The Lady and the Stamp

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ABSTRACT: In 1999, the U.S. Postal Service issued the Ayn Rand commemorative stamp, an out-of-place addition to their long-running Literary Arts series. This article tells the story of the stamp—how it came to be and why.

KEYWORDS: Ayn Rand commemorative stamp, Literary Arts series, stamp collecting, philately

The year was 1999. The day, 22 April. It was a chilly day to be by the Hudson, and a light breeze skimmed over the water. The sky was thick with clouds; the air was thick with fog. New York had experienced rain that morning. By noon, the rain had stopped.

It was chilly inside the building, too. The venue, located on Show Pier 92 at Twelfth Avenue and Fifty-Fifth Street, stretched out into the Hudson, giving the stamp collectors inside it a view to river, and a view of the boats that sailed across it. It was the 1999 Spring Postage Stamp Mega Event hosted by ASDA—the American Stamp Dealers' Association, Inc.—one of the largest stamp shows in the country.[1]

A flyer for one of the show's main events, designed by Roberta Wojtkowski, bore, in black-and-white, the photographed portrait of a woman whose large, dark eyes stared fixedly at some point to the photographer's left. Below it, in a

The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2021

DOI: 10.5325/jaynrandstud.21.2.0230

near perfect replica of the woman's signature, spidery, scarlet lettering spelled out the name: Ayn Rand.

"Novelist Ayn Rand to Be Honored with New Postage Stamp in City She Loved," read the official headline, generated for the event by PR Newswire, a press release company based in New York.[2]

Two men who attended the event, both listed as "Honored Guests," were Phil Jordan and Nick Gaetano. At the time, Jordan was a consulting art director to the USPS's Stamp Development Department, where, in all, he art-directed and produced three hundred postage stamps. The Ayn Rand commemorative stamp is one of them, and Jordan is credited as its designer, typographer, and art director.

In practice, Jordan told me, these roles mean the following: "The Typographer generally choses the typefaces (fonts) used in the job with direction from the art director and designer. In the majority of cases the designer and typographer [are] the same person."[3] And what does the designer do? "In most cases the designer pulls together all the elements of a job and arranges (designs) them according to a visual plan. The designer is usually assigned the project by the art director." And the art director? "The art director is usually the manager of the individual project," Jordan told me. "In this case I determined how we were going to portray Ayn Rand—either art or photograph. Since this was one of a long series of Literary Art all of which were illustrated (as opposed to photographed) I chose art and then just which artist would be best suited."

And the artist best suited, Jordan decided, was Nick Gaetano. Gaetano, who did the stamp's illustration (and, more or less, the design) was no stranger to the weird world of Objectivism. Though not an Objectivist himself, the award-winning artist had been commissioned by Penguin in 1981, aged thirty-seven, to design the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of Rand's collected works. At the time, these spanned ten volumes. *JARS* readers probably have a sample or two of Gaetano's work on their bookshelves; his designs are blocky, modern, art deco; they often center around a chiseled, statuesque man with metallic skin, staring determinedly in this or that direction, sometimes laboring under the weight of the sun, or the wheel of the world, or undertaking some other similarly serious and responsible task.

Covers are important. People have been known to judge books by them. And Gaetano's have come to be embody the Objectivist "feel," with the jacket designs of books on Objectivism (see, for example, Brook and Watkins 2012; Weiner 2016), and the videogame Bioshock, which is set in an Objectivist dystopia—paying tribute to Gaetano's work.

Choosing Ayn Rand for the next installation of the Literary Arts series was a risky and remarkable move. But the story of her selection is surprisingly unremarkable. The U.S. Postal Service reads thousands of letters from members

of the public each year, each hoping that their recommendation for a new stamp will be approved and put in print. So long as the subject matter fits the USPS's criteria, the idea will be brought before the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC) for consideration.

Despite speculation that "the issuance of this stamp is based on pressure from a few influential ultra-conservative congressmen" (Amick 1999, 99–100), the decision was, according to Terry McCaffrey—then the head of stamp design for USPS—far less conspiratorial: "I think a letter from a proponent came in, and the committee said, OK, we can put her on hold. [. . .] Then we were looking to lock in subjects for Literary Arts, and Rand's name came up, and somehow she breezed through. I don't think there was any proponent on the committee; it was just, 'Let's take a vote and put her in'" (100).

