1997 [Sc3130-3131].



(7) Space Achievement and Exploration souvenir sheet, 7 Jul 2000. [Sc3412].

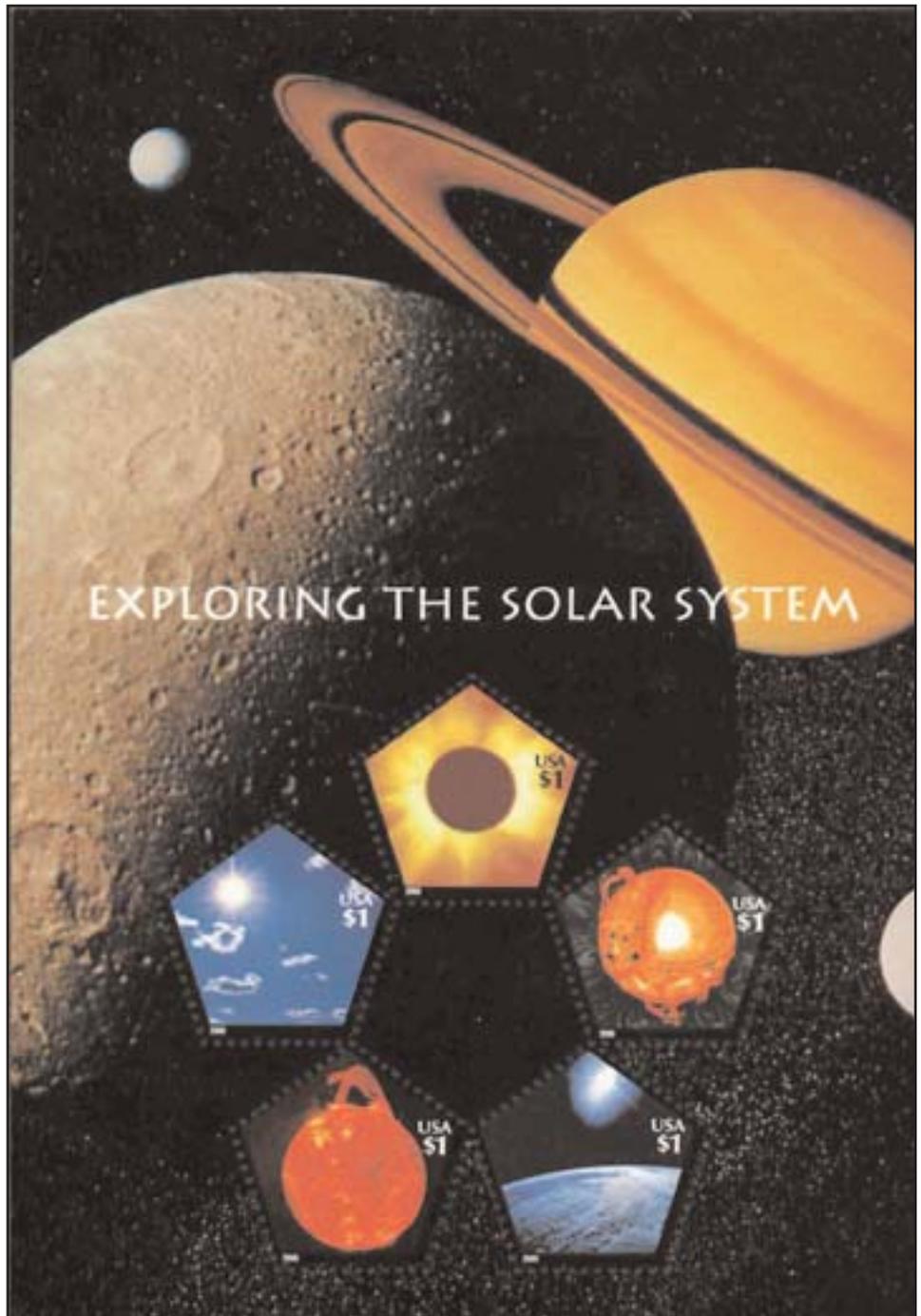
tioned stamp. In "Desert Plants" (Figure 5), designer Frank J. Waslick deftly matches his subjects with the shape and positioning of the stamps. The first U.S. triangular-shaped stamps, "Pacific 97," (Figure 6),

were designed by Richard Sheaff. He also designed both the "Space Achievement and Exploration" souvenir sheet (Figure 7), where the sheet's round shape is mirrored by the round holographic stamp in the

