

# Stamp Collection

## Imaging South Africa

### Siemon Allen

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The postal stamp is a humble and useful item, a currency that marks payment for a specific service essential to the transport of information. It is also a reproduced miniature work of art with distinct aesthetic qualities. As one of the most commonly collected artifacts, its market worth is arbitrarily unhinged from its clearly marked original face value in the philatelist's eye.

But the stamp is perhaps most significantly an official image – a highly mobile record of visual propaganda reflecting how a country at any given period in its history sees itself and seeks to present itself. It bears a remarkably concentrated and complex body of cultural information. It is at once icon and index – a tiny picture, mass-produced and disseminated both locally and globally.

*Stamp Collection – Imaging South Africa* is a project by South African artist Siemon Allen that explores the political history and shifting identity of South Africa through the collection, cataloging, research and display of postal stamps released in the country from the formation of the Union in 1910 to the present. The exhibition tells the story of the changing face of South Africa, revealing how the country, over time, has chosen to represent itself both within its borders and internationally. It is a fragmented narration that speaks not only through what is shown but also through what is not.

*Stamp Collection* revisits an earlier series from 1993 in which Allen presented what he described as "icons from my middle class youth" – a display of personal possessions re-framed to read as cultural artifacts. These works offered a subtle social critique of the insular nature of postcolonial white South African culture, and included what would become the seeds for this exhibition – his childhood collection of South African stamps.

The exhibition at the Corcoran is an expanded, more comprehensive inventory of more than 8000 specimens presented within the framework of an architectural installation that operates as a simulated gallery within the existing exhibition space. Shown in a structure built to reference the display conventions used to present archival documents in historical museums, the stamps behave both as art objects operating through visual pleasure, and as artifacts plucked from South Africa's history.

Each stamp is essentially a reproduction of an original work of art, where distinctive color, typographical styles, and other design conventions locate individual specimens within a given date of issue. The first releases are primarily fine line etchings printed in deep shades of indigo blue, ochre or scarlet, which later give way to highly graphic geometric designs with streamlined logos in flat fields of lime green or saturated orange. As the century draws to an end, the number of releases and the variety of design treatments multiply exponentially. Sorted and configured in a time-line, the stamps form a dense collage of pictures, with more common issues grouped to form grids of identical images subtly distinguished from unit to unit by postmark or wear. Rarer editions represented by a single specimen, become almost incidental accents in an organized arrangement which, from a distance, reads as a complex pattern.

Each stamp operates not only aesthetically, but also as a vehicle for a particular subject. For Allen, "it is a kind of public relations gesture – a highly self-conscious attempt to express through a single image some aspect of national identity." He describes *Stamp Collection* as "a history told in a succession of scenes, in a voice that is constantly relocating with subtle and dramatic shifts in political power."

The collection opens with the image of King George V surrounded by the seals from the four former colonies that had been united to create the new Union. Other early printings chronicle the continued colonial presence, both through landscapes that affirm territorial claim and portraits that mark the progression of British sovereigns. The country's effort in World War II is vigorously promoted with a release of issues that include a line of infantrymen, a dramatically foreshortened artillery gun, and a female welder. The rise of Afrikaner political power is marked by portraits of the apartheid authors and the historical leaders who were regarded as sources of inspiration for a resurgent nationalism, and by images that reaffirm their claims of legitimacy. These are seen in the image of a family with arms outstretched, 'receiving' an open landscape, and other symbols from the constructed mythology of the Voortrekker such as the Bible and candle and the ox wagon. Most of the stamps issued from this period are less overt in their message. But they are no less politically charged. The abundance of releases showing wildlife or technological achievements reflects the country's effort in the then apartheid-era South Africa to represent itself to the world as beautiful and progressive.

