Portraits Podcast- Postage Pairings, With Dan Piazza (Season 4, Episode 8)

[INTRO MUSIC]

Kim Sajet:
So, Dan, I can’t help noticing that you have a very fetching in purple portrait behind you. Can you explain that portrait please?

Dan Piazza:
Yes, by my six year old daughter. I think that's her with long hair and a Purple Heart executed in highlighter. I think purple highlighter.

Kim Sajet:
Right, that would be a good one to submit to the stamp committee. Welcome to Portraits. I'm Kim Sajet, Director of the National Portrait Gallery. It seems like a dying art these days, but remember letters. Before radio and cable news and email and Twitter it was the Postal Service that transmitted ideas and information across land across the sea across political divides. Initially, letters were paid for by the receiver and by private postal services but in 1847, the United States issued two prepaid adhesive stamps. Now letters came with a portrait attached. For five cents, you could get a stamp with an engraving of Benjamin Franklin that would carry a one ounce letter up to 300 miles. For 10 cents, you could get an engraving of George Washington that would get your letter even further. These tiny portraits contain a lot of stories about the United States. And some of them are actually based on paintings and busts and engravings that we have right here at the National Portrait Gallery, or we think they are. Sometimes we're not 100%. Sure. So I asked an expert to look at some of this artwork with me.

Dan Piazza:
My name is Dan Piazza. I'm the Chief Curator of Philately at the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum.

Kim Sajet:
Which means Dan oversees the museum's collection of 6 million stamps, give or take a few.

Dan Piazza:
I haven't counted them all myself. But yes, close to 6 million.

Kim Sajet:
I guess there's a lot to be said for your works of art being nearly small, so you can actually store them.

Dan Piazza:
That's right. They don't take up a lot of room. They don't need all that much care and feeding.

Kim Sajet:
When we sat down, it was pretty clear right away that stamps are about more than just stamps. They're about how we connect and how we communicate. But first, let's clear this up. Just a
question, where does the word Philately come from? Because it's not something it's like it's not like, you know, stamp or laterally or something. Right. How do you get to Philately?

Dan Piazza:
Well, the word Philately was made up at the end of the 19th century, largely by collectors who were a little miffed at, at their collections being described as a boyhood pursuit. The idea that stamp collecting was a child's play, that hobbies were for children. So, they made up this very fancy sounding word with Greek roots so that their stamp collection sounded more impressive and more scientific

Kim Sajet:
Phil from the Greek root meaning love or an attraction for and ately meaning tax exemption. Remember, stamps meant you didn't have to pay for a letter when it arrived. So no duty or tax on delivery.

Dan Piazza:
It's similar to numismatics being coin collecting or deltiology being the name for postcard collecting. That's one most people haven't heard before also.

Kim Sajet:
No, I've never heard of that.

Dan Piazza:
It was a way for people to give kind of a little more importance to what they were doing.

Kim Sajet:
And I guess everything goes back to the Greek or to the Latin at some point, if you want to make yourself sound better, right?

Dan Piazza:
Right.

Kim Sajet:
I asked Dan about that founding father on the first five cent stamp, the patron saint of inventions, Benjamin Franklin.

Dan Piazza:
He was the first postmaster general of the United States appointed by the Continental Congress. But what's less well known about Franklin is that even before he was the first postmaster general of the United States, he was the last royal Postmaster General, under the crown.

Kim Sajet:
What interested me was a stamp of Franklin from 1993. So, it's relatively recent, that commemorated the opening of the National Postal Museum. It's based on one of the most famous paintings in our collection, a portrait by Joseph Duplessis. See, he painted Franklin around 1785 when he was representing the revolutionary American government to the French court. It's also the portrait on the $100 bill. So, he's looking directly out at you and he doesn't you know, he had this amazing wit right he was known as kind of a bon vivant he was sort of the life of the party, everybody loved to have been there. He knew how to speak a number of languages and could entertain a crowd. He's got a paunch is a little bit overweight here. He
does have this sort of I think a bit of a grumpy look. And it might be interesting for you to know that it was around this time that he was actually accused of being a spy. And, and he didn't take that terribly well, he was actually pretty annoyed about it. And I think that that kind of comes out a little bit. I don't know if you can see that?