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center, and the five pentagonal stamps that together form a larger pentagon in "Exploring the Solar System" (Figure 8). The 1999 version of the Love stamp (Figure 9), designed by John Grossman and Holly Sudduth, was the first U.S. die cut stamp with curved edges and was notched to follow the shape of the design. Several U.S. stamps are diamond-shaped. An especially nice example is "Washington and Jackson" (Figure 10), designed by John Thompson. Although many stamps appear to be square, when carefully measured they turn out to be rectangles. An older example of a truly square stamp is "Landing of the Swedes and Finns" at Wilmington, Delaware (Figure 11), issued in 1938, whose central design is a reproduction of a painting by Stanley M. Arthurs.

The frames and borders on a stamp also contribute to its unified composition because they are related structurally to the other parts. The frame, usually one or two lines, is in the area between the edges of the paper and the design. Frames may be a single line of one color, or more decorative in multicolor. Frames and borders are absent, however, on some stamps. When the frame is physically missing, it may be implied by the arrangement of the inscriptions or the design elements. In "Pacific 97" (Figure 6), for example, the frame creates a circular space for the



vignette, while in "Wonders of the Sea" (Figure 12), designed by Charles Lynn Bragg, the background floats from one stamp to another.

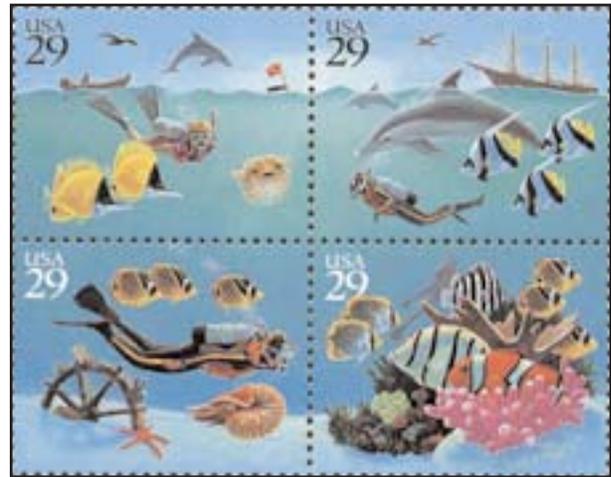
Borders can serve as frames with decorative elements and be in multicolor. On the 1988 "Carousel" stamps (Figure 13), designer Paul Calle uses a gold border that bleeds onto the adjacent stamp design. The "Pacific 97" stamp (Figure 6) uses frames, as seen in the circle for the vignette and the outer lines forming the triangle, as well as border material, found in the decorative elements between the internal and external frame lines.

Inscriptive elements are the type fonts and letter styles used for letters and numbers. They may identify the subject of the stamp, its location, and other information about the stamp's focus, and may be created by the typographer, the designer, or the art director, any of whom might select the fonts, choose the style, and determine where the letters will appear on the stamp. "Pacific 97" (Figure 6), a philatelic exposition held in San Francisco, is one example where the information, "Pacific 97," may be meaningful to the philatelist, but meaningless to the general public. In "Dogs" (Figure 14), designer Roy Anderson's drawings are so clear that the viewer who watches the Westminster Dog Show might recognize the breeds even without the clear identification.

For a few stamps the entire design is composed of inscriptive elements. One pleasing example is "America's Libraries" (Figure 15), designed Bradbury Thompson. The "ABC" is a rendering from a 1523 alphabet by Geoffroy Tory of Bourges, France. The modern type face is known as Sabon Antiqua.

