

STAMPS: AN AMERICAN JOURNEY

Transcript provided courtesy of the United States Postal Service®

Narrator: You see them every day...but have you ever really looked at them? Each image is a message, a cultural clue. Telling us what we do...where we go...and who we are.

President Ronald Reagan: TEAR DOWN THIS WALL!

[CROWD CHEERS]

Narrator: The story of stamps is the story of America...a monumental tale told in miniature. And the stamps' own journey from idea to art is one of the most surprising stories of all.

[MOTORCYCLE ROARS BY]

Narrator: For one man, the journey begins at full throttle, but Steve Buchanan isn't here to rumble. He's an artist, and his job is to pack all that raw power into a stamp. The series he's creating will celebrate four generations of motorcycles. To jump-start his research, Steve has taken to the street to talk to the people who own and love classic motorcycles.

Steve Buchanan, Illustrator: But this is as far as it turns?

Man: That's as far as it turns this way and then --

Buchanan: The collectors are just walking encyclopedias.

Man: You can see how tight everything is engineered --

Buchanan: There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of different models and different color and different choices that you could make. There's just so much energy and revision and consulting and interaction involved.

Narrator: And every idea has to be squeezed into a space the size of, well, a postage stamp.

Buchanan: You see the highlights so much more. What you need is a composition that's extremely efficient so that it will appear as large as possible in that really limited space.

Narrator: Amazing how something so small could have such a huge impact...

[CANNON FIRES]

Cheryl Ganz, Curator, National Postal Museum: The Post was incredibly important to Democracy and our coming together as a nation. This was the way that the colonies could communicate with each other: with pamphlets, newspapers, and letters.

Narrator: Yet until the mid-19th century, only wealthy Americans could afford to use the mail. Sending a letter from New York City to a loved one on the Western frontier could cost as much as a bushel of wheat.

In 1847, the introduction of standardized rates and postage stamps changed all that.

Meg Ausman, Historian, United States Postal Service: The one thing that separated the United States from the British postal system almost immediately is the preferential, or favored, rates we gave to newspapers, because our early leaders thought it was extremely important for news to go out to all Americans.

Narrator: At first, Americans considered only one subject fit for postage: dead heroes.

Ausman: You had to be a “monumental figure,” and that was the term we used. We wanted monumental people on the stamps.

Narrator: And one patriot stands first among equals. George Washington's image graces a record 242 stamps, and counting.

For a long time, stamps stuck strictly to the "great man" theme, but in 1893 Postmaster General John Wannamaker started a revolution of his own. He issued a series of stamps to commemorate the World's Fair, which was known as the Columbian Exposition.

Ausman: The Columbian Exposition stamps were a breakthrough; they told a story on the stamps. They told about the discovery of America. Congress passed a joint resolution calling these kind of images on stamps “outrageous.”

Narrator: Despite congressional disapproval, Wannamaker's gamble paid off. He proved that stamps could do much more than move mail. They could delight the public.

Ganz: The citizens loved them. That set of stamps was very popular and sold extremely well.

Narrator: Suddenly, many subjects were fair game, especially those celebrating American ingenuity and progress.

As settlers flowed into the West, the mail followed, bringing news, views, and business.

Ganz: As transportation could go faster and faster, the distance between people became smaller and smaller, and the time it took for people to communicate was reduced to next to nothing.

Narrator: The faster mail traveled, the better. At the turn of the 20th century, the Post Office Department saw the future of transportation...and it was electric.

The automobile that made its debut on a stamp didn't run on gas.

Ganz: The electric car might seem like it was ahead of its time, but early on when they were first inventing cars, people didn't know whether we were going to go the route of electric cars or gasoline cars.

Narrator: ...or motorcycles. These two-wheelers quickly zoomed into the hearts of mail carriers and others looking for transportation that's reliable, cheap, and fun.

Armed with a hunk of Harley for inspiration, Steve Buchanan hopes to recreate the spirit of the motorcycle in his stamps. It's exciting new terrain for Buchanan, but his usual turf is even wilder.

Buchanan: Motorcycles and insects have a lot in common. A lot of insects -- the ones that are most fun to paint in fact -- appear to be made out of metallic foil.

There are things that I try to do as an illustrator that I think photography can't always do as well. I can, say, selectively leave out details; ...for the tiny, tiny presentation, the detail just becomes muddy textures.

Narrator: With shadow and light, color and scale...exaggerating some details, leaving others out, Buchanan captures the essence of his subject. At the same time, the Postal Service's meticulous research ensures that each image is not only artistic, but accurate. Still, sometimes things slip by.

Ganz: The first postage stamp for air mail issued in the United States had the Jenny on it, a plane popular in World War I.

Terry McCaffrey, Manager of Stamp Development, United States Postal Service: One of the sheets of stamps was inadvertently turned completely upside down. Because planes were so new at that time, most people didn't notice that it was upside down.

Narrator: Today, a single inverted Jenny stamp can fetch tens of thousands of dollars.

