

Welcome to “History on the Fly” a new podcast series offered by the Washington State Historical Society. This episode is titled: “The Art Behind ‘Art of the Stamp’,” by SueSan Chan, Exhibits Designer & Project Manager for the Washington State Historical Society.

Hi! I’m SueSan Chan, Exhibits Designer/Project Manager, at the Washington State Historical Society. It was my job to plan for, design, prepare, and install “Art of the Stamp.”

“Art of the Stamp,” a traveling exhibit organized by the Smithsonian Institution, features 94 original artworks that have been made into U.S. postage stamps. 52 of the country’s best artists chose subject matter ranging from: penguins to presidents, Elvis to explorers, Bugs Bunny to boy scouts, and movie monsters to moon landings.

In the first stage, planning, I have to know exactly what is in the exhibition. I need to know dimensions of every object, signage, text, label, case, and prop. If something needs to be produced in-house, manufactured, or purchased, I will oversee or contract out those responsibilities.

When I have a good idea of the amount of space required for the exhibition, I can start on the design process of creating a layout or floorplan for the gallery. On my computer, I can move around walls to change traffic flow and create more intimate spaces, place artwork on walls to grab your attention and arrange objects into cases to tell a story.

“Art of the Stamp” was a straightforward show to design, containing only 2-dimensional artwork. It arrived with a recommended order in which to hang the artwork, grouped into major themes. I kept with the show’s major themes, but I changed the hanging order a bit to accommodate my own whims.

After completing my initial design, I then share my work with an exhibits team, comprised of members from the Exhibits, Collections, Education, Marketing & Public Relations Departments. Together, we brainstorm, discuss issues, and decide what changes or additions we should make to the design.

Oftentimes, we will supplement a national traveling show with artifacts that show local interest or will round out the exhibit. The Washington State Historical Society recently acquired a group of artifacts from the nearby downtown Tacoma Post Office branch for the Society’s permanent artifact collection. We chose a sampling of ink stamps used by that station and added several stamped envelopes and commemoratives coins, also from our collections. Then, we located a video, called “Stamps: An American Journey,” produced by the United States Postal Service, and integrated that into our show.

Finally, while I was still designing my layout, a co-worker approached me with a large collection of plate block stamps that her father had left her. The collection represented every stamp issued in the United States from 1962-1982. She was generous enough to

loan us the plate blocks of our choice. I had the envious task of sifting through the hundreds of stamps to choose those that best represented the major themes of the exhibit. You will see those framed stamps introduce each new section of the current show.

It takes a lot of collaboration within & between departments to put on an exhibit, in fact all members of my department & every department in our museum can become involved.

Within the Exhibits Department, I regularly rely on the assistance of other curators for artifact selection, historic or technical expertise, and graphic design. Outside of my department, the Collections Department is responsible for managing the collection artifacts that are oftentimes included in our exhibitions, as well as providing curatorial expertise and background research. The Education Department often develops a component for audiences which enhances their visit – whether that be a game, puzzle, or an online curriculum.

After the gallery preparation comes my favorite part of my job – artifact installation. Generally, I hire a crew of artifact handlers. These professionals usually have had extensive experience working with artifacts and may also have a degree in museum science. Together, we physically hang the art and text on the walls, adhere vinyl lettering for displays, and place the artifacts into their cases. I enjoy this process because I am able to hold unique and historic objects in my hands and view them up close. Unfortunately for the visitors, these artifacts oftentimes look very different behind a Plexiglas case.

One of the last but most important things to happen during the installation process is lighting. I am fortunate to have a knowledgeable IT co-worker who doubles as our Audio-visual and lighting technician. Lighting greatly affects the look and feel of the gallery. Not only does museum lighting have to be functional, but the lighting levels must be appropriate for the different types of objects that we display. For example, works on paper require very low light levels while most objects made of stone, glass, or metal can receive a higher intensity of light without hurting the artifacts.

With “Art of the Stamp,” I was amazed by the amount of detail the artists were able to include on such small-scale paintings such as the dinosaur scene or how realistic the works were as with the aircraft the Curtis Jenny. Clearly, the artists put much thought into the composition of their stamp art. I always learned something about the subject matter of the stamp – whether it was an explorer, a species, or a historic event I had never heard of. Sometimes the subject revealed a social or political commentary. In general, the original works were far more vibrant and engaging than I had expected.

Stamps are a commonplace form of functional art, often overlooked and taken for granted. I’ve always enjoyed looking at stamps – I think we all do. Stamps afford us an accessible, non-intimidating link to the art world, so next time you post a letter, take a moment to consider the art of the stamp.

“Art of the Stamp,” organized for travel and circulated by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and developed by the National Postal Museum and the United States Postal Service, continues through March 2nd, 2008, at the Washington State Historical Society.