While lettering and numbers are part of a stamp's inscription, the remainder of the stamp is called the vignette, usually located at the stamp's center; it may be a picture, an illustration, or a depiction in words. In some stamps the focal point at the center of the vignette may be surrounded by subsidiary vignettes. This characteristic is seen in "Benjamin Franklin," (Figure 16), designed by Richard Schlecht. The arrangement of the vignette is well

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(12) Wonders of the Sea, 3 Oct 1994 [Sc2863-2866].



(13) Folk Art Carousel Animals, 1 Oct 1988 [Sc2390-2393].



(15) above, America's Libraries, 13 Jul 1982 [Sc2015]. (16) below, National Postal Museum (Benjamin Franklin), 30 Jul 1993 [Sc2779].



(14) Dogs, 7 Sep 1984 [Sc2098-2101].



balanced and in proportion to the shape and size of the stamp and its internal structural elements.

### Design: Pictorial Elements

Artists, regardless of their style or choice of medium, decide how they are going to use pictorial elements most effectively to tell a story. One can equate pictorial elements with an artist's vocabulary; the use of shapes, lines, edges, colors, proportion, and detail serve the same purposes as words and syntax for authors.

The artist can use lines, colors, and value to create shapes or to outline some mass. Shapes can be recognizable (objects, animals, or people), geometric, or abstract. They may be flat, two-dimensional, or fully rounded, giving a three-dimensional impression. Shapes can also merely suggest rather than realistically portray objects. Abstract designs tend to appear when the designer is dealing with a concept or idea, such as Bradbury Thompson's "Learning Never Ends" (Figure 17), which relies on the painting titled "Homage to the Square: Glow," by Josef Albers, to convey its message.

Beginning with a single dot, an artist creates a line that can go in any direction. It may be straight, angular, or one that curves. The line can be broken. It can be thick or thin, dark or pale, and in any color. Lines may be fluid and follow contours, simulating movement. Each use helps the artist communicate in different ways. Often lines are used to outline a shape or form or to imply depth and texture. "Desert Plants" (Figure 5) displays this technique very nicely.

Stamp artists use negative areas (empty spaces) or positive areas (enclosed spaces) to create balance in an illustration. They use the same techniques to create the illusion of depth (perspective). Pale colors can create a faraway effect. In a two-dimensional illustration the object or figure remains distinct. Objects in three-dimensional illustrations, however, might overlap, thereby creating a point of view in the space. A striking example is "American Architecture" (Figure 18), designed by Walter D. Richards, where the buildings are three dimensional. Another good example of three-dimensionality is "Dogs" (Figure 14).



(17) above left, Learning Never Ends, 12 Sep 1980 [Sc1833].  
(18) below, American Architecture, 4 Jun 1979 [Sc1779-1782].  
(19) above right, Horatio Alger, 30 Apr 1982 [Sc2010].



Other stamp design artists use edge, rather than lines, to create shape. To create the edge, the artist may use a contrasting color to distinguish the shape from the background or another subject. The figures on "Horatio Alger" (Figure 19), designed by Robert Hallock and David Brown, are surrounded by an edge, giving the group a shape.

One only wishes the figures accompanying this article were in color, so the reader could readily visualize its impact. Color used in a stamp illustration has three attributes: hue (the six pure colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet), intensity, and value. Color affects the mood of the picture. Red is considered warm, for example, while blue is cool. Intensity of a color (its brightness or dullness) is adjusted by adding the color opposite it on the color wheel. Adding blue to orange, for example, makes the orange duller. Value refers to the lightness or darkness of a color, which can be changed by adding white or black. Artists also use shape, line, and texture to create value contrasts.



(20), above left, National Archives (Lincoln with hat, Washington in silhouette) 16 Apr 1984 [Sc2081]. (21), above, "Western Cattle in Storm," 18 Jun 1998 [Sc3209h and 3210]. (22), above right, Harry Truman, 26 Jan 1984 [Sc1862]. (23), far right, Jack London, sheets issued 11 Jan 1986 [Sc2183]; booklet issued 3 May 1988 [Sc2197].

