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POSTAL STAMPS AND THE HISTORIAN

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[p.1] I am far from being a professional after-dinner speaker, nor do I find it humorous and funny at all to be set to work tonight instead of being allowed to enjoy peacefully my wine and listen to the performance of one of my rhetorically far better equipped colleagues.

I did not even know how to start a table-talk, and I had to turn to mediaeval manuals of rhetoric for advice. They were not very satisfactory. Jerome and Alcuin suggested to introduce a speech by a so-called ship-metaphor: The speaker should compare himself and oration with a ship ready to leave the safe harbour and to dare winds and waves of a rough rude sea. But my rather limited nautical vocabulary did not permit me to consider this suggestion.

Another manual recommended to start with a praise of the predecessor's speech. Now the last after-dinner speaker I heard at a Phi Alpha Theta dinner was Mr. *Guttridge*; his speech, as all of you would admit, was beyond praise, so I cannot praise it.

A third suggestion was to compare banqueters with flowers. I rather liked that idea. I found it suitable and nice to think of [p.2] Mr. *Bolton*, our chairman eternal and beyond time, in terms of the queen of flowers, the rose; and of Mr. *Hicks*, our chairman within time, logically as primrose—unless Mr. Guttridge would claim for himself this flower so important dear to Disraeli, and therewith to Queen Victoria and the English historian. Also I liked to think of my roommate *Van [Nostrand]* in classical terms as another “Hyacinthos”, a hyacinth or crocus, or of Mr. *Kerner* as a violet, modestly hidden away in the cold southwestern corner of Wheeler 30. It would have been natural to compare Mr. *Palm* with a Phoenix and Mr. *Hammond* with an exotic Bancroft Yucca. *Kinnaird* should be given the choice of some Scotch emblem, broom or thistle, leaving to punch-happy *Larry Harper* of course the snapdragon.

As I said, I liked the idea, and I might have carried it through had my knowledge of Botany been more perfect than it is, and had those flowery comparisons led me to the few remarks which I wanted to drop—a few remarks on “Postage Stamps & the Historian.”

I assume that all of us had and have the same experience: whenever we buy postage stamps we get a new type, especially in the 3¢ class, showing an image both beautiful and instructive. Last year's [heron of Everglades National Park](#), overcutting [p.3] with its bill the map of Florida, seems to tell you where to hibernate when you wish to escape the icy Californian winter. But, within the ornithological sphere I felt—in my capacity as a cook—more attracted by last year's large brown stamp displaying a well-sized hen which represented (I should say: in a

very dignified fashion) the *Centennial of the [American Poultry Industry 1848-1948](#)*. This centennial seemed to indicate that the art of laying-eggs-successfully was invented in 1848; and in my other capacity—as historian—I realized that this revolutionary invention should probably be connected with the March-Revolution, since March is the right time for laying eggs anyhow. Moreover, this Poultry Centennial stamp no doubt should be viewed together with the handsome purple stamp of the same year, indicating together with the portraits of three ladies “*100 Years of [Progress of Women](#)*,” 1848-1948. I find it difficult to imagine that the historian of 2548 would miss the missing link between the art of laying eggs and the Progress of Women; and, of course, that colleague of 2548 will be a bad historian if he overlooks the obvious inner connection of those brown eggs & progressive women, on one hand, with the Communist Manifesto of 1848 on the other, which has not received a memorial stamp. The Communist Manifesto leads us [p.4] of course to Sutter’s Mill as depicted on the *[California Gold Centennial 1848-1948](#)* stamps—all the more so since Marx, in 1851, discusses very seriously economic implications of the Californian gold findings. I do not know to what extent the device ‘Forward’ of the *[Wisconsin Centennial](#)* stamp of 1948 may have stimulated the events 100 years ago, but I should not like to exclude the possibility that Wisconsin’s ‘Forward’ is causally responsible for the Berlin Socialist Newspaper, the *Vorwärts*. At any rate, it is fascinating to think that in 2548 so much new light should be shed, by our postage stamps, on the events of 1848. It all will appear very global—or oval.