Dan Piazza:
Annoyance Oh, yes.

Kim Sajet:
But then when it gets translated to the stamp, the stamp actually tries to, in a very small amount of space, convey to people what he did, rather than what he looked like, can you maybe describe the stamp and what's in the stamp?

Dan Piazza:
Sure, in the upper right hand corner, a colonial post writer, referring, I think, to the fact that that Franklin not only organized a lot of the early post routes in the pre-Revolutionary War colonies, but put a lot of work towards figuring out the distances between post offices and the rates of postage that would be charged from one office to the other. He in a very practical turn of mind. The printing press, of course, refers to Franklin's occupation as a publisher, but it's also a postal reference, because much of the mail that was carried by the early postal services in the colonies was newspapers.

Kim Sajet:
As the newspapers circulated and the routes improved, the colonies became a lot more interconnected. Under Franklin, you can get a letter from Philadelphia to New York City in just 33 hours.

Dan Piazza:
Prior to this period, very little energy had been put into building an inter colonial postal network in what became the United States. Most of the colonies were focused on improving their transportation and their communication with the mother country, they all had lobbyists, factors they were called, representing their interests with members of parliament in the government in London. Then under the pressure of increasing colonial wars, suddenly, the colonies find themselves needing to communicate with one another, more conveniently and more readily. And Franklin's the man who comes along and sort of organizes this.

Kim Sajet:
This actually refers to a question I have season four of this podcast is actually about resistance and resilience. So was there a sort of a political strategy attached to creating the postal service that was about resisting British authority?

Dan Piazza:
Well, in you know, it's sort of ironic, because the postal service in the colonies was actually founded by the Crown. And it was established by the crown as a way, among other things to raise money. So, I, they didn't really found it with the idea of fostering resistance. But over time, that was the effect with the development of a postal network, between the colonies that facilitated communication and coordination between pockets of resistance, that without this postal network might have remained more or less isolated. They might have just kind of stayed stewing in their own little grievances of whatever they were angry about in Massachusetts or Virginia, and complaining to their lobbyists over in London, rather than joining up and making
common cause. It really facilitated that sort of cooperation and transmission of ideas that brought about resistance to British rule.

Kim Sajet:
Let's go, we're, I know we're skipping around in history.

Dan Piazza:
Sure.

Kim Sajet:
Let's go to this really fascinating postage stamp. This time, it's two cents and it was done in 1945 and it was a memorial series that was issued just months after Franklin Delano Roosevelt died. But it's another one of those stamps that has all of this other coding, more pictures in there, then just the portrait, but it is based, we think, on a photograph that was done around 1933. Maybe you could talk a little bit about this stamp, and it's red. This is red and white.

Dan Piazza:
Right. So in this time period, there were by agreement among postal administrations around the world through something called the Universal Postal Union. They had tried to standardize the colors of postage stamps. So that in this case, for example, two cent stamps would be red, one cent stamps would be green, three cent stamps would be purple. And this would facilitate as mail traveled around the world, postal clerks who wouldn't necessarily be able to, to read the language on the stamp or to understand the imagery would know where it was from and roughly what it was worth in the local currency and the exchange rate and whether enough postage had been applied to the envelope. So, there was a move to try and standardize the colors. But this was a series of stamps, four stamps in the set I think commemorating FDR, and you've chosen the two cent stamp in the series. Then it shows the Little White House in Warm Springs, Georgia, which is actually where he died. Just a little while after working on his stamp collection by the way, it was the last thing he did.

Kim Sajet:
He was a philatelist then.

Dan Piazza:
He was he was a well-known stamp collector, probably the most famous stamp collector of his time, except for King George the sixth, who was also a stamp collector.

Kim Sajet:
FDR was really passionate about stamps. Historians believed that organizing stamps was stress relief for him, something that he did right before bed, but he also saw stamps as a means of communication, or even if you like propaganda.

