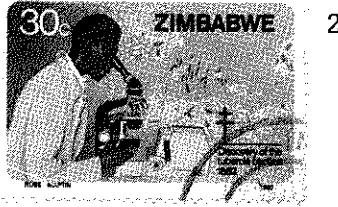
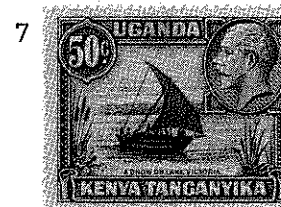
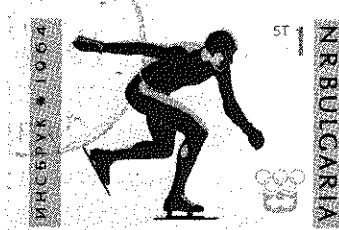


Looking at Stamps



Dennis Altman



For most people stamps are objects which are bought after queuing at the Post Office, used, and discarded. Other than stamp collectors, few people really look closely at them, even though almost everyone who is literate makes frequent use of stamps.

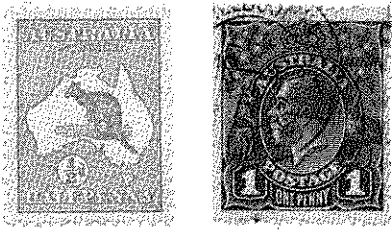
But consider the following sample of recent stamps. Stamps are issued to mark special occasions, from Fidel Castro's appearance at the United Nations to the birth of royal princes; to celebrate science and invention, as in Britain's commemoration of Charles Darwin (1) and Zimbabwe's homage to the discoverer of the tubercule bacillus(2); to honour traditional culture, as in these stamps from Lebanon, Trinidad, and Greece (3); to celebrate sport — Bulgaria and Sweden (4); and to display popular culture, as in Monaco's illustrations of stories by Jules Verne (5) and Hans Christian Anderson, or the popularity of Disney characters, or this Japanese stamp displaying a popular myth (6).

Stamps may be seen both as works of art and as propaganda, probably the most ubiquitous and varied sets of images produced by governments today. Unlike post cards, posters or match-books, stamps remain almost entirely the monopoly of governments, and are therefore invaluable as a reflection of the official culture promoted by different states.

In his novel, *A Bend in the River*, V.S. Naipaul wrote:

Small things can start us off in new ways of thinking, and I was started off by the postage stamps of our area. The British administration gave us beautiful stamps. These stamps depicted local scenes and local things; there was one called "Arab Dhow." (7) It was as though, in these stamps, a foreigner had said, "This is what is most striking about this place." Without that stamp of the dhow I might have taken the dhows for granted. As it was, I learned to look at them. Whenever I saw them tied up at the waterfront I thought of them as something peculiar to our region, quaint, something the foreigner would remark on, something not quite modern and certainly nothing like the liners and cargo ships that berthed in our own modern docks. (p22)

Even if you have never collected stamps, to start looking at them is, like Naipaul, to start seeing things anew. What appears on stamps is a message, for those often ignored pieces of coloured paper on the corner of an envelope are part of the picture of the world and of the national identity which



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governments seek to create.

National Identity

Stamps are often very revealing of the problems of national self-definition; it is almost a cliché to observe that governments put on stamps that which they consider most symbolic of the nation, whether it be the Queen's head in the case of Britain, the various female heads representing France, or the shells of the Pacific Islands. The search for a national symbol is a constant theme for some countries such as Australia. The first federal issue in 1913 — stamps from the six colonies were in use for the first twelve years of federation — showed a kangaroo superimposed on a map of Australia. (8) These were quickly followed by a series bearing the portrait of George V (9), and this ambivalence between national and imperial themes has persisted until the present. In 1978 the first of an annual issue for Australia Day appeared (10) to be followed by the inauguration of an annual issue for the Queen's birthday two years later (11). One may trace a similar ambivalence in the history of Canadian stamps, from the first stamp which depicted a beaver to the many issues which depict the Queen.

