



PHILATELI-GRAPHICS

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The Stamp Butcher by Amanda L. Morgenstern

“Niko Courtelis is an award-winning creative director, graphic designer and filmmaker based in Portland, Oregon. He collects stamps, old typewriters and vintage perforating machines, and uses them to make artistamps, mail and correspondence art.

World Stamp Show



Fig. 1. Official World Stamp Show NY 2016 logo by show Design Director, Niko Courtelis. Used with permission. www.ny2016.org

He is Design Director of World Stamp Show NY2016 [Fig. 1]; current member of the American Philatelic Society, the Oregon Stamp Society, the International Union of Mail Artists, and a former member of the Board of Governors of The Collectors Club in New York City.”
<http://philatelicalatrocities.wordpress.com/about/>

At first I could not decide how I felt about the Atrocities of Niko Courtelis, although you are reading the words of a lady who used to glue and shellac nickel box stamps to any still surface in her childhood. Perhaps I am simply jealous that I didn't think of this avenue of butchery myself.

I discovered his work recently on the Kat Ran Press website (<http://katranpress.com/work/philatelicalatrocities/>) and quickly friended Philatelic Atrocities on Facebook. *Philatelic Atrocities*, also the name of Niko's book [Fig. 2], is full of his butchery and a short excerpt about his work.



Fig. 2. *Philatelic Atrocities* book cover, 2014, by Niko Courtelis. Used with permission from Niko Courtelis & Kat Ran Press.

Amazingly, when I asked permission from Kat Ran to use Niko's Atrocities in *P-G*, they put me in direct email contact with him. I jumped at the opportunity to have a mini-interview with the designer.

What inspired you to start cutting stamps?

“My attraction to stamps is at first, purely visual: the design, composition, color, typography, the engraving and printing techniques; they're beautiful but frozen in time. I began combining old stamps

to reanimate them. I juxtapose them, force them to be looked at with fresh eyes, to be reconsidered.”

Is there a particular method or meaning behind the stamps you pair together?

“I'm a head hunter. I look for older stamps with likenesses of monarchs, dignitaries, presidents, kings - especially those with features I think will look interesting combined with others: a nose, an ear, a hat. I then group **continued on page 44**

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continued from page 41 them, looking left, looking right, looking ahead, and by color. Mine is a meandering but graphic approach suggesting Cubism or trying to make



Fig. 3, *United States/ Cuba Philatelic Atrocity*, by Niko Courtelis. Used with permission.

something humorous, gender-bending, disruptive or alien. Sometimes there is a political subtext, such as combining the United States and Cuba [Fig. 3], for example. The whole endeavor is absurd.”

Why is it “okay” to cut stamps?

“This does tend to shock people, which I enjoy. They are after all, a form of currency, and cutting them seems like a violation. It’s deviant. Many of the stamps used in my collages are imperfect: stains, thins, hinge remnants, poor centering, pulled perfs, gum disturbances – qualities that render them of little value from a philatelic point of view. Others are common. I’m not cutting up any rarities, at least not yet!

There was an obscure postal practice in some countries called ‘bisects’ where stamps were cut to decrease their value by half. In other words, if the postmaster had a 4 cent stamp and needed a 2 cent stamp, they’d cut the 4 cent stamp in half diagonally, a diagonal bisect.”

Are you a topical/thematic collector?

“I collect several countries: Greece, Poland, United States and Colombia. Themes I collect include hearts, printing presses/Gutenberg, typography/calligraphy, TB/Xmas seals, poster stamps and something I simply call ‘design excellence’ – really just an excuse to collect stamps that catch my eye.”

Are there particular collections that would intrigue our readers?

“Here are 12 stamps I really enjoy, in no particular order, with Scott catalog numbers and brief comments.”

1. Columbia/Antioquia #128. Anyone who has hand set lead type will recognize this as masterful.

2. Turkey #1. Elaborate design, coarse printing, thin paper and colorful control strip all come together perfectly.

3. Netherlands #C9. Radical and groundbreaking design by Piet Zwart, the first use of photography on a stamp.

4. Gambia #12. The embossed cameo gives this series a quiet beauty, stunning in its simplicity.

5. Hungary #C34. Wings. Winged helmet. Winged shoes. Two propellers. This guy is going places.

6. Israel #536. The Hebrew letters as ink is brilliant, with a sensitive, hand-drawn execution. This sheet, signed by the designer Aharon Shevo, hangs in my studio.

7. Mexico #1030. Issued on the July 3, 1970, total eclipse this multi-lingual design by Lance Wyman is powerful in spite of the inferior printing.

8. France. These 1880s revenue stamps were purchased for use in my collages, but I like them so much I can’t bring myself to cut these beauties.

9. Poland #816/17. The Jerzy Desselberger design features fantastic typography, subdued color, and intriguing shapes forming the glide path.

10. Estonia #C1. Magical, you can almost hear plane’s engine.

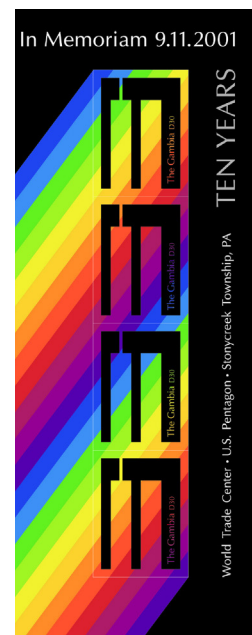
11. Saudi Arabia/Hejaz #1. The ornate calligraphy and design, patterned after an elaborate mosque door, are beautifully integrated.