Dan Piazza:
This is an era before television. Not terribly many people even have radio in the early 1930s. And so this is mass media. This is a way that the government can get its its ideas in front of Americans visually and have it come right into their homes. Government has very few ways to come into your home in the 1930’s. And so we find FDR issuing stamps to promote his New Deal policies, the National Recovery Administration. I mean, Roosevelt was a stamp collector. And so, he kind of understood the visual language of stamps.

Kim Sajet:
So, photograph that we have of FDR shows him at a desk and he’s got his hands resting on some papers. In one hand there his glasses is reading glasses and another as his pen. Was in fact, the commemorative stamp based on this photograph?

**Dan Piazza:**
I'm almost certain that's the photograph that it's based on. publicity materials at the time, stated that Eleanor Roosevelt had personally selected the photograph to be used on the memorial stamps and stated that the photographer was Harrison Ewing and I think I see the Harrison Ewing embossed Mark, just sort of FDR his elbow there and the only disappointment to me is as you say, his hand is resting on some papers. I, I wish it was one of his stamp albums.

**Kim Sajet:**
Total self-interest, yeah. It's worth noting that FDR’s Postmaster General was his former campaign manager, James Farley. Roosevelt even suggested designs for some stamps and he asked that the colors be softer to use the public that was reeling from the Great Depression. On the other side of the break, some of the people who were overlooked on early stamps who finally find their way onto the envelope.

[Intro Music]

**Kim Sajet:**
Today on the podcast, we're talking about the portraits that connect us through the mail. Early U.S. postage stamps depicted founders and presidents. This young nation was trying hard to look serious. Women, meanwhile, were more or less overlooked. If you listen to our episode about portraits on our money last season, you heard us discussing how there are no women on our banknotes at all today in the 21st century. So, I asked Dan Piazza from the National Postal Museum, how steps stacked up in comparison. You know, it was it a little bit like the money or we did a an interview with Rosie Ross about the money and her big comment was, it took a long time before women got on the money. And when the and when they did in the early days, they tended to be symbolic wom en like Colombiana or Americana. They weren't real women. They were sort of mythical types of women. Was that the same with stamps?

**Dan Piazza:**
Yes. The first woman really on a US postage stamp isn't even American at all. Its Queen Isabella, who appears on a series of stamps in 1893 for the Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

**Kim Sajet:**
Queen Isabella of Spain, right? That's right. That's kind of crazy, right?

**Dan Piazza:**
Yes. And then Martha Washington appears on a few postage stamps.

**Kim Sajet:**
Another one of the first women on a postage stamp was Susan B. Anthony, the teetotal social reformer, who played a pivotal role in women's suffrage.

**Dan Piazza:**
And even at the time, people pointed out, you know, the stamp was issued in 1936. For the anniversary of suffrage for women, as it says at the bottom of the stamp in 1920. So, a 16th anniversary, which is a very strange anniversary to commemorate.
Kim Sajet:
Why commemorate a 16th anniversary? Well, this takes us all the way back to FDR again, it happened to be a presidential election year.

Dan Piazza:
And so, it was FDR electioneering. Using the stamp to electioneer among women who, and then asking them, reminding them that they can vote for him.

Kim Sajet:
The stamp is actually three cents. It's a purple stamp. So, is that back in that time where three cent stamps are purple?

Dan Piazza:
Yes, yes.

Kim Sajet:
Okay, great. I'm learning, I'm catching up here. The stamp is based on a bust that we have a copy of in our collection. We also have a photograph of Susan B. Anthony that looks really close to another stamp that was issued a couple of decades later. The photograph is by Theodore Marceau. But the portrait and the stamp are not a perfect match. So, I asked Dan to take a look.

Dan Piazza:
Yes, this is the first time a woman appears in the irregular series of stamps that's in widespread use, not a commemorative stamp, the first woman other than Martha Washington to be in a definitive series like that. The, the dress and the collar look very similar to the photograph. The angle of the head is somewhat different. I'm not sure if that's because the stamp is based on a slightly different photograph than this or if that's something that happened in the process of translating the photograph into the engraving.

