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◆ DESIGN STUDIO ◆

FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Stamp images go big (for once) in a new window display at the National Postal Museum. Yet there's more to the design than meets the eye.



By day, the National Postal Museum appears stately and historic, its architecture pointing to the building's former role as Washington, D.C.'s City Post Office.

Yet by night, the recently renovated façade exudes 21st-century elegance: The windows that line the building *glow*, each bay filled with illuminated stamps as tall as five feet.

While this display transforms the building into a gallery both inside and out, the feature isn't just eye-catching. It's also part of a sophisticated design to protect the contents *inside* the new 10,000-square-foot William H. Gross Stamp Gallery.

The gallery's rarities — ranging from a letter bearing the earliest known U.S. stamp ever mailed, to a block of the famous Inverted Jenny stamp misprints — form one of the Smithsonian's most valuable collections. In total, they're worth more than the Hope diamond. Yet they're hardly as durable.

“Stamps and envelopes are paper,” says Sara Pasch, project

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manager at Gallagher & Associates, the design firm that handled the museum renovation. “None of [these objects] can be exposed to light for very long.”

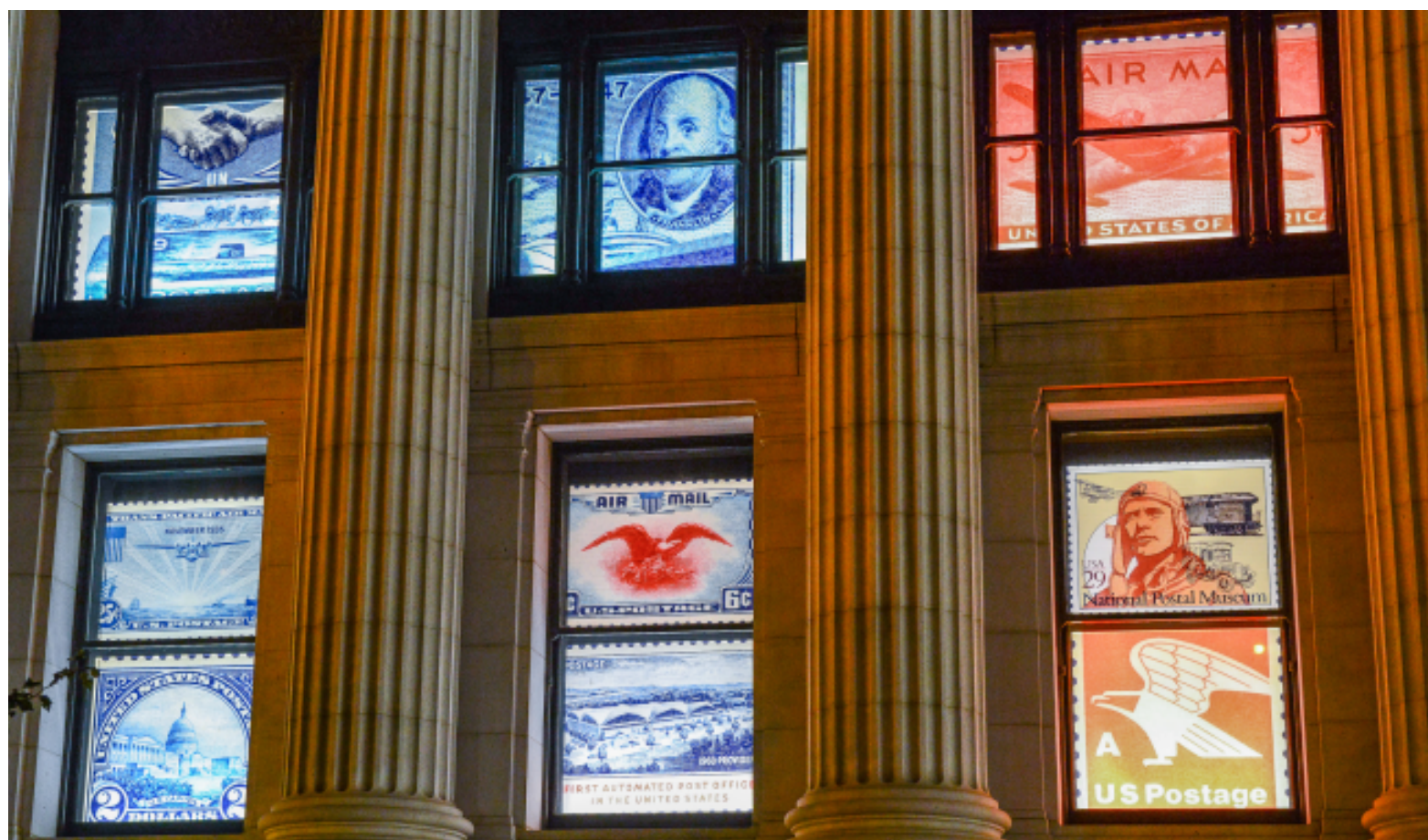
To devise a solution for blocking UV rays, the design team worked closely with the museum’s curators, Cheryl Ganz and Daniel Piazza. Not wanting to hang heavy curtains or cover the historic windows with drywