

Philatelist. It almost sounds a little naughty. A philatelist is a person who collects and studies postage stamps. The term "philately" refers to the hobby and the study of stamps. Stamp collecting has been a popular pastime for centuries, with notable individuals like King George V of the U.K. and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt being known philatelists.

Yes, I am a philatelist and collected stamps as a young person. I would respond to print ads in magazines like "Free! 100 worldwide stamps just released...Now, while supplies last. Include 10 cents to cover handling and postage." It turned into quite a geography lesson. I learned about far off places like Rhodesia, Transjordan, Zanzibar and Zululand along with more mainstream countries like Canada, Mexico and Greenland. I even collected some "First Day Issue" envelopes. These represent the first day a new stamp is authorized for use. This year, the U.S. Postal Service will issue 25-30 new stamps including stamps celebrating the 250th anniversaries of the U.S. Army, Navy and Marine Corps, a stamp previewing the 2026 World Stamp Show in Boston and a stamp honoring writer William F. Buckley Jr. Often a ceremony occurs at a post office in a town related to the subject of the stamp. Special envelopes may be created that include a design or "cachet" created by an artist to illustrate more about the story of the stamp.

But enough about philately. What about the artwork itself? Some of the greatest artwork on stamps is that selected each year for the annual Federal Duck Stamp. As any waterfowl hunter knows, since 1934 you must purchase the special stamp, sign it and affix it to your hunting license to legally hunt migratory birds. Although not valid for use for postage, it is considered a high honor for an artist's work to be chosen for use on each year's stamp. There is even a Junior Duck Stamp program that YSAC supports in some of our local schools.

Artwork on any postage stamp represents a miniature but powerful expression of culture, history, and artistic achievement. As functional objects, stamps serve a utilitarian purpose, but as collectibles and visual artifacts, they hold immense value in the world of philately. Since the first adhesive stamp, the Penny Black, was issued in the U.K. in 1840, stamp design has evolved into an art form that reflects national identity and commemorates important people, events, and themes.

Stamps often feature finely detailed portraits, landscapes, architecture, flora, fauna, and iconic artwork, all carefully rendered within the confines of a small rectangle. This constraint challenges designers to create compelling, recognizable images at a tiny scale. Some stamps reproduce famous works of art, such as paintings by Rembrandt, da Vinci, or Frida Kahlo, while others highlight indigenous motifs, folk traditions, or contemporary artistic styles. For philatelists, stamps offer a way to explore and preserve visual and cultural heritage. In many countries including the U.S., stamp advisory committees work with artists, historians, and government agencies to curate designs that reflect civic pride and artistic excellence.

In addition to still paying a few bills by mail, I send off the occasional special occasion card or even a letter now and then. In the case of personal correspondence, I try to match the stamp to the recipient whenever possible, bird stamps for the bird lover, artwork for the art lover, etc. How long will the U.S. Postal Service last do you suppose? After reaching a peak of around 213 billion units in 2006, USPS has continued to experience annual declines in mail volume since. In 2024, the volume of mail delivered by USPS dropped to just 112.5 billion units.