Kim Sajet:
Yeah, in the photograph, she's almost looking directly at you not quite, and she actually looks quite severe. I don't know if you've ever seen a picture of her smiling but I don't think I have. She was always a pretty severe looking woman because a very serious business trying to get women's vote and she is wearing her glasses. Her hair is back in a bun but she has his high color, lace collar with a, a cameo at her throat. In the stamp she's made to look a little bit more likable. She has almost the hint of a smile. She doesn't look quite as stern maybe is the word I'm looking for.

Dan Piazza:
Yeah, certainly looks a little more expressive.

Kim Sajet:
Yeah. Well, you know, one of the things that I've noticed on this little journey that we've been on is not only did it take a long time to get women on the stamps, but there are no people of color. So what's happening there in terms of diversity and inclusion?

Dan Piazza:
Well, the first African American on a US postage stamp is Booker T. Washington in 1940, as part of a series called The Famous Americans, and then George Washington Carver in 1948. So, the depictions are few and far between until the 1970’s. And in the 1970’s, partially I think because of the approaching bicentennial there's a lot more national conversation around who's
represented, who's included, who's part of this bicentennial. And partly in response to this, I think the Postal Service launches in 1978, what they call the Black Heritage Series. And that's a series of stamps that still exists today, there are still new issues each year in the Black Heritage stamp series. So, if this was part of a conscious effort on the part of the Postal Service, not only to include more African Americans in the stamp output, but also to hire African American art directors and illustrators to create those images, like Jerry Pinkney and Tom Blackshear and some other artists.

Kim Sajet:
Were there a lot of African American postal carriers.

Dan Piazza:
Yes, absolutely. The Postal Service, or most of the 20th century was the single largest employer of African Americans in the United States, as carriers as clerks, transportation.

Kim Sajet:
There was resistance to some of the Black Heritage stamps. Critics blasted the Postal Service for putting the author and activist W.E.B. Dubois on a stamp. That's in part because he had fraternized with communist sympathizers. Malcolm X's stamp sparked controversy too for his insistence that African Americans should advance themselves by any means necessary. We get the same critique here at the National Portrait Gallery. So, Dan, you know, obviously, I'm obsessed about portraits, and certainly a piece of what the Postal Museum does. But can you agree that portraits actually make for the best stamps? Is that being cheeky?

Dan Piazza:
Well, I think certainly, portraits are a good design for postage stamps, because the eternal problem of designing postage stamps is how to convey a message with great clarity and a small space. And so portraits, on one hand, I do think are very good for doing that. But I'm,

Kim Sajet:
You're very politic you're not going to pick sides are you?

Dan Piazza:
Well, no, here comes, here comes the but.

Kim Sajet:
Okay.

Dan Piazza:
But when you limit yourself to portraits, then you're limiting yourself to people of whom portraits exist. And so, so, while on the one hand, they can be very strong design wise, they can also mean that a lot of people are left out and not commemorated because their portraits don't exist. And all of the solutions to that are sort of unsatisfactory, although they tried in several instances. In the Black Heritage Series, for example, there are two postage stamps with portraits, commemorating individuals for whom no contemporary portrait exists. And so, they're DuSable and Benjamin Banneker, and the Postal Service actually commissioned artists to create artists' conceptions or artists' portraits of them. In the case of Banneker, there is one very rough woodcut, I think, that was done during his lifetime that may or may not be him and is not really a very good likeness. So, there was a little shred of something to work with there. But in the case of DuSable, there's absolutely nothing so they tried to remedy this, this void. So too much of a
reliance on portraits can mean either that people get left out, or that you resort to fabricating things in order to, in order to represent individuals. Neither one of those is particularly great.

**Kim Sajet:**
So, in a way, the portraits on stamps don't just communicate to us about our history, they also remind us of some of our failings. This is also something we're tackling at the National Portrait Gallery, how to make sure that the people who are not traditionally included in portraits are still represented in a collective memory. You can see the portraits and the stamps that we've been discussing in the show notes of this episode, or at our website, npg.si.edu. Ruth Morris produced this episode. Our podcast team also includes Justin O'Neill, Ann Conanan, Deborah Sisum, and Rebecca Kasemeyer. Our music is by Joe Kye and Brake Master Cylinder, our engineer is Tarik Fouda. Until next time, I'm your host, Kim Sajet.