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Lydia Mayorova: Stamp Engraver (1927–2008)

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Some of the world’s greatest engravers had privileged, genteel upbringings before enrolling at art school and building an international reputation.

In stark contrast, Lydia Mayorova (Fig.1) grew up in poverty, experienced warfare on her doorstep, developed her skills on the job and was little known outside the organization she worked for.

Mayorova (16 December 1927 – 31 December 2008) was born in a village just outside Moscow, ten years after the Russian Revolution. Life was hard, food shortages were common, and in her memoirs she recalled how the ink she used at school used to freeze.

Things became even worse during World War II, when German troops invaded the Soviet Union and advanced towards Moscow. They were halted in December 1941, just outside the village where Mayorova lived.

Her lucky break came in 1943, when the Soviet state printers Goznak, many of whose employees had been conscripted into the army and

were not likely to return from the front, opened a college to train the engravers of the future. Even though she had no artistic training, she was awarded a place.

For the new apprentice (Fig.2), it was like entering heaven. She was given new clothes, and was fed twice a day, which felt like luxury.

The educational facilities were of a high standard, too, despite the deprivations of war. The authorities realized the importance of the college, and made sure that it was not lacking in resources; there was an abundance of *cont. on pg 27*



Fig.1. Lydia Mayorova (1927-2008)



Fig.2. Lydia Mayorova at about the time of her apprenticeship.

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copper plates, burins and magnifiers for the students to work with.

The five-year course entailed both art history, including studying classic engravers such as Albrecht Dürer and Mayorova's own favorite Gustav Frank, the 19th-century German engraver, and hands-on training, progressing from engraving simple mathematical forms to the finer details of portraiture such as ears and eyes.



Fig.3. Russia 1975. Mayorova's engraving of the head of Michelangelo's David was used on this stamp marking the 500th anniversary of the birth of the artist. [Sc4296]

By the end of the training, many of Mayorova's fellow students had gone, and it was only herself and her fellow student Tatyana Nikitina who finished the course. Mayorova's diploma project was a copper engraving of the head of Michelangelo's

David. Years later, she would get the opportunity to revisit this subject, when she was asked to engrave a similar detail for a 1975 set marking the 500th anniversary of the birth of Michelangelo (Fig.3).

Offered a permanent position at Goznak in 1948, she would remain there for the rest of her career. Not only would she work for the organization until her retirement in 1983, but she would return the compliment and train a new generation of engravers.

One thing Mayorova would always regret was the fact that for much of her career she worked anonymously.

Security printing was seen as a team effort, with no personal credit encouraged or permitted. Engravers were not even allowed to join the USSR's Union of Artists.

This meant that their work was also largely unknown in the wider art world and ignored in philatelic literature. Only comparatively recently has information about the state's designers and engravers become publicly available.

What we know is that Mayorova's



Fig.4. Russia 1953. Mayorova's first issued stamp depicting the Order of the Red Banner medal. [Sc1653]



Fig.5. Mayorova's engraved the portrait of Lenin used on the 10r note.

first issued stamp was part of the seventh series of the long-running War Orders & Medals theme. She engraved a 5r value depicting the Order of the Red Banner, issued in 1953 (Fig.4).

Through the 1950s, she was largely employed in engraving banknotes, especially when a revaluation of the currency in 1961 necessitated a new set of designs.

On a visit to Goznak, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev was impressed with her work, and especially with a bas-relief of Lenin she had once made. So she was asked to engrave a portrait of Lenin for the 10r note based on that bas-relief of hers (Fig.5). It would be in circulation for 30 years.

Subsequently, stamps would take center stage in Mayorova's career. She engraved more than 80 in all, and it was her portraiture that she considered her best work.

As examples of her own favorites she cited portraits of Mikhail Shchepkin, the most famous Russian actor of the 19th century (1963) (Fig.6), *concluded on next page.*

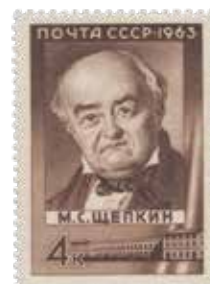


Fig.6. Russia 1963. Mikhail Shchepkin, 19th century Russian actor. [Sc2813]



Fig.7. Russia 1967. Centenary of the publication of Das Kapital by Karl Marx. [Sc3360]



Fig.8. Russia 1980. Alexander V. Suvorov (1730-1800), General and military theorist. [Sc4878]

Karl Marx, the economist and revolutionary communist (1967) (Fig.7), and Alexander Suvorov, the 18th-century military hero (1980) (Fig.8).

Of her non-portrait work, she particularly liked the 1966 stamp she engraved for the set marking the 800th anniversary of the birth of the Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli, depicting a scene from *The Knight in the Tiger's Skin* (Fig.8).

But her all-time favorite stamp was her penultimate one. In 1983, her final year at Goznak, she engraved a very



Fig.8. Russia 1966. Scene from *The Knight in the Tiger's Skin* by the Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli. [Sc3235]

fine stamp marking the 80th anniversary of the birth of the composer Aram Khachaturyan, comprising a profile portrait alongside a page of musical notation (Fig.9).

It was a triumphal way to end a distinguished career, one which deserved greater recognition.

Editor's note: A shorter version of this article appeared in *Stamp Magazine* of February 2018.



Fig.9. Russia 1983. Portrait of composer Aram Khachaturyan (1903-1978). [Sc5144]

My Stamp Story

Amanda Morgenstern

At age nine, my great grandmother sat me down at the kitchen table with some neatly trimmed stamps on cover and Fleischman butter tubs full of water. I was intrigued with the stamp soaking process. Skip ahead, and my parents discovered a bathtub full of kiloware being soaked; this went on for weeks. Realizing my true interest in stamps, my parents took me to the local stamp club, Southern Illinois Stamp Club, where I met Robert B. Stevenson and Vera Felts. These two continued to be my philatelic mentors; Robert until his passing, and Vera to this day.

These two characters took me to my first stamp show in 1993, the first-ever St. Louis Stamp EXPO. The show floor was daunting for sure. Not only was I female, but I was 12 years old. Vera introduced me to Ron McVay at that show in 1993, who also took me under his wing as a lifelong project. I purchased Pink Pills for Pale People (Fig.1) from Ron, and have been collecting Private Die Medicine Stamps ever since. I continue to shop with Ron, having last visited



Fig.1. This Private Die Medicine Stamp for Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People.

him at the 2022 EXPO. I give much credit to these folks for keeping my love of philately alive.

I am a lucky one who has managed to earn a living in her hobby. I worked for nine years with Vera in the American Topical Association as designer, followed by serving as Executive Director of the National Stamp Dealers Association. About a decade ago, Vera purchased a GPA membership for me, and I've been reasonably active ever since.

I am the previous editor of *Philateli-Graphics* and *POLONUS*, the Polish Philatelic Society. I was most honored to receive the American Philatelic Society's Carter Award for Volunteerism in Philately as a Young Adult.

As I am blessed to work in the field of philately, I unfortunately don't get much time with my stamps these days. Having lived in England for 15 years, I enjoy my GB collection, particularly plating Penny Reds. I have a Firsts collection and enjoy leather postcards. My passion still remains my Private Die Medicine collection. I adore the layout, history, engraving, typography and Victorian style of these tax stamps.

I am without a doubt, a lifelong philatelist who cannot wait for a career gap so as to truly start collecting again!