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Bradbury Thompson: Graphic Designer

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In the field of graphic design, an insufficient number of superlatives exist to describe adequately the work and contributions of Bradbury Thompson (1911-1995). The Art Directors Club asks: “How did he become the architect of prizewinning books, a consulting physician to magazines, a preeminent typographer, a designer of stamps, and a multiple medalist?” A remarkable book, *Bradbury Thompson: The Art of Graphic Design* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press [1988]), attempts an answer to that question in 18 marvelous chapters; my focus here, however, is on the chapter by Belmont Faries, “Contemporary Postage Stamps: Honoring the Arts and Humanities of the Nation.” Faries, a philatelist who dedicated his entire career to editing philatelic publications, seems well suited to the task, and the insights and quotes in the present article, which is based on Faries, are his.

Bradbury Thompson (Fig.1) holds a prominent position among twentieth-century American graphic designers and art directors. Every major American design organization, including the National Society of Art Directors (Art Director of the Year, 1950), the American Institute of Graphic Arts (a Gold Medal in 1975), and the Art Directors Hall of Fame (1977), recognized his iconic achievements.



Fig.1. Bradbury Thompson (1911-1995).

During his prolific career, Bradbury Thompson not only designed more than 90 United States postage stamps himself, but, beginning in 1969, he guided the stamp-design work of other graphic artists. Thompson’s own high standards of typography are reflected in nearly all of them.

Thompson was born in Kansas and received his formal art education at Washburn College in Topeka. Books and their design were critical in Thompson’s career right from the start, from his work as art editor of his high school yearbook; to his design of the Washburn College’s mascot, “The Ichabod”; to the publishing of *The Washburn College Bible*—a King James translation featuring revolutionary type and design.

Upon graduation from Washburn, Thompson joined Capper Publications as a designer and, although he worked there only briefly, he learned most of the basic aspects of graphic production. After leaving Capper in 1938, Thompson relocated to *cont. on pg 15*

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New York City and embraced every graphic design opportunity he could. Among the firms and magazines for which he worked are the Rogers-Kellogg-Stillson printing firm, *Mademoiselle* magazine, *Art News*, and *Art News Annual*. During his long and productive career, he went on to design 35 magazines, including *Business Week*, the *Harvard Business Review*, and *Smithsonian Magazine*.

Thompson also provided consultation and design work for Westvaco Corporation. He worked for *Westvaco Inspirations for Printers*, a periodical originally published by the West Virginia Pulp & Paper Company; the objective of the publication was to showcase typography, photography, artwork, and other graphic inventiveness on papers manufactured at its mills. In every issue, each page records not only the printing technique used, but also the paper used, for example: "Printed by Letterpress on Sterling Enamel, 25 x 38-80." Thompson designed more than 60 issues of *Inspirations for Printers* and thereby shared his design philosophy with thousands of typographers, students, and print buyers.

While at Westvaco, he began his experiments in typographic reform by creating his "monoalphabet," which broke with the tradition of separate letterforms for upper- and lower-case letters. He perfectly illustrated this concept in 1958, with his design of Alphabet 26, ostensibly created for early readers who are dyslexic. The simplified alphabetic system contains only 26 unique characters, with the case established by letter size only. Alphabet 26 consists of a transitional serif that mixes lowercase with uppercase to make the letters more logical



Fig.2. Bradbury Thompson's "monoalphabet."

and intuitive (Fig.2).

In addition to graphic designing, Thompson also accepted a teaching position at Yale University where he resided for several years; there he became an inspiring teacher and guide to his students and shed light on typography and the role of the typographic designer. According to him,

the art of typography, like architecture, is concerned with beauty and utility. A typographic designer is responsible for representing the art of previous ages as well as of the present time. While designing, the designer must incorporate the spirit of his own time even when representing past centuries. Instead of imitating previous work, the designer must demonstrate the understanding of past works in his piece of art.

The Stamp Development Department at the USPS works with professional art directors to oversee the creation of new stamp designs. The art directors, in turn, work with professional designers, artists, illustrators, and photographers to produce Stamp Art, one of the most visible forms of public art.

In 1958, Thompson's first commission to design a stamp for the U.S. Postal Service commemorated the Brussels Universal and International Exhibition in Belgium and featured the United States Pavilion at Brussels (Fig.3); this initial effort



Fig.3. USA 1958. U.S. pavilion at Brussels International Exhibition. [Sc1104]

led ultimately to more than 90 additional stamp designs.

Thompson often used portions of paintings in his designs, such as a 1980 stamp to honor the newly established Department of Education. Thompson's collaborator on *The Washburn College Bible*, Josef Albers, had died in 1976, and several admirers, including Thompson, thought that a United States stamp honoring this influential teacher and artist should be issued. A federal statute, however, prohibits issuing a commemorative stamp until at least 10 years after the subject's death. Thompson jumped at the chance to remember a great teacher philatelically by instead adapting a vibrant painting by Albers rather than a portrait of the man himself.



Fig.4. USA 1980. Learning Never Ends. [Sc1833]

The stamp, “Learning Never Ends,” features “Homage to the Square: Glow,” a series of studies by Albers about the independence and interdependence of colors (Fig.4). Faries notes that “The Secretary of Education was happy to interpret [the stamp] as a symbol of the new department itself, ‘starting from a deep solid base and reaching out to more and more people each year, spreading a glow throughout American education,’ which seemed [to some] a long leap in interpretation.”