"Settler societies" — those countries like Canada and Australia which were settled as part of the great expansion of Europe into the rest of the world during the past few centuries — pose particular problems for stamp designers in that the great events and victories of European settlement also mark the defeat and often partial genocide of the original inhabitants. Solutions to this dilemma range from that of New Zealand, which has recognized Maori culture and history on its stamps from early days (12), through Canada with its first recognition in the 1950s: "Indians drying Skins" (13) and an "Eskimo" in 1955 (14), to South Africa which has yet to show a non-white on its stamps. The Soviet Union, while prone to issue stamps showing the extent of the country (15) rarely acknowledges non-Russian cultures, while the United States has been only slightly better in acknowledging its Indian heritage (16).

Most interesting in this respect are those countries of Central and South America with a strong Indian heritage which has rarely made it onto their stamps. Peru, for example, barely acknowledged this past for the first hundred years of postal issues, preferring to honour Pizarro (17), Simon Bolívar (18) and other aspects of its European heritage, with only a few exceptions such as a stamp showing "the Inca" in 1934 (19). Following a change in regime in the beginning of the 1970s, however, Peruvian authorities started producing stamps showing various aspects of the Inca heritage. Of Latin American countries, Mexico has probably been the most consistently willing to show its Indian past (20); Bolivia has been more typical in its reluctance to acknowledge its pre-Hispanic history, with only a couple of philatelic references, such as stamps issued in 1960 for "tourist publicity."

Israel is perhaps a special case, in that almost all of its stamps explicitly assert a Jewish identity, both political and spiritual. Thus Israeli stamps cover the gamut of Jewish history, from Biblical references to Noah's ark (21) and the Flight from Egypt through the history of the Diaspora, as in stamps showing old synagogues and Jewish culture, the Holocaust, the foundation of Israel, and the various subsequent wars and disputes over territory (22). The non-Jewish population of Israel is never acknowledged, and the only non-Jews to appear on its stamps so far have been Eleanor Roosevelt, Lord Balfour, President Truman and Raoul Wallenberg, all of whom have obvious connections with Israel.

Where conflict over language reflects larger conflicts over national iden-



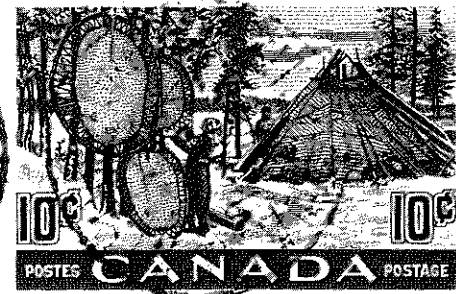
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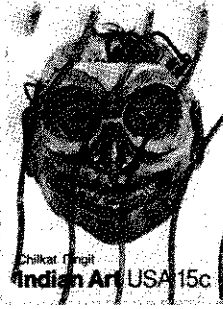
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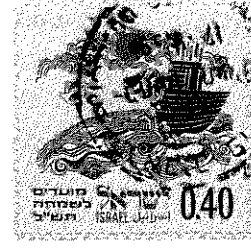
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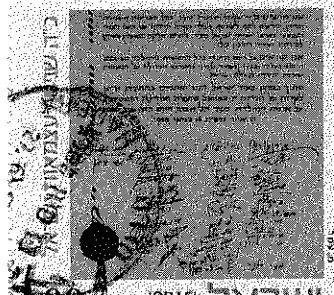
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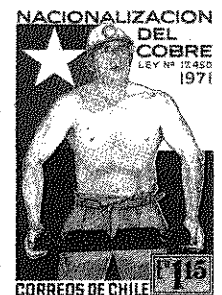
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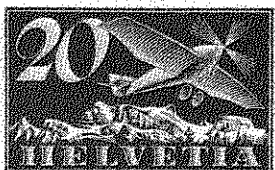
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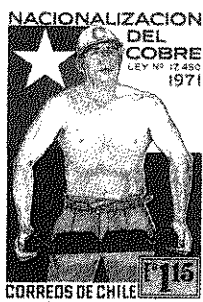
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tity, this immediately poses the question of what language to use on stamps. Canada, South Africa and Belgium carefully balance their two official languages. For a time South Africa issued an English and Afrikaans version of each stamp (23), India uses both English and Hindi on its stamps and Norway — which recognizes two versions of its language — alternates between “norge” and “Noreg” to identify its stamps. The Swiss use the Latin name “Helvetia” to avoid the whole problem (24).