Allen points out that only three stamps out of the 174 issued during the Union period (1910 and 1961) reference any non-European presence in South Africa. On one, Zulu beehive structures are rendered in remarkable detail, but in most early catalogues they are simply labeled *Native huts*. Another depicts the signing of the Dingane/Retief Treaty, an encounter between Zulu and Voortrekker that tragically led to betrayal and revenge – part of a pattern of persistent mutual distrust. The third stamp portrays two African men, represented in an unlikely scene, 'welcoming' the arrival of the Dutch East India Company's Jan van Riebeeck. On stamps issued during the 1961-1994 Republic period, one sees the historic Cape mail-runners, miners, romanticized bronze figures and a series of densely packed battle scenes depicting the carnage of the 1897 Anglo-Zulu War. But in that same time frame, a remarkably large number of stamps were released from what were then called the 'Homelands': Transkei, Ciskei, Venda and Bophuthatswana. Tellingly, these stamps appear to represent idealized 'African states' distinct from South Africa. They were, in fact, internationally unrecognized 'countries' created out of the apartheid policy of *separate development* later to be reabsorbed into the new South Africa.

1994 to the present is considered to be the period of *The New South Africa*. And the first releases in the year of the historic post-apartheid elections include a number of stamps that reflect politically dramatic changes. In that first year are stamps that celebrate unity with issues of *Peace* and *Our Family*. And these are followed by releases depicting Nelson Mandela, the new national flag and the new anthem. Mahatma Gandhi – who began his political life in South Africa in 1893 when he was forcibly ejected from a train for refusing to ride in the third class carriage – is represented as a young lawyer, and again as the more familiar Indian activist. Other stamp issues from the new government include *South African Nobel Laureates* (most notably honoring Albert Luthuli, the teacher and activist who won the Peace Prize back in 1961); the composer of *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, Enoch Sontonga; and a series called *Freedom Day* commemorating the country's first universal vote.

But in spite of this radical opening up of content, the majority of stamps continue to show the less politically overt and more philatelically popular images of wildlife, locomotives, vintage automobiles and ships. Many recent releases carry commercial advertise-

ments – one of the most bold is the *MTN Gladiators* series – and these reflect the proliferation and embrace of popular consumer culture in the new South Africa.

For Allen, the official message of each stamp carries with it a sub-text, and for him a critical look at the collection reveals the persistent contradictions that exist between the images presented on the stamps and the social realities of the period in which they were released. In recent releases, these tensions are often subtle. Stamps depicting art shift from European oil paintings and heroic bronzes to 'traditional crafts' and, so in some sense, appear to validate 'African Art'. "But in a rapidly globalized exchange," he points out, "it is an image of African artistic production that is also limited." Workers are celebrated with a set of sunny heroic icons. But for Allen, this is both a positive affirmation of the broadening economic opportunities in the new South Africa and a hopeful assertion in the face of an impatient underemployed labor force. While the release of a stamp with the image of a beadwork red ribbon pin – the South African symbol for AIDS awareness – operates as a kind of official recognition of the problem, behind this beautiful and modest image is a complex struggle of policy and attitudes.

Despite the international interest in South Africa's political miracle, it remains a place only partially understood through a small number of familiar media images. *Stamp Collection* is both a look back over time at how South Africa has been 'imaged' and a view into lesser known events in or aspects of South African culture and history. A careful look at these artifacts requires a critical eye, for though much is revealed, there is much concealed as well.

Recently the South African Office of Environmental Affairs and Tourism made a public appeal for what it called a positive "branding" of South Africa internationally. This included the recruitment of non-government South Africans living overseas to act as "ambassadors" for the country. For Allen, this direct and official articulation of the need to "image" South Africa echoes the ways in which the stamp's image constructs a national identity. He sees his own presentation of the stamp collection in Washington DC as both a subtle critique and a kind of covert participation with this stated agenda. Allen, who works from a self-described "place of apprehension and contradiction," presents his stamps with the admission that they are "carriers of images that most often mask or remain silent on much that is officially unacknowledged." But the seeming detachment in Allen's almost 'scientific' presentation along with his obvious care in the arrangement and display of these 'precious artifacts' in some sense denies this critique. Ultimately, the exhibition operates with a kind of feigned complicity in the dissemination of the stamps' propagandistic messages.

It is significant that this presentation of *Stamp Collection – Imaging South Africa* takes place in Washington, in an institution that is itself located across the street from The White House and near the Smithsonian Museums. The weight of history is evident both in the presence of the numerous national collections, and in the self-consciousness of the city's layout of monuments in the surrounding area. It is an exhibition of stamps from South Africa that addresses through its historical artifacts the South African government's political shifts and its changing image of itself. It is an art exhibition framed first as a 'scientific display', framed again by the museum and yet again by the city.

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