“The Eagle, the Rocket, and the Moon: US Postal Iconography at the End of History”

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Abstract: U.S. postal iconography of the 19th and 20th centuries was preoccupied by story-telling, specifically, the history of the nation depicted in images of significant persons, scenes, and objects. Considered over time, the Post Office’s ongoing issuance of hundreds of stamps told a story of democratic progress, particularly the increasing inclusion of people of different races, abilities, and genders into the body politic.

In this session the rise of this iconography of post-historical techno-determinism is traced by focusing on stamps illustrating the space race and space travel. In this iconography, history begins and ends with the 1969 moon landing, commemorated two months after the fact in an airmail stamp and then by a succession of “high-value” stamps that (1) depicted the conquest of space in relation to images of eagles and the moon and that (2) were issued to serve as payment for specialized postal services like Express Mail engineered by the USPS to compete with private carriers like UPS and FedEx.

Alongside these high-value stamps bearing images of space vehicles, many of the commemorative stamps issued for ordinary mail featured imagery of the space race. By 2001, the high-value Express Mail stamps ceased representing the eagle, rockets and the moon to return to an older iconography of national monuments.