We ourselves, however, are contemporaries; we still know that those stamps reflect unrelated facts. This lack of interrelatedness, however, is not true with regard to other modern postale stamps. For some time I faithfully sponged and glued Miss Juliette Gordon Low, *[Founder of the Girl Scouts](#)*, to my envelopes, until recently I received at the post-office a far more interesting stamp. It shows, on green ground, and in full frontality, a Puerto Rican with his broad-rimmed straw hat. The inscription reads: *First [Gubernatorial Election in Puerto Rico: Inauguration Jan.2, 1949](#)*. [p.5] In his right hand, the Puerto Rican holds a cog-wheel; in his left, an urn with the telling inscription “BALLOT”.

Now we begin to move on historically safer ground than hitherto. This Puerto Rican “Ballot” stamp, it is true, records a historical event; but it is also political propaganda. This stamp may travel to Bulgaria, Titonia, Hungary, to any country beyond or between the iron curtain; it may reach such countries as have not yet been re-educated, Germany and Austria, or Spain and Argentina. And in that case the square-inch of gummed green paper carries a message to those abroad, a message saying that the principle of free and secret elections and of self-government—in short, the whole compound of political ideas and of *Weltanschauung* as described by the ballot urn—have been given by the U.S. to Puerto Rico. We should not forget that the word “Ballot” ranks very highly in our political vocabulary and in our Post-war Propaganda. It has been dinned into the ears of the Post-War Continentals. It is like a magical power or promise. “Saint Ballot” one might call it, or compare it to the Roman functional deities: *Pax Romana*, *Concordia*, *Fides*, and similar virtues—that is, Ballot with a capital B and “she”.

[p.6] Now the historian is not only entitled to, he is obliged to raise the question concerning the sources: where does that political propaganda on postage stamps derive from? What are the fore-runners? Is it a new invention? Is there a tradition? Is it new only by transference, by applying an old idea to a new material?

It is well known, though not often realised, that our postage stamps are nothing but the replacement of coins. Our oldest stamps of the 1850s, as every philatelist would know, betray that original connection of coin and stamp very clearly. Those early value-symbols are round like coins, though pressed in a quadrangle or square piece of paper. This pattern is found in practically all the issues of German States before 1870. It has been preserved with tenacity in England. And in this country the 1¢ and 3¢ embossments on envelopes not only are round, but they show also the relatively high relief of coin-images and coin-inscriptions. This, by and large, was the customary type before the modern fancy and propaganda imagery got hold of our gummed paper coinage.

Once we have recognized the connection of stamp and coin it is relatively easy to ascertain the [p.7] ancestors of our propaganda stamps which proclaim to the world the Western political concepts. The stamp propaganda is a coin propaganda by transference. However, the problem is not quite as simple as that. For in history there are only two periods in which coins propagated political ideas: the Roman Empire period and the High Renaissance and Classicistic era.

The Greek coins, beautiful as they are, were mythological or what we may call “heraldic.” They heralded the god or gods protecting a city, or showed the insignia of the gods; but they did not refer, or very rarely, to historico-political events; they were not narrative, nor were they related to any contemporary happening.

This was hardly different with regard to early Roman coinage. But in the last century of the Republic when Rome had become a Empire—even a missionary Empire—and had a distinct message to convey to the world, the coins began to refer to actual events and, what is more important, to interpret them in an official manner. A coin, bearing the inscription “Ides of March”, showed the Phrygian felt cap, the liberty cap, flanked by two daggers. It was issued by the murderers of Caesar, Brutus Cassius and the others, and it offered a very telling [p.8] interpretation of Caesar’s assassination from the point of view of his adversaries: it meant freedom recovered.

During the following centuries the Roman emperors developed in their coinage actually their whole political program, giving at the same time the imperial interpretation of the events. Finally, in the fourth century, the coins reflected the struggle between pagan henotheism and Christian monotheism. But once the new religion had secured the victory, the coin propaganda

of their world stopped; it referred to things beyond time and space rather than to events in time. And during the Middle Ages the coinage showed hardly more than almost unintelligible monograms, signs, and lettering. With very few exceptions they did not allude to contemporary events.

Heraldic coinage, though far better executed than before, prevailed also in the Renaissance. However, medallions were issued quite frequently to commemorate current events—in Italy as well as in France, Germany, and England. A medallion, e.g., of Henry VIII, showing an inscription in the three biblical languages—Hebrew, Greek, and Roman—manifests the king’s ecclesio-political program hardly less distinctly than the text of the “Act of Supremacy” itself.

