



Beyond philately: stamps and the iconography of globalization

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This presentation explores stamps as an incredibly rich, virtually infinite and important visual archive for global historians that has, so far, remained largely untapped. It highlights a few lines of inquiry that illustrate how stamps can shed light on major moments and trends in modern global history:

- i Whereas stamps initially featured mostly heads of state, royals and state paraphernalia, stamps issued across the globe increasingly reveal a nationalist pedagogy. The (idealized) depiction of local cultural practices, art, monuments and key moments in the nation's history reflects the prevalence of nationalism and the global rise of the nation state. Besides, stamps also captured other global processes, ranging from industrialization, the advent of body cults, scouting, and internationalist ideologies (Rotary, the UN Charter, human rights) and organizations (the Red Cross, UN, UPU, etc.). The emergence of regionalist power blocs and alliances was often anticipated in stamps, the most notable example being the long tradition of issuing stamps with a European (CEPT) theme.
- ii The staging of the “exotic” native inhabitants, culture, ancient monuments, landscapes and primary products of the colony on colonial postage stamps – whether Dutch, British, Portuguese, Spanish or French – reveal strikingly similar visual strategies and colonial ideologies. National stamps in Europe, on the other hand, often featured colonial themes that familiarized the metropole with different aspects and key events associated with the colonial past, not only in the age of high imperialism but also much later, when former colonies had long transformed into independent nation-states. In the latter case, anti-colonialist imaginaries and the pantheon of freedom fighters replaced colonial iconography.
- iii Global political ideologies, such as interwar fascism, Cold War communism, and left-wing South–South internationalism (Bandung, Non-Aligned Movement, Third World), were reflected in the themes depicted on stamps, and also gave expression to new global aesthetic repertoires. For example, stamps issued during the Cold War by countries belonging to or affiliated with the Soviet sphere, e.g. China, Cuba, North Vietnam and the German Democratic Republic, often contained statements of solidarity and reveal a strikingly similar socialist iconography.
- iv Some figures transcended the nationalist pantheon, and were depicted on stamps across the globe, including pioneering scientists (e.g. Robert Koch, Marie Curie and Copernicus), the founder of the Scout Movement (Baden-Powell), political leaders of global stature (e.g. Lenin, Churchill and Gandhi), and cultural icons ranging from Karl Marx to the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, the French writer Romain Rolland and the German composer Ludwig van Beethoven.

Stamps continue to be an interesting visual “barometer” of global politics, ideologies and values, from Chinese projections of geocultural power along the “Silk Roads” to global environmentalism and the COVID-19 pandemic. The presentation will end on a note of reflection and ponder the UPU's “pedagogical role” as an ambassador of globalism at the cusp of an age in which postage stamps seem fated to become increasingly redundant, while philately, once the world's most popular hobby enthusiastically pursued by young and old, holds limited appeal to new generations.