As for how Gaetano was decided upon, written accounts differ. According to Lynn's *U.S. Stamp Yearbook, 1999*, the decision to commission Gaetano was made like this (Amick 1999, 101):

> One day in 1997 Terrence McCaffrey and Phil Jordan, the USPS art director assigned to design the Rand stamp, were flying to Madison, Wisconsin, to discuss designs for the Wisconsin Statehood stamp with officials of the state's sesquicentennial committee. En route they picked up copies of United Airlines' in-flight magazine *Hemispheres*, with a cover illustration by artist Nicholas Gaetano of Fletcher, North Carolina. Inside was an article about Gaetano and a reproduction of an airbrush illustration he had created for the cover of a new edition of one of Rand's books.
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> "We thought that this sort of art deco feeling would be perfectly appropriate for her stamp," Jordan said. "I contacted him through his agent, and he agreed to take the job."

However, in an interview with *Beyond the Perf*—an online publication for stamp enthusiasts—McCaffrey recounted the story like this (*Beyond the Perf* 2009):

> Art Director Phil Jordan and I were on a United Airlines flight in 1997 and picked up the inflight magazine, *Hemispheres*. Its cover featured the work of Nicholas Gaetano. Phil and I both thought Gaetano would be perfect for author Ayn Rand. Little did we know that he had just completed illustrations for new versions of her works *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

The question raised by the discrepancy—whether the decision to commission Gaetano was made independently of the knowledge that he had done

Rand-themed work before[4]—has been resolved in correspondence with Jordan and McCaffrey. Jordan was unsure but was inclined to go with the first version of events, as recorded in Lynn's Stamp Book: "I don't frankly know which version is accurate. My inclination would be go with the 1999 version since it would be closest to the occasion." Fortunately, McCaffrey was able to confirm this hunch: "You [Jordan] are . . . correct in your choice. The 1999 version is what I remember."

In any case, once Gaetano had been decided on, he was contacted ("I'm pretty sure they called me, although they might have called my rep"), commissioned, and subsequently set to work on the preliminary concept drawings, which were loosely based on his previous book covers. Gaetano selected his top three and sent them off to CSAC. Of these, one was finally selected.

The Ayn Rand stamp displays Rand's face split in two; one side is blue and shadowy, the other side dowsed in gold and orange light. The rays of light, depicted by four golden, parallel lines, don't serve any symbolic purpose. They're there to look pretty. As Jordan recounts, they were "just structural things that Nick thought looked good; they sort of complement the way her face is coming out of the buildings" (Amick 1999, 102).

The buildings, though, are symbolic. They represent the Manhattan skyscrapers Rand saw when she emigrated from Russia to New York aboard the SS *De Grasse*. Heller (2009, 53) describes the scene:

> Looking up, she could see the lower Manhattan skyline, whose stone towers and copper spires pierced the sky in celebration of the American era's busy faith in commerce. [. . .] They were "the will of man made visible" and "the finger of God," she thought. In a rare display of emotion, she began to cry at the sight of them.

Microprinted on the stamp—a common practice to combat counterfeiting—the word "NOVELIST" can be found, if only under the lens of a microscope, on the right-hand edge of the first window on the bottom-left building. Don't bother looking for it. The word is practically invisible to the naked eye and is made all the more unreadable by the black-against-dark-purple background.

Previous installations of the Literary Arts series—which included John Steinbeck, T. S. Eliot, and Ernest Hemingway—were very literal. They depicted the writers as they were, like penciled-in photographs. Not so for the Ayn Rand stamp. But, then again, as Jordan remarked, "this person is very different from authors we have honoured before" (Amick 1999, 102).

The first national postage stamp was issued in 1840 in England. America followed suit in 1847. As a hobby, stamp collecting started off among women and children and was an activity that took place mostly within the home. The driving interest was aesthetic, not economic. But by 1860, Boston's *Daily Advertiser* was able to observe that, now, stamp collecting had evolved into "something more than a mere past time" (Harlow 1940, 18). Indeed, while "[t]his elegant and curious 'mania' is now chiefly indulged in by young ladies, we cannot tell how soon it may take possession of the more mature portion of mankind" (18). And soon, it did. By the 1880s, as a Denver stamp journal snidely remarked, there were three kinds of stamp collecting associations: "those composed altogether of quite young boys; those composed of men and youngsters who have nearly reached manhood; and those composed of both the former" (Gelber 1992, 747).

In a widely cited 1992 essay, "Free Market Metaphor: The Historical Dynamics of Stamp Collecting," Steven Gelber argued that, as the hobby grew, stamp collecting came to be seen by collectors as a metaphor for the free market, mimicking the mechanisms of industrial, Gilded Age capitalism, acting as an intermediary, a go-between, between the worlds of work and pleasure, between business and leisure. Gelber concludes:

> The psychic benefits legitimized stamp collecting as a hobby, that is, as non-work or not-for-profit behavior. Yet the myriad ways in which the hobby paralleled real life gave it another kind of legitimacy. It was a training ground for, and an affirmation of, fundamental capitalist values. More specifically, stamp collecting mimicked the roles of the essential middlemen of capitalism: those who bought and sold the products that other people made. They produced nothing of concrete value themselves, but their mutual demand for a finite supply of stamps made their pastime the perfect free market metaphor. (769)

New light is cast on Gelber's thesis by Ayn Rand, the arch–free marketeer who was also a notorious stamp collector. "She enjoyed it," recalled Evva Pryor, a friend of Rand's (McConnell 2010, 525). "I couldn't believe it, but she really enjoyed it. She had a real child's glee when she opened up those stamps. She was ecstatic. She really loved them."

