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Children's Books and Stamps: Studies in Design

Synthia Saint James

by Phyllis Van Orden

In 1996 the United States Postal Service (USPS) initiated its Holiday Celebration Series designed to honor a different cultural or religious holiday each year. The first stamp honored the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. In 1997, the second stamp in the series commemorated the African American festival of Kwanzaa. Log onto the web site of artist Synthia Saint James (1949-) and you'll see her



Synthia Saint James at the First Day Ceremony

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smile at the unveiling of her 32-cent Kwanzaa stamp (Sc 3175) issued on 22 October 1997.

Synthia Saint James was born in Los Angeles in 1949; she began her

professional career twenty years later in New York City when she sold her first commissioned paintings. She is self-taught and has gained an international reputation as an artist, an author of several books (both children's and adult ones), an illustrator, and a songwriter.

Synthia Saint James uses acrylic on canvas to produce vibrant, powerful colors; strong lines; geometric shapes; generic figures, rather than individual features; all rendered in the style of a poster. Once you are familiar with her work you can immediately recognize her distinctive style on book jackets and as illustrations on greeting cards, and other products.

Synthia Saint James's numerous awards include the 1997 Coretta Scott King Honor for Illustrating Children's Books for *Neeny Coming . . . Neeny Going* (Mahwah, NJ: Bridge-Water Books, 1996). Major organizations and corporations, such as the National Bar Association, the United Nations International Children's Educational Fund (UNICEF greeting cards), the American Library Association (posters and bookmarks), the Los Angeles Public Library, and the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department have commissioned work by Saint James. She designed a 150-foot-long ceramic tile art mural in California's Ontario airport.

Synthia Saint James wrote *The Gifts of Kwanzaa* (Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company, 1994) to explain this "invented holiday," which was created in 1966 by Maulana Karenga, chairman of the Department of Black Studies at California State University at Long Beach. For those unfamiliar with this celebration, which is today observed around the



Illustration on page [25] of *The Gifts of Kwanzaa*, which served as the basis for the Kwanzaa stamps designed by Synthia Saint James.

world, Kwanzaa begins on 26 December and ends on 1 January. It celebrates family, community, and culture through the practice and affirmation of seven principles (Nguzo Saba): unity (Umoja), self-determination (Kujichagulia), collective work and responsibility (Ujima), cooperative economics (Ujamaa), purpose (Nia), creativity (Kuumba), and faith (Imani). Seven symbols represent the spirit and focus of Kwanzaa.

Derry Noyes, USPS art director, discovered *The Gifts of Kwanzaa* and presented a mock-up of a picture from the book to USPS art directors, who agreed that Saint James should do the stamp design. Saint James's final stamp design, however, parallels another page in the book. The stamp depicts a man, woman, and three children in African costumes, plus the seven basic symbols: a straw mat (Mkeka); a candleholder (Kinara) and seven candles (Mishumaa); fruit and vegetables (Mazao); an ear of corn for each child (Muhindi); a unity cup (Kikombe Cha Umoja); and culturally based gifts for the children (Zawadi), which must include a book and heritage symbol. The design originally included a flag with colors that resembled the black nationalist flag; it became a matter of controversy and was later changed.

Derry Noyes chose a typeface called Lithos for the letters and numbers in the Kwanzaa stamp design. The stamps were printed by Avery Dennison Security Printing Division in

Clinton, South Carolina, on an 8-color Dai Nippon Kikko web-fed gravure press.

You may be surprised at how often you spot poster-like dust jackets by Synthia Saint James on both cloth and paperback books or as designs for children's books.

United States Postage Stamps Designed by Synthia Saint James:

- Scott 3175: 32 cent "Kwanzaa," issued 22 October 1997
- Scott 3368: 33 cent "Kwanzaa," issued 28 October 1999
- Scott 3548: 34 cent "Kwanzaa," issued 21 October 2000
- Scott 3673: 37 cent "Kwanzaa," issued 10 October 2002

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The four Kwanzaa stamps designed by Synthia Saint James (Sc 3175, 3368, 3548, and 3673).