Ausman: The history of Aviation really starts with the Post Office Department. In the early 1900s, the Wright Brothers tried to sell planes to the U.S. Government, and no one was interested except the Post Office Department.

Narrator: With the Postal Department as a partner, the fledgling Aviation industry took off. During the Depression, it experimented with another gravity-defying technology.

Ganz: Zeppelins established many of the routes that later would be flown by airplanes. So, for example, they did the first overseas transcontinental flights, and the Zeppelins flew mail all the time; that was part of how they paid for their flight.

Narrator: But the very thing that held the graceful titans aloft turned out to be a ticking bomb. In 1937, hydrogen ignited aboard the *HINDENBURG*.

Ganz: And when it burst into flames, it was carrying over 17,000 pieces of mail. Of that, about 150 burned examples have survived.

Narrator: Air Mail to Europe did not resume until after World War II, and never again by Zeppelin.

[ROCKET ENGINES FIRE]

Still, over the next several decades, mail continued to boldly go where few men had gone before.

[ROCKET ENGINES FIRE]

During the Apollo 15 mission in 1971, astronauts even delivered a stamp to the moon.

Astronaut: What could be a better place to cancel a stamp than right here?

Narrator: Can Mars be far behind?

McCaffrey: Hey, Steve, how are you?

Buchanan: Well, Good morning.

McCaffrey: Good to see you, come on in.

Narrator: It's been a year since Steve Buchanan started work on his motorcycle stamps.

A distinguished panel of citizen advisors has reviewed his work with the Postal Service's head of stamp design, Terry McCaffrey. Now Buchanan comes to Washington to find out which direction his motorcycles should take. His favorite puts people in the driver's seat.

Buchanan: I mean, there was a whole different culture: the ladies in their bonnets, right? What I'm thinking is we can say, you know make some cultural connection.

McCaffrey: One of the concerns I have with the people thing is with the chopper, we have the Easy Rider and we did discuss that in committee, and the USPS staff fell on the floor because the connotation of the easy lifestyle with "Easy Rider."

Narrator: When it comes to stamp design, it's a fine line between thought-provoking and provocative. Even a change in shape can spark heated discussion.

Buchanan: The overall effect would be, you know, like one of those shots of the whole touring crowd going down the road, just motorcycles one behind the other.

McCaffrey: It's a bunch of stamps with wheels on them. The average consumer that we're trying to reach...they're going to want to see more of the motorcycles.

Narrator: Still, even in this tiny space, there's room for innovation.

McCaffrey: Myself, I prefer the angles because it does give a little bit more dimensionality to the subject matter. How do you feel about it?

Buchanan: Well, yeah, I like the angles just because it suits my style of painting.

McCaffrey: This, to me, speaks of roads and the Harleys and the big gutsy motorcycles. I think having this emphasis on this shape, now works.

Narrator: Per square inch, few things require so many hours of deliberation and debate as the design of a postage stamp. But in the end, it's the people who decide what goes in the corner of the envelope.

[ROCK & ROLL MUSIC PLAYS]

After all, 50 million Elvis fans can't be wrong.

McCaffrey: Elvis changed the stamp world in 1993. Up until that time, we hadn't really done pop culture icons, like Rock & Roll heroes.

Narrator: It turns out everyone had an opinion about Elvis. Out of dozens of ideas, the Postal Service narrowed the field to just two stamp designs. Then, in a radical move, they let the fans choose. Ballots appeared in Post Offices and magazines across the country.

McCaffrey: We got 1.2 million ballots back, which is a phenomenal return for such a thing; 75 percent of them agreed with the young Elvis. That's what we were all hoping for!

Narrator: The Elvis stamps brought in \$26 million dollars in revenue -- shake, rattle and rollin' attitudes toward stamp design. Pop culture had arrived in the Post Office!

McCaffrey: Since then, our whole program has become much more contemporary and exciting.

Ganz: We're talking different ages, genders, nationalities of heritage, and I think it's made stamps more exciting and appealing, and I think it also helps inform everyone that we are one national people.

Narrator: Steve Buchanan's motorcycles represent both pop culture and a piece of our nation's past.

Right up 'til the end, he incorporates changes that will strengthen each image. Finally, they're ready to become a permanent part of America's best-traveled art collection. It's taken two years to get from idea to miniature masterpiece, but it's just one small step in the journey of stamps.

Buchanan: As printed things, they're just remarkable little jewels.

Ganz: Stamps connect every single person in America.

Ausman: Stamps are art for everyone...they're historical messages for everyone...they're a way of learning for everyone.

They're a thing of beauty.

Narrator: Millions of images united in a dream...to build a single community celebrating great diversity. That's America's story...framed in stamps.

[CREDITS ROLL]

Announcer: History is everywhere. Don't lose it, live it! If we can save history, together we can make history.

Boy: There's a lot of history everywhere. There's a lot of history here, too.

[END]