Stamps and the Commemoration of History

One of the clearest political implications of stamps is as markers of a given country. Indeed, it is curious how rarely historians have looked at stamps as an insight into shifts in official culture and state ideology. Examples of this can be found every time a country undergoes a revolution, civil war or even dramatic change in regime; under Allende Chile issued stamps commemorating the takeover of the copper mines (25), under Pinochet it honoured the military takeover.

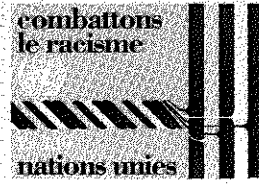
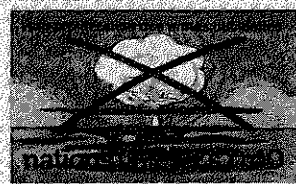
Perhaps the best example is the shift that occurred in Spain during the Civil War (1937-38): while the last issues of the Republican government showed militia defending their territory (there was even a special overprint to mark the defence of Madrid), Franco's nationalists, who began issuing stamps for areas under their control two years before their final victory, appealed to religious symbols, such as Isabella the Catholic (26) and the Holy Year of Campostelle. One can see similar shifts in Italy after Mussolini's accession to power, or in the Soviet Union, Cuba or China. The history of Chinese stamps is enormously complicated, because of the situation of the Japanese occupation and the control by the Communists of various local areas prior to their final takeover; in that year — 1949 — there were stamps being issued by the Nationalists, numerous local communists (“North East” and “East Province”), and the first general issues of the victorious government (27).

In March 1985, as part of the US government's campaign against Nicaragua, Vice President Bush brandished several Nicaraguan stamps bearing portraits of Karl Marx to “prove” that the Sandanista government had become truly Marxist. He neglected to point out that the Sandanista government had also honored George Washington and Pope John Paul II on their stamps.

The use of stamps to “prove” a case against Nicaragua is not limited to the present. In 1901, during the Senate debate on whether to cut a canal from the Atlantic to the Pacific through Nicaragua or Panama, Senator Mark Hanna mailed a Nicaraguan stamp to all Senators. It showed the Motombo volcano “in glorious eruption,” (28) thus reinforcing Hanna's argument against the Nicaraguan site. In 1937, a stamp depicting a map of Nicaragua with an incorrect boundary line almost provoked a war with Honduras.

Examples of claims to disputed territory through maps and slogans on stamps abound; one famous example is the stamps produced by Paraguay in its war (1929-35) with Bolivia over the Gran Chaco territory (29), to which Bolivia replied with stamps showing the disputed territory on its own map (30). Paraguay, the more successful in the contest, marked the final peace conference and treaty in 1939 with a series of stamps. Similarly, Germany's takeover of various parts of “the homeland” were the basis for several stamp issues during the Nazi regime, as in these stamps from Austria and Poland (31).

Argentina has asserted its claims to disputed territory on its domestic postage stamps, declaring its control over part of the Antarctic (32) as well as its claim to the Malvinas (Falklands) as far back as 1936 (an issue which was



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withdrawn under British pressure).

An Internationalist Political Culture

One of the clichés about stamp collecting has long been that it promotes international understanding and harmony; the Secretary General of the United Nations, Perez de Cuellar, claimed that "Stamps carry a message of their own and lead to world understanding." The stamps issued by the United Nations are the closest to a guide to the current language of the international equivalents to motherhood and apple pie: recent issues have espoused such issues as conservation, human rights and opposition to racism (32). Other issues are somewhat more contentious, such as stamps proclaiming the new international economic order or the rights of the Palestinians. Themes such as these are taken up by a number of countries: the Soviets, for example, are particularly assiduous in promoting peace on stamps (33).

