



**NO SMALL CHANGE**  
 The average stamp generates \$1 million in revenue. Some stamps are more popular than others. Insects and Spiders in 1998 made \$20 million. Elvis, the most popular stamp ever, netted \$36 million.

DESIGN DISCIPLINES

# SMALL WONDERS

E-mail may be *de rigueur* for daily correspondence, but the USPS is still going strong. And this government institution is one of design's most interesting clients.

In August 2001, San Francisco designer Michael Osborne returned from lunch to a message on his desk: "Ethel called from the post office." He set the note aside and forgot about it.

Ethel called again the next day. She was persistent. "Believe me," she told Osborne's assistant. "He wants to take this call."

Ethel, it turned out, was Ethel Kessler, one of six art directors on contract with the U.S. Postal Service. She was calling to offer Osborne a chance to design the 2002 Love stamp—an itty-bitty job with a print run of, oh, 1.2 billion.

For Osborne, principal of MOD/Michael Osborne Design, the assignment was sort of karmic. A Val-

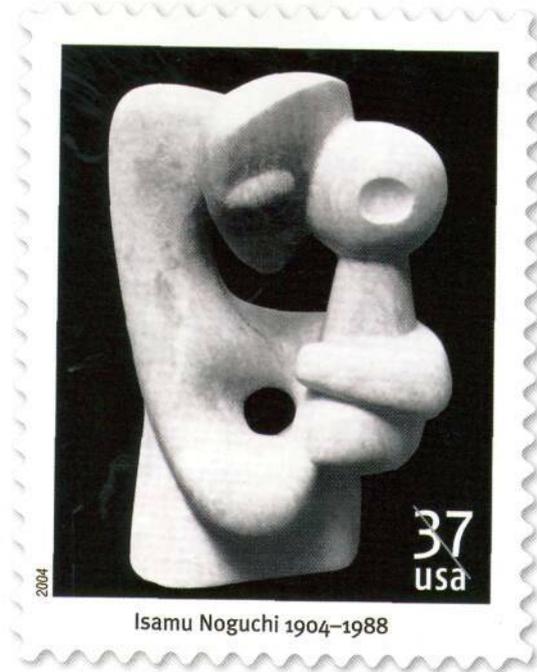
entine's Day promo for his letterpress shop, One Heart Press, had landed in the hands of a U.S. Postal Museum employee in Washington, DC. The museum staffer passed the card along to Kessler at just the right time. Love is funny that way.

A couple of weeks later, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. As the nation grieved, Osborne sat in his studio for three days, writing and drawing the word "love" over and over. Bright, life-affirming colors emerged from the flurry of sketches on his desk. He presented Kessler with a booklet of 14 Love-stamp concepts. So far, the USPS has produced two; and has also invited Osborne to design a pane of wedding stamps.



#### NO SMALL PROJECT

For the Noguchi stamp series, Derry Noyes chose typography that looked contemporary but not too bold, so as not to overpower the art. The type had to be understated and feel slightly Japanese.



#### NO SMALL HONOR

The USPS negotiates usage rights, but doesn't pay to use celebrity likenesses or other intellectual property on stamps. Being featured on a U.S. stamp is second only to being featured on U.S. currency.

## PHILATELY 101

Stamps aren't just pretty pictures. They're serious money-makers for the federal government, and big business for collectors. Vive la variety:

- **Definitives** are garden-variety stamps (for example, flags) that are printed in large quantities and are sold for many years. Less than 1 inch tall, they're the most diminutive. New definitives are issued when the postage rates change or a new series debuts.
- **Commemoratives** are printed in limited quantities and sold for a finite period of time (no longer than one year), after which they become collectibles. The most popular commemorative of all time? The 1993 Elvis stamp, which grossed \$36 million.
- **Specials** supplement each year's regular stamp issues and remain on sale for one to two years. They include holiday and special-occasion designs such as love, Christmas and wedding stamps.
- **Semi-postals** sell for a few cents more than the cost of postage to raise money for a cause. These issues have to be authorized by Congress. Examples include the 2002 Breast Cancer stamp and the 2004 Stop Family Violence stamp.
- **Series** is a term that refers to all of the variations of design and value of a particular stamp issue. A series can grow over many years. For example, the 2004 John Wayne stamp is part of the "Legends of Hollywood" series, which also includes likenesses of Marilyn Monroe (1995), James Dean (1996), Lucille Ball (2001) and Audrey Hepburn (2003).

## GODS AND GENERALISTS

Anyone can propose an idea for a U.S. postage stamp, but few people ever get to design one. According to Terry McCaffrey, manager of the USPS stamp-development program for the past 14 years, the agency receives about 50,000 recommendations and introduces 25 new commemorative stamp subjects each year. Some stamp sheets include four to 10 variations on a theme, so the number of designs produced annually is about 100. The U.S. market for stamp design, with its client of one, is small. McCaffrey was the first designer hired by the U.S. Postal Service 34 years ago. Only 10 other people in the world have jobs like his.

The governing body that shepherds stamp development in the U.S. is equally idiosyncratic. Suggestions are filtered through the Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC), an interdisciplinary group of 15 educators, historians, designers and philatelists appointed by the Postmaster General. CSAC members include former Notre Dame basketball coach Richard "Digger" Phelps, American Film Institute director Jean Picker Firstenberg, designer Michael Brock and information-design strategist Sylvia Harris.

Stamp subjects approved by the CSAC are delegated to the six art directors for creative development. The art directors then partner with additional designers, illustrators, artisans, typographers and photographers, or, in some cases, opt to design the stamps solo. McCaffrey, whom Kessler describes as the "Steven Spielberg of Stamps" acts as executive creative director and sounding board for all projects and collaborators. Every quarter, the art directors convene in Washington to present new and revamped concepts for CSAC review. Stamp mania can occupy anywhere from 50% to 80% of an art director's time, depending on where the project is in a given cycle.

## THE ULTIMATE MAIL

Who gets John Wayne and who gets the Arctic Tundra? Project assignments are usually made in accordance with art directors' individual interests and obsessions. Derry Noyes, daughter of the modernist architect Eliot Noyes, was the obvious choice to direct the 1998 Alexander Calder stamps, having grown up with the Calders (and the Eameses) as family friends. Carl Herrman, a die-hard surfer, was a natural for a set on extreme sports. Phil Jordan, a pilot and former art director for the Smithsonian's Air and Space Magazine, is always a given for aviation subjects.

Like logos, stamps can look deceptively simple, but the research behind them is exhaustive. It has to be. U.S. stamps are expected to have broad multicultural and intergenerational appeal. They must speak to both everyday citizens and fanatical collectors. They must be quintessentially American. And there are hard rules. For example, stamps cannot honor specific businesses, industries, organizations or religious institutions. Living persons can never appear on postage, and dead ones only become stamp-worthy after 10 years—with the exception of U.S. presidents (watch for Reagan in early 2005). For the complete criteria, visit [www.usps.com/communications/organization/csac.htm](http://www.usps.com/communications/organization/csac.htm).