Throughout his career, Thompson found favor designing stamps as part of a series or as individual stamp panes featuring multiple images. Even though other artists received credit as the stamp designers, Thompson designed the format for the American Architecture series (Fig.5); three subsequent four-stamp issues in the same series are Scott 1838-1841, 1928-1931, and 2019-2022. The stamps featuring American Architecture were among Thompson’s favorite issues that were rendered by other designers, in this case, Walter Richards.



Fig.5. USA 1979. American Architecture. [Sc1779-1782]

Thompson also designed the formats for the American Wildlife pane of 50 stamps (Fig.6), which were designed by Chuck Ripper of Huntington, West Virginia. When the USPS honored the Universal Postal Union’s centenary, Thompson assembled paintings of eight people reading or writing letters. He tied the group together by featuring a phrase from a letter by poet John Donne on all eight—“Letters Mingle Souls.” (Fig.7)

Many of Bradbury Thompson’s stamp designs offered lessons on the importance of typography in stamp design. Larry Nix dealt with typography and Thompson’s 1982 Library Stamps in the July 2022 issue of *P-G* [See: Volume 44, Number 3, pages 30-31].



Fig.7. USA 1974. “Letters Mingle Souls.” [Sc1530-1537]

On a closely related theme, for “A Nation of Readers” commemorative stamp, a program offered by the Library of Congress, Thompson used a daguerreotype by Mathew Brady of President Lincoln reading to his son, Tad. (Fig.8)

Arthur Singer and his son, Alan Singer, provided art for the 1982 State Birds and Flowers pane of 50 different stamp designs (Fig.9), one of the USPS’s most popular issues ever. Thompson designed the issue’s typographical format, with the state’s name at top left in large type.

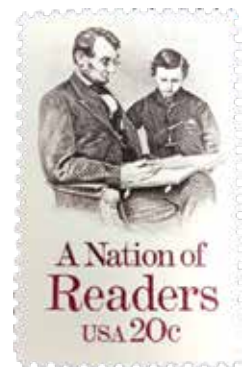


Fig.8. USA 1984. A Nation of Readers. [Sc2106]

Among the other series (but not necessarily the stamps) designed by Thompson are:

- The popular Love Series, beginning with Robert Indiana’s LOVE sculpture in 1973 (Fig.10); Thompson himself designed the third LOVE issue in 1984 using “an all-typographical design,



Fig.10. Top. USA 1973. Love stamp. [Sc1475]

Fig.11. Bottom. USA 1984. Love stamp. [Sc2072]



Fig.6. USA 1987.
North American
Wildlife. [Sc2286-
2335]



Fig.9. USA 1982.
State Birds and
Flowers. [Sc1953-
2002]



which featured the word ‘LOVE’ stacked five times, with the V replaced by hearts of different colors of the spectrum.” (Fig. 11)

➤ American Folk Art Series (19 Apr 1979) (Fig.12): Pennsylvania Toleware, ca. 1800, featuring: two coffeepots, a tea caddy, and a sugar bowl.

➤ American Indian Art Series (25 Sep 1980) (Fig.13): Pacific Northwest Indian Masks, featuring: Heiltsuk, Bella Bella Tribe; Chilkat Tlingit Tribe; Tlingit Tribe; and the Bella Coola Tribe.

➤ American Folk Art Series (Fig.14) in 1986, which featured four wood-carved figurines; a Highlander Figure, a Ship Figurehead, a Nautical Figure, and a Cigar-store Figure.

➤ The Literary Arts Series (Fig.15), beginning with John Steinbeck, followed by Edith Wharton (Sc1832), Nathaniel



Fig.12. USA 1979. Pennsylvania Toleware. [Sc1775-1778]



Fig.13. USA 1980. Pacific Northwest Indian Masks. [Sc1834-1837]



Fig.14. USA 1986. Woodcarved Figurines. [Sc2240-2243]

Hawthorne (Sc2047), Herman Melville (Sc2094), T.S. Eliot (Sc2239), and William Faulkner (Sc2350).

➤ The American Bicentennial Series, beginning with “Washington at Princeton” (Fig.16), followed by the Marquis de Lafayette (Sc1716), Battle of Oriskany (Sc1722), Surrender at Saratoga (Sc1728), and French Alliance (Sc1753).

Thompson’s design series of longest duration are his religious Christmas stamps, beginning in 1971 through 1994, a year before he died. Although Thompson receives credit for designing the 1994 Christmas stamp (Fig.17), since he had retired in 1992, the job of adapting Elisabetta Sirani’s 1663 painting to the stamp design fell to John Boyd of Anagraphics, Inc. in New York.

In 1988, his autobiography, and the book upon which much of the present article is based, *The Art of Graphic Design*, was published by Yale University Press. It won the North America’s George Wittenborn Memorial Award as best art book of the year from the Art Libraries Society.

Thompson died on 1 November 1995, in Greenwich, Connecticut. His papers are housed at the University of Illinois in Chicago.



Fig.15. USA 1979. John Steinbeck. [Sc1773]



Fig.16. USA 1977. Washington at Princeton. [Sc1704]



Fig.17. USA 1994. Christmas Stamp. [Sc2871]