The new internationalist language is often promoted through international years and common stamp issues. Each year the countries of Western Europe produce stamps to mark their dedication to the idea of European community, often with common designs (34).

Global Themes

There are, too, many themes and events that are commemorated by a number of countries which on first sight have little to do with political ideals. A good example is the Olympics, which has become an almost mandatory subject for a plethora of stamp issues every four years. One doubts whether Maldives took part in the 1976 Winter Olympics, for which they produced stamps (35), and the United States had already produced their issues for the 1980 Moscow Olympics when they decided to boycott them (36).

Over the past twenty years growing numbers of countries have issued Christmas stamps, and their proliferation is an interesting index of the diffusion of western imagery, as in the use of classical European religious art on the stamps of Malawi or Togo (37).

Perhaps the most fascinating instance of the growth of an international culture is the growth of stamps related to the British Royal Family. The existence of Empire meant that the British sovereign was a feature of stamp design from the earliest days, and the Commonwealth countries preceded Britain in depicting non-reigning members of the Royal Family (the pictures of the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret on stamps of Canada and New Zealand) (38). As more countries became independent and gave up the Queen as head of state one might have expected fewer royal stamps. In fact, as the Queen has disappeared from definitive issues, those commemorating royal events have increased.

The wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana in 1981 unleashed an orgy of commemoratives, and not only from the Commonwealth; the wedding was marked by stamps from Bhutan, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Niger, Paraguay and, most amazing of all, North Korea, all aimed, obviously, at stamp collectors (39). Many of these countries then followed up with commemoratives for the birth of Prince William and the twenty first birthday of Princess Diana — not, one would have thought, a great moment for most countries. The 85th birthday of the Queen Mother in 1985 and the 60th birthday of the Queen in 1986 produced a complex series of commemoratives from a large number of dominions and colonies, between them telling the life story of the Queen. However, there are limits to the philatelic selling of "the royals": Buckingham Palace vetoed a move in 1985 by the British Virgin Islands to use the Queen's

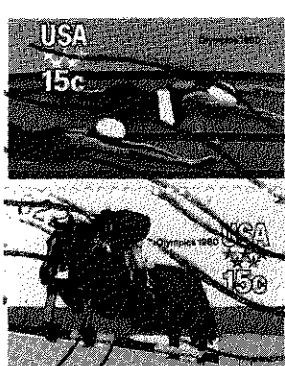


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REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES

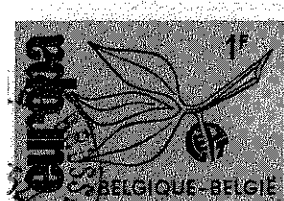
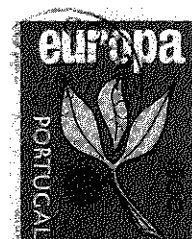


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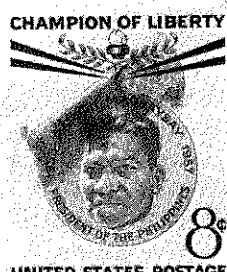
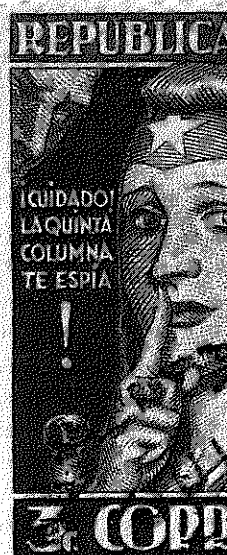
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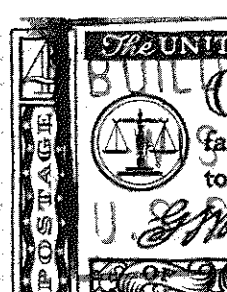
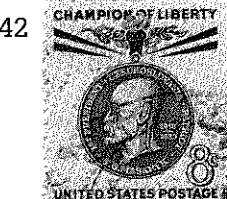
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head on a stamp bearing a portrait of Michael Jackson.