[p.9] Allusions to contemporary events became more frequent in the coinage of the late 16th and 17th centuries; and by the time of Louis XIV it becomes actually feasible to write history again on the basis of numismatic evidence. The Peace of Munster, e.g., is commemorated by Louis XIV. He is in the attire of Hercules standing on a Hydra while the inscription expounds *ERIT HERCULE MAIOR*. The threat of the Turks is interpreted by the amusing inscription: “Josuah stopped the Sun, Louis stopped the Moon”, i.e. the Half-Moon, the Turks. And in a similar fashion the other events of that eventful reign are recorded on coins.

The idea of using coins propagandistically climaxed, in modern times, in the age of the French Revolution. Between 1789 and 1815 literally hundreds of different coins and medallions were issued in France. They were genuine proclamations to the world, expounding not only the political philosophy of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, but heralding also the victories and inner achievements of Republic, Consulate, and Empire. Here, that is, during the classicism of the Napoleonic era, we find the greatest proximity to Roman coin propaganda which modern Europe so far has produced. There was, once more, that combinations of Empire and Mission.

[p.10] The dynastic legitimism of the 19th century fell back again on the heraldic display of ruler images & coats of arms, or of national symbols. Narratives, usually of a dynastic pattern, are not lacking completely, but those motives are rare. And since the coins no longer told a continuous story comparable to our Comic strips, people did not bother to look very much at the money they used and spent. The coins lost their propaganda value, as this value was not utilized and lay fallow.

This modern blindness may explain the fact that the grossest emblematic syncretisms could pass almost without being noticed. Such involuntary ambiguities had happened before. A Duke of Artois allowed his coins to exclaim *Ego sum Deus*—“I (the coin) am your God—and Louis XIV was probably correct when issuing coins which announced *Per me reges regnant*—“Kings rule through me.” But unsurpassed, in a way, is our Nickel preceding the Monticello type. Here we

find on the obverse the device “Liberty” symbolized, of all possibilities, by the head of a Red Indian. And the reverse puts, as it were, the dot on the “I”. It shows a buffalo with the inscription *E pluribus unum*—“from millions of buffalos one single *buffalino* is left.” This coin passes daily through our fingers. But how many of you—to [p.11] be honest—have ever noticed the paradoxes of this coin?

In other words, we no longer look carefully enough at the coins as to recommend them as a means of propaganda. Moreover, since 1914 coined currency hardly ever travels abroad. Hence, in our age of currency restrictions all over the world the colourful little scraps of gummed paper have taken over the role of the mute, yet eloquent, propaganda formerly spread by metal coins. Also, the colourful appearance of the stamps may attract our attention more easily than coins; and their propaganda value is certainly high.

For don't let us forget that the Puerto Rican “Ballot” stamp is not an isolated document. The [Pulitzer stamp](#) of 1947, with the inscription *Our Republic and its Press will rise or fall together* announces this country's political creed just as distinctly as the Puerto Rican stamp: Freedom of the Press & Freedom at the polls belong together. Add to these the stamp of “These [four immortal Chaplains](#)” with the inscription *Interfaith in Action*, implying “freedom of religion”; take the 1948 Indian Centennial of the *Five civilized* [p.12] [Indian Tribes of Oklahoma](#), perhaps together with the stamp for Dr. [George Washington Carver](#), and you add the idea of racial freedom. Or, the 1946 [Smithsonian Institute Stamp](#) inscribed *For the increase and Diffusion of Knowledge among Men*, which proclaim the progress and freedom of scientific research. These stamps cover the basic principles of life of this country which are summed up by the [Abraham Lincoln](#) emission of stamps bearing the message “*that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from earth.*”

I do not want to discuss the propaganda stamps of other countries—for instance, the airmail stamps of Vatican City showing the Holy Angels carrying the House of Loretto, or the Austrian and Swiss stamps which remind us of ads of travel agencies.

The main problem may have been clarified: that stamps are a very important instrument for the spread of political ideas and of political propaganda whenever Empire Idea and idea of mission are combined; further that the postage stamps successfully continue a tradition which has been started by the Roman empire; finally that stamps are a very interesting and most valuable source of information for the historian.

[p.13] Let me therefore conclude with an appeal—not one *pro domo*, but an appeal for the sake of the modern European historian and the American historian: that some rich donor provide this university with the necessary funds for establishing an *Institute of Philatelic Studies*.