

Aviation art can turn up in the smallest places—the corner of an envelope.

Stamp of Approval



The USAF 50th anniversary stamp, issued Sept. 18, was created by graphic artist Phil Jordan. It features the USAF aerial demonstration team—the Thunderbirds. The vivid image showing four F-16Cs flying in a diamond formation was taken by noted aviation photographer Philip Handleman.

The 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Air Force as a separate service has inspired aviation artists to create paintings, photographs, and other works of art commemorating the hallmark event. Some of that work, like aviation art from past years, has taken flight itself—leaving galleries behind to crisscross the nation on the corners of envelopes—in the guise of postage stamps.

The US Postal Service released a 1997 commemorative stamp (below) to honor the Department of the Air Force, but it had already issued another golden anniversary of the Air Force stamp (left) on Aug. 1, 1957, commemorating the 1907 formation of the Aeronautical Division of the US Signal Corps. Three F-104s and a B-52 graced the winning design, selected from more than 1,500 entries and created by Alexander Nagy Jr., of USAF's Air Research and Development Command.

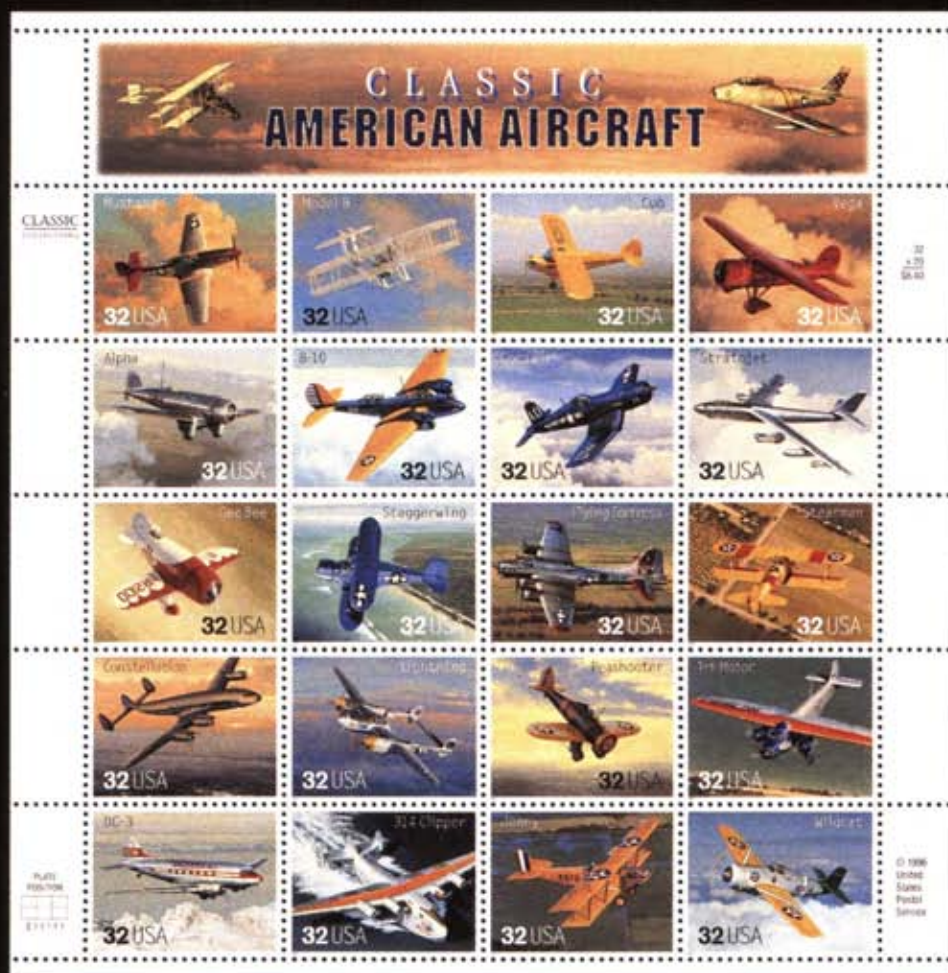


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HELMUT MARY DESIGN



The first postage stamp to depict an airplane was this 1912 US parcel post stamp. The engraving shows a Wright Flyer, complete with "whirring" propellers. The skill and talent of early aviation artists make these tiny "canvases" as easy to appreciate as many paintings hundreds of times their size.



Another 1997 release was this set of 20 stamps (above), featuring classic aircraft from the spindly Wright Model B to the world's first swept wing bomber, the B-47 Stratojet. To create these stamps, Phil Jordan teamed with aviation artist William Phillips. Author and historian Walter J. Boyne helped choose the 20 aircraft—not an easy job, given the variety of aircraft in US aviation heritage.

The Curtiss Jenny stamp (left) with its meticulous detail is representative of the craftsmanship of each of the 20 images. The Jenny is no stranger to the philatelic world—in 1918, an error during printing of the 24-cent airmail stamp (below) created one of the stamp world's prized rarities.

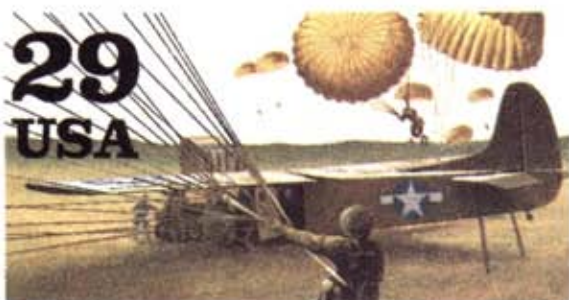




Between 1991 and 1995 the USPS offered a series of stamps to commemorate the 50th anniversary of World War II. Ten stamps were issued for each year of the war and were also used to surround a large map showing pivotal events of the war during that year. The 1943 map collection, issued in 1993, is shown above. One stamp (right) depicts B-24s from Operation Tidal Wave flying over the burning remains of oil refineries, destroyed in a raid on Ploesti, Romania.



B-24s hit Ploesti refineries, August 1943



Airborne units spearhead attacks, 1944

World War II glider forces won a spot on the 1944 sheet with the stamp at left, which features a painting of a CG-4A. Although the World War II stamp project was generally well-received, it was not without controversy. Conspicuously absent were B-29s and any mention of the atomic missions against Hiroshima and Nagasaki that forced Japan to surrender. A stamp showing a "mushroom" cloud was initially planned, then pulled and replaced with another, unrelated image.



On Oct. 14, 1997, exactly 50 years after the fact, Chuck Yeager was to repeat the feat that paved the way for the jet age by breaking the sound barrier again—this time in an F-15 instead of the X-1, shown on the stamp at left. The stamp, by illustrator Paul Salmon, had its first day of issue at Edwards AFB, Calif.



Aviation pioneers also have had their turn "pushing the envelope" through the US mail. Jacqueline Cochran set numerous aviation records, directed the Women's Airforce Service Pilots in World War II, and was enshrined in the National Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton, Ohio. She is pictured above on this March 1996 stamp. At left is a September 1995 stamp honoring Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker, who entered World War I as a driver, then went on to become a pilot in the famed 94th Aero Pursuit "Hat in the Ring" Squadron and the war's top US ace, credited with 26 victories. Both illustrations were done by Davis Meltzer.



Space is well represented in this unique art form. This drawing of the 1969 moon landing was created by Paul Calle to commemorate this historic event.

Frequently taken for granted, these utilitarian works of art celebrating aviation history and achievement are beloved by collectors worldwide for their artistry and attention to detail. The rich history of aviation offers an inexhaustible supply of subjects sure to continue inspiring painters, graphic artists, and photographers to create additional images—whether for a gallery wall or an envelope. ■