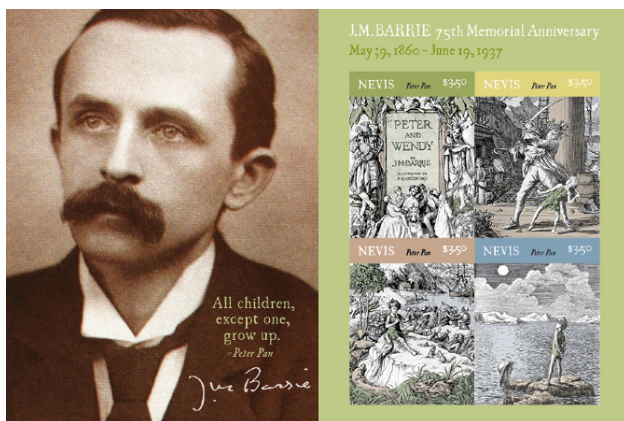
12. Germany, 1911 poster stamp, Franz von Stuck. The ominous imagery is just bizarre; see you at the hygiene exhibition!

Visiting Niko’s website portfolio, I was stunned by the variety of his stamp design; from the use of vintage type, to super-modern graphics, to the regality of Queen Elizabeth II’s Diamond Jubilee. You can view part of his philatelic portfolio at <http://nikocourtelis.com/>.

Niko will be speaking at the Curiosity Club in Portland, *continued on page 45*

Niko Courtelis design. A stamp sheet issued by the Gambia to commemorate the 10 year anniversary of the September 11 terror attacks. 2011.





Niko Courtelis design. A stamp sheet issued to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the death of J.M. Barries, author of Peter Pan. 2012.

continued from page 44 Oregon on 21 October 2014. This club meets fort-nightly on Tuesdays at Hand Eye Supply. The topic of his talk is “Stamps Are my Brain.” He is also designing a mini-stamp sheet for the occasion. You can view this event at handeyesupply.com and click on Curiosity Club.

A final thought from your editor: Are you a fellow philatelic butcher? Do you use stamps in your creations? If so, I'd love to see your work!

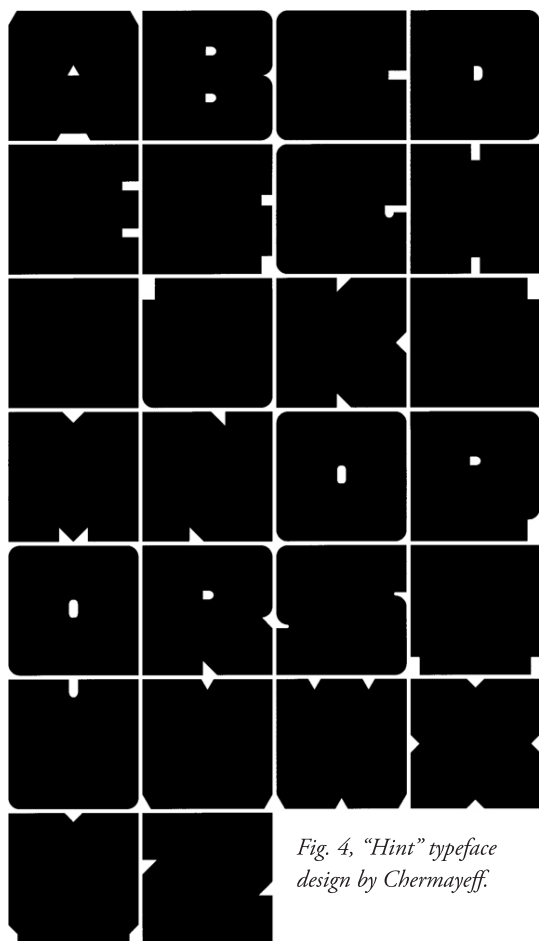


Fig. 4, “Hint” typeface design by Chermayeff.

continued from page 43 In his book, Chermayeff writes, “I love envelopes with stamps from faraway places or from here in the United States or large mailing pieces from imaginative people who use as many different stamp denominations as possible to make up the total demanded by the post office. . . I even like the cancellations, which sometimes even improve the stamps. I often use the fragments of an envelope with stamps as elements of a collage to make noses and eyes or if the stamps are predominantly red I can use them for the mouth or face.” In short, Chermayeff uses this cutting and pasting of envelopes and stamps as a type of therapy in creating his own artwork. He particularly enjoys creating faces via this process which is the basis of his book.

In *Why Stamps?* Chermayeff says, “Another reason I love stamps is this: they are often reminders of great people in society who deserve to be recognized and honored: writers, political figures, artists, scientists, and other contributors to our understanding of what makes the world a better place.”

Chermayeff has designed several stamps; for the United States, the 5¢ stamp commemorating the Canadian Centenary (1967) [Fig. 1], the American Revolution Bicentennial (1976) [Fig. 2] and for the Royal Mail of Great Britain, *Balloons* of 2006 [Fig. 3.] You can clearly see his use of the cut and paste method in the design of these stamps, using flat overlapping colors.

Also in his design portfolio is a typeface called “Hint” [Fig. 4.] It is rarely seen, but in theory, Chermayeff removed the minimal amount of white space to make a perfect square recognizable as a letter. These letters perhaps work together as a group, but I question how it would work as a display face. Undoubtedly, however, his typeface has spawned a following of the same order, studying the geometric options within type design and to what dramatic extent one can take ledigibility and structure.

<http://www.fastcodesign.com/3033483/7-questions-for-logo-design-legend-ivan-chermayeff>
http://www.katranpress.com/stamps_chermayeff_1_1.html



Fig. 1, stamp design by Chermayeff commemorating the Canadian Centenary (1967)



Fig. 2, stamp design by Chermayeff & Geismar for the American Revolution Bicentennial (1976)



Fig. 3, stamp design “Balloons” by Chermayeff (2006)