Proportions, the relationship of the size of one object on a stamp to another, may be realistic or exaggerated. Exaggeration is evident on Robert Hallock and David Brown's "National Archives" stamp (Figure 20) in Lincoln's top hat. To meet all the content requirements in "Wonders of the Sea" (Figure 12), designer Charles Lynn Bragg provided a design in which proportion was not possible. Note the inaccuracy of the relative sizes of fish, humans to boat, and others.

Detail also affects the message being delivered. The presence of many objects creates a "busy" illustration. There are several good examples of the artful use of detail in the figures accompanying this article. The modern version of "Western Cattle in Storm" (Figure 21) used the original dies designed for a bi-color issue of the 1898 "Trans-Mississippi" (Figure 1). Using the original design, Richard Sheaff added more detail—not only "1998" below the frame line on the left side, but also boardwalk margins, which make the recent stamp larger than the original; thus the vignette doesn't fully fill the shield-shaped space inside the frame.

### Composition

Just as writers arrange words to fashion a message, stamp artists make decisions about unity, balance, rhythm, perspective, and proximity. They arrange pictorial elements to create a visual message. Unity results when an artist effectively relates all parts of an illustration to one another to create an integrated

whole. According to Greenberg and Jordan, "When you look at a unified work of art, you feel it. If you were to remove one line, or shape or color, the painting might fall apart. If you were to add another part, it would be too much." Readers can test this idea

by examining with care any of the designs shown here, or look at recent "best design" winners in the annual competition conducted by *Linn's Stamp News*.

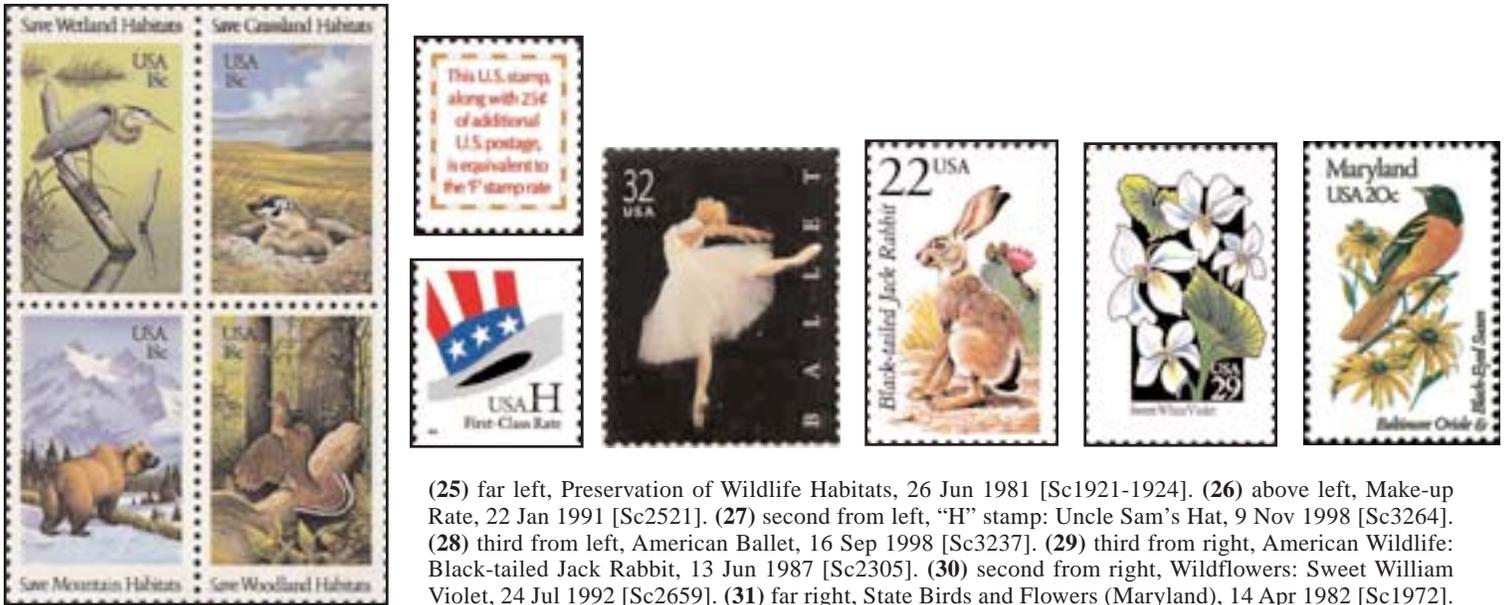
Balance, either symmetrical or asymmetrical, is created using color, lines, shapes, and sizes. In the case of the Harry Truman stamp (Figure 22), for example, designer Christopher Calle uses the black behind the president to balance the vertical letters.

