

Stamping ground: Bookbinders' exhibit pays homage to the genius in a postage stamp

by pmitchell

A postage stamp takes poster-sized ideas and graphics and fits them neatly into something as small as, well, a postage stamp. Proving that point, a stamp issued by the U.S. Postal Service in 2002 has inspired a new book and, most recently, a Smith College exhibit. That show is similarly successful in condensing a wealth of aesthetic, technical and even personal elements into a well-conceived, concise display in the third-floor Book Art Gallery of the Northampton college's Neilson Library.

Called "Inspired Design: The Mentoring Stamp," the exhibit is on view through Dec. 20 and features the bookbindings of 30 members of the New England Chapter of the Guild of Book Workers. Each of the participating binders, including several who live and work in the Valley, bound a copy of "Designing the Mentoring Stamp" (2007) written by Lance Hidy, a well-known artist, typographer and type designer - and former Valley resident.

Organized to provide a showcase of the bookbinders' craft, this is the seventh exhibition of the New England Chapter since 1982. "Inspired Design" is the first show in which members have each created bindings for one book alone. In the past, guild members have submitted bindings for books tied together by a common theme, such as time or flight.

"It seemed like a perfect book," said Barbara Blumenthal, book arts specialist at Smith's Mortimer Rare Book Room and the show's curator, because it addressed many of the design issues that bookbinders face in creating book covers. "It's a book about the process of designing a stamp. Somebody designing a binding [for Hidy's book] thinks about the same things."

Designed and published by Michael Russem's Florence-based Kat Ran Press, the 64-page book traces the creation of a 34-cent stamp, which Hidy was commissioned to design by the U.S. Postal Service. With a nod to the mentoring work done by such organizations as the Big Brother/Big Sister program, the stamp depicts a boy and man looking into the distance. The man stands behind the boy, his left hand on the boy's shoulder and his right pointing at something. The figures are composed of simple blocks of color; black, red, green, purple and brown against a yellowish background.

The book analyzes in detail the elements that went into the making of The Mentoring Stamp, such as color, light, composition and type face, and how they relate to larger design concepts. Russem, who came up with the idea for the book, said he was inspired, in part, because the brilliant work that goes into the making of a stamp by graphic and type designers is often overlooked.

"No one knew about these hundreds and hundreds of stamps these men had designed," said Russem, in a recent phone conversation from his office in Cambridge.

Full circle

Two longtime, local bookbinders, David Bourbeau of Thistle Bindery in Florence and Sarah Creighton, who has a studio in Easthampton, talked about the bindings they contributed to the show at the book gallery last week, along with Blumenthal, who also has a cover on display.

Bourbeau pointed to a scaled-down version of a silk screen poster designed by Hidy in 1977 on view in one case. The image shows a bearded man in a black vest and rose-colored apron standing next to a restaurant table, pouring water into a glass. The picture graced the menu at the former Beardsley's Cafe Restaurant in Northampton and Bourbeau served as its model for Hidy, his friend, who was then living in Williamsburg.

Hidy writes this in his book: "The grace and charm that David brought to his night job [he was then working as a bookbinder during the day and as a waiter at night] inspired me, and my first poster was launched." Hidy, who now lives in Merrimack, went on to establish himself as a skilled designer and artist, inspiring leagues of bookbinders and other artists along the way.

In a nearby case, Bourbeau's book cover sports vertical stripes of color - pale green, yellow, orange, red and brown - that fade into each other across the book's face. Horizontal stripes cross these vertical bands, blurring one color into the next and inscribing three shallow triangles across the book's rectangular cover.

He said he had a clear idea of what he wanted for the cover almost immediately after reading the manuscript for Hidy's book.

"I knew I wanted to have some kind of gesture," said Bourbeau, to echo the man's gesture in the stamp, which forms the triangle inscribed within the stamp's rectangle. The binding's colors also draw from those of the stamp, five of which form a vertical strip on the book's title page.

"I wanted to make the binding feel as much as possible like what was going on inside the book," said Bourbeau. The book includes a chapter on the importance of the gesture, in which Hidy writes: "This is the essence of the stamp's visual message. Everything else - symbolic light, color, composition, and text - is secondary."

Bourbeau took the extra step of inserting extra pages in the book made of handmade paper on which are mounted plate blocks of the actual stamps pictured in the text.

Less is more

Creighton created a binding covered in what is known in the trade as paste paper that is decorated with soft shades of blue fading to yellow across the all-but-invisible outline of a strip of five stamps.

"I'm always trying to simplify my bindings," added Creighton, with an eye to expressing the essence of what the book is about without imposing her own aesthetic.

While several of the bindings use the serrated edge of a stamp as a major design element, Bourbeau and Creighton's designs made subtler reference to the book's contents.

Bourbeau received the Artist's Award from Hidy for his binding; Creighton earned the Publisher's Award from Russem.

In a recent phone conversation from his home, Hidy said he chose Bourbeau's design, in part, because it integrated the book's ideas, without drawing attention to the binding itself or Bourbeau's "30 years of mastery of the craft."

The exhibit also showcases the range of creative choices in bookbinding, from leather covers to those resembling collages to others that unfold, accordion-like.

Along with a display that provides insight into the process Hidy follows in

creating his pieces, the show features several of his posters and postage stamp designs. (The Mentoring Stamp is one of three stamps he's designed for the U.S. Postal Service.) In addition, the exhibit includes an array of postage stamps designed by typeface designers from Russem's personal collection, as well as other related philatelic material from the library's Rare Book Room.

On Sept. 28 at 4 p.m., Hidy will visit Smith to present a lecture, "Digital Craft," about designing in the age of computers, followed by a talk by Russem, "A Primer on Postage Stamps by Type Designers." A reception at 5 p.m. will follow in the gallery. "Inspired Design: The Mentoring Stamp" is on view through Dec. 20. The library is open Mondays through Thursdays, 7:30 a.m. to 1 a.m.; Fridays, 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.; and Sundays, 10 a.m. to 1 a.m. For information, call 585-2906 or visit [HYPERLINK "http://www.smith.edu" www.smith.edu](http://www.smith.edu).

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