Unlike many of the collectors Gelber documents in his essay, Rand did not collect stamps for their economic value. Recalls the longtime friend of Rand's and fellow stamp collector Charles Sures (Sures and Sures 2001, 58):

> She did not collect for investment, as some philatelists do. They insist on the best quality and they search for rare stamps, all with the expectation

> that the value of their collection will increase. Ayn collected for keeps and never intended to sell. She was not a stickler for perfect quality in stamps, but they had to be more than merely presentable. They had to be good-looking and above-average quality—not faded or torn. She acquired both used and unused stamps, but she preferred the unused ones.

However, in other ways, Rand's collecting fits perfectly into Gelber's mold. For Gelber, stamp collecting occupies a peculiar, halfway point between work and leisure, providing all the perks of a career without any of the burdens. Writes Rand (1971):

> In the course of a career, every achievement is an end in itself and, simultaneously, a step toward further achievements. In collecting, every new stamp is an event, a pleasure in itself and, simultaneously, a step toward the growth of one's collection. A collector is not a passive spectator, but an active, purposeful agent in a cumulative drive. He cannot stand still: an album page without fresh additions becomes a reproach, an almost irresistible call to embark on a new quest.
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> In a career, there is no such thing as achieving too much: the more one does, the more one loves one's work. In collecting, there is no such thing as too many stamps: the more one gets, the more one wants. The sense of action, of movement, of progression is wonderful . . . and habit forming.
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> And yet there were also certain differences between the two pursuits: Stamp collecting is an adjunct of, not a substitute for, a career. A career requires problem-solving . . . creative problems, technical problems, business problems, etc. Stamp collecting requires a full, focused attention, but no problem solving; it is a process of cashing in on the given and known. If one makes a substitute for productive work, it becomes an empty escape; an unproductive mind does not need rest.

Still, for Rand, Gelber's central thesis holds true:

> While the world politicians are doing their best to split the globe apart by means of iron curtains and brute force, the world postal services are demonstrating . . . in the quiet, unobtrusive way . . . what is required to bring mankind closer together: a specific purpose cooperatively carried out, serving individual goals and needs. It is the voices of individual men that stamps carry around the globe; it is individual men that need a postal service; kings, dictators and other rulers do

> not work by mail. In this sense, stamps are the world's ambassadors of good will.

When Gaetano's Ayn Rand book covers were published, his work was met with mixed reviews. Some were so impressed that they wanted Gaetano to give them an *Atlas*-themed tattoo. One admirer of the designs even requested that Gaetano paint Rand's portrait on the side of his boat. Others were less happy. "When the new ones first came out, I got a lot of emails from people that were just outraged," Gaetano told his nephew in an interview for *Interview Magazine* (Hebert 2011).

Indeed, a number of Objectivists have complained that Rand herself likely would not have been happy with Gaetano's designs—the book covers or the stamp. "Unfortunately," laments Wyatt McNamara in a recent study of Rand's aesthetic sensibilities, "Nick Gaetano's covers and his Art Deco branding refuse to be shaken" (McNamara 2019, 60). McNamara concludes:

> This world-shaping, nature-taming aspect of Deco's style is deeply Randian, and it makes an appealing case for Art Deco as the typeface of Rand's work, but the fact of the matter is, Rand found Deco to be unimaginative, sycophantic, and at times, beholden to gaudy trends. (59)

Gaetano is unfazed by such criticism. In fact, he embraces it: "I knew that Ayn Rand would hate my work. She hated anything abstract and not literal. I'm totally the opposite. If her ideas had influenced the covers, I never would have been picked. She would have insisted on romantic realism." Indeed, Gaetano had little regard for Rand's romantic realism in the first place: "I thought her aesthetic ideas were shit—appalling. They amounted to state art. Freedom was fine in commerce, but art had to meet her criteria" (Hebert 2011).

But when it came to the stamp, Gaetano told me, "I don't remember any outrage. The reactions to the stamp were pretty positive." In all, 42.5 million of the stamps were printed, selling at a retail price of thirty-three cents apiece (National Postal Museum 1999).