Rhythm in an illustration expresses movement, which also causes the eye to move from one part of the illustration to another. Repeating patterns or lines can create this effect and help direct the viewer's eye to the implied movement. Compare and contrast the four "Owls" (Figure 23) to see how designer Frank J. Waslick showed movement.

To create perspective the stamp artist uses lines and patterns to lead the viewer's eye to what the viewer is supposed to see. Compare how "Jack London" (Figure 24), designed by Richard Sparks, is looking at the viewer, to the more sideways position of "Harry Truman" (Figure 22).

Proximity, the location of various objects in relation to each other, allows the artist to make an object dominant and catch the eye. The closer an object is to the viewer, the larger it appears. The artist may also accent certain features by exaggerating them. Note the position of the subjects and their back-

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(25) far left, Preservation of Wildlife Habitats, 26 Jun 1981 [Sc1921-1924]. (26) above left, Make-up Rate, 22 Jan 1991 [Sc2521]. (27) second from left, "H" stamp: Uncle Sam's Hat, 9 Nov 1998 [Sc3264]. (28) third from left, American Ballet, 16 Sep 1998 [Sc3237]. (29) third from right, American Wildlife: Black-tailed Jack Rabbit, 13 Jun 1987 [Sc2305]. (30) second from right, Wildflowers: Sweet William Violet, 24 Jul 1992 [Sc2659]. (31) far right, State Birds and Flowers (Maryland), 14 Apr 1982 [Sc1972].

grounds in Chuck Ripper's "Preservation of Wildlife Habitats" (Figure 25).

### Function

Function refers to the clarity of the stamp in communicating its official nature, its value, and the year it was issued. Including this information, however, can limit the design.

The words "United States" or "USA" are displayed in various places, styles, and sizes on most of the stamps illustrating this article. On the purely functional "Make-up Rate" stamp (Figure 26), designed by Richard Sheaff, the function is completely within the six lines of text. This stamp effectively communicates its nature and year, even though no denomination is given—it was printed before the rate was set. The use of letters, such as the "H" on "Uncle Sam's Hat" stamp (Figure 27), are confusing in communicating the value, especially years after the stamp's appearance.

Including the year of issue on a stamp can create problems, something evident in "American Ballet" (Figure 28), designed by Derry Noyes. The requirement to include the date was achieved by printing it in micro type on the ballerina's toe slipper; it is not visible to the naked eye! Another year of issue example is "Wonders of the Sea" (Figure

12), where a magnifying glass is needed to see "1994" on the divers' oxygen tanks.

### Closing

Please enjoy the aesthetic appeal of samplings from "American Wildlife" by Chuck Ripper (Figure 29), "Wildflowers" by Karen Mallary (Figure 30), and "State Bird and Flowers" by Arthur and Alan Singer (Figure 31). Each stamp and the others on these pages offer opportunities to eye the artistic elements of U.S. postage stamps.

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### **About the author**

Phyllis Van Orden is a retired library educator with a strong interest in the arts. The basis for this article comes in part from consulting with two artists (one a MFA) before writing "Selecting Picture Books" in her book *Selecting Books for the Elementary School Library Media Center* (Neal-Schuman, 2000). She is a member of the Washington State Philatelic Society, American Philatelic Society, American Philatelic Research Library, and the Graphics Philately Association.