Stamps as Propaganda

In a sense all stamps have a propaganda purpose. Nonetheless there is clearly a difference between a stamp proclaiming "smash Japanese imperialism" and one showing dogs and flowers. Stamps with explicitly political messages are less rare than one might expect, or indeed than the intensely conservative stamp collecting world likes to recognize. Many stamps serve as political posters in miniature, conveying an unambiguous message about the political programme of the issuing government.

In 1943 Cuba issued a series of stamps warning against Fifth column activities with captions such as "The Fifth Column is like the serpent — destroy it" and "Fulfill your patriotic duty by destroying the Fifth Column" (40). In 1954 Greece asserted its support for union with Cyprus in a series of stamps showing an ink blot on the pages of the British Hansard (41). Most Islamic countries in recent years have issued stamps in support of the Palestinians.

The United States and China have both issued a considerable number of stamps that are intended to convey official ideology. In the late 1950s the United States issued a series of stamps commemorating "champions of liberty" — these included President Magsaysay of the Philippines, Mayor Ernst Reuter of West Berlin and Thomas Massaryk of Czechoslovakia (42), all of whom were staunch anti-communists. These were closely followed by six stamps proclaiming "the American creed" — patriotic sentiments from the Founding Fathers (43) — and in the 1970s a series of definitives proclaimed, among other slogans, that "to cast a free ballot is the root of democracy" and "the people's right to petition for redress" (44).

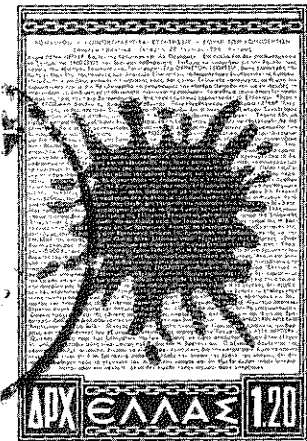
Such ideological issues were more than balanced by China under Mao, including several series in strident red and gold bearing the text of his "anti-American declaration" and some of his poems. Recent Chinese stamps have been noticeably less overtly political in their message. Soviet stamps have tended to be preoccupied with the glories of the Revolution and the achievements of the Soviet state, and the USSR has produced literally hundreds of stamps honouring Lenin (45).

It is ironic that as stamp issues proliferate, fewer and fewer are being used for postal purposes. Various forms of electronic mail and courier services are cutting away at postal services while stamps are bigger, gaudier and more frequent. By the end of the century it is likely that the majority of countries will have joined those — San Marino, the Arab Emirates, the various mini-states of the West Indies and the Pacific — whose stamps go straight from the printing presses of London and Hong Kong to collectors, and are not even available in the countries that allegedly issue them. As this happens the designs of stamps will become more and more interchangeable, and the dominance of Euro-centric designs, aimed at First World collectors, more significant. To date, however, there are enough stamps which represent both the conscious and unconscious political agendas of their governments to make them worth exploring for hints of how they see the world.

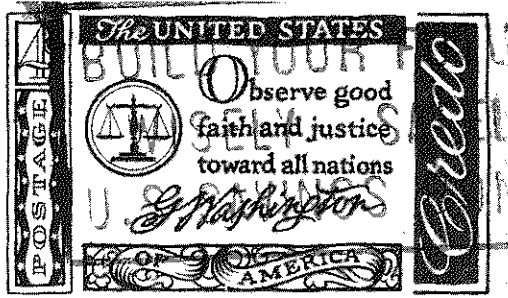
Dennis Altman is a writer now teaching in the Department of Politics at La Trobe University in Bundoora, Australia. His many books include: The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual; Coming Out in the 70s; Rehearsals for Change. He is presently at work on a book on stamps.



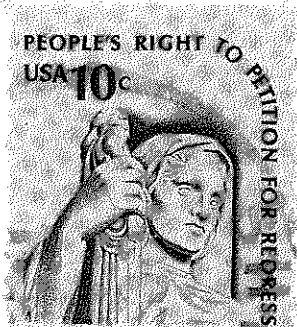
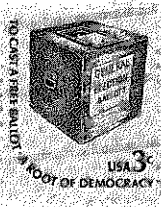
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