What does Gaetano make of Rand? "I liked . . . *We the Living*, *The Fountainhead*, *Anthem,* and *The Early Ayn Rand*," he told me. "I didn't like *Atlas Shrugged*. It was painful and tedious, and a bunch of her philosophy books were really difficult, monotonous, and boring." When asked by *Interview Magazine* what he thought of Rand and her work, his thoughts, too, were mixed. He liked *The Fountainhead*: "I didn't see it as pro-capitalism; I thought it was against capitalism, because the people that were involved in destroying Howard Roark's dream were all rich, greedy bastards. I was more involved with the personalities

of the people in the books than I was in the ideas" (Hebert 2011). Some of the vitriol aimed at the book surprised him too: "And then I happened to read a review in the *New York Times* about how Ayn Rand would have had the brown shirts marching down Fifth Avenue—that she was a fascist. It was a surprise to me, because I never saw that."[5]

Anthem? "I liked." *We the Living*? "I liked." *The Early Ayn Rand*? "I liked one or two of the stories." *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*? *Philosophy: Who Needs It*? "I was just bored—it was just the same things re-said in different ways." *Atlas Shrugged*? "There were parts of *Atlas Shrugged* that I liked, but it's three or four times longer than it needs to be." Jordan concurred. "I liked *The Fountainhead* (liked the movie version as well) but felt exactly like Nick about the rest."

"Words can be fucking amazing," Gaetano surmised. "Words can be fire; words can be ice. But Ayn Rand never moved me; not one inch" (Hebert 2011).

For historians, stamps can serve as a sort of cultural highlight reel, underscoring the most important places, names, and events. As Chris Matthew Sciabarra (2003) notes, the commemorative stamp marks a tipping point, the point when "Rand-mania reached a cultural apex of sorts" (42).

Regrettably, however, now that Rand has been immortalized on a postage stamp—an honor shared by Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and George Washington—overeager historians can overinflate Rand's political significance, either to paint her in a more favorable light by puffing up her credentials, or to reimagine her as the cynical mastermind of neoliberalism, behind everything from the financial crisis to austerity. In his *A History of America in Thirty-Six Postage Stamps*, which does pretty much what it says on the tin, Chris West (2014) tells his readers a thrilling tale:

> In 1999 a stamp was issued for Ayn Rand, the literary celebrant of unfettered capitalism. One of her great admirers was Alan Greenspan, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, who could have curbed the market's "irrational exuberance" (a phrase he used back in 1996) with tighter monetary policies but preferred to just let it rip. Ayn Rand would have approved, heartily. (277)

Heartily. Nice.

Still, that Rand was commemorated by the USPS—an organization that she would have privatized without a second thought—is no mean feat. (At the stamp's unveiling, Leonard Peikoff was able to quip that this was the first time that a branch of government had ever recognized Rand's intellectual contributions, and that, hopefully, other branches would soon follow [Sciabarra 1999,

11].) And for Rand to have been honored alongside Mark Twain, Flannery O'Connor, and F. Scott Fitzgerald speaks to her prestige as a writer and highlights her enduring relevance for today.

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NOTES

1. For an eyewitness report on the unveiling, see Sciabarra 1999, 11.

2. This press release was made available to me by the generous archivists at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum. Any errors are, of course, entirely the fault of The System.

3. I am grateful to Phil Jordan, Nick Gaetano, Jeff Britting, Terry McCaffrey, Chris Matthew Sciabarra, and John Hotchner for answering my questions and providing me with relevant resources.

4. Using the *Beyond the Perf* article as his source, writer Christopher Hebert naturally infers that McCaffrey and Jordan decided on Gaetano without any prior knowledge that he had been chosen to illustrate the covers of Rand's books. In an interview he conducted with Nick Gaetano, his uncle, Hebert, drawing on the 2006 interview, remarks: "What's especially fascinating is that he says they had no idea you'd done the illustrations for the books. That means they'd independently come to the same conclusion as a lot of other people—that your aesthetics were perfect for Ayn Rand" (Hebert 2011). The perfect story. But, it turns out, not a true one.

5. The insinuation of a hidden fascism in *Atlas Shrugged* is leveled by Granville Hicks, in a lacerating book review for the *New York Times*: "Thinking of the holocaust implied by this paragraph [see Rand ([1957] 2007, 1158)], one remembers Ignatius Donnelly's 'Caesar's Column' and Jack London's 'The Iron Heel.' But the destruction Donnelly and London described—not without relish—was trivial compared with the disaster Miss Rand so cheerfully envisages. Perhaps most of us have moments when we feel that it might be a good idea if the whole human race, except for us and a few nice people we know, were wiped out; but one wonders about a person who sustains such a mood through the writing of 1,168 pages and some fourteen years of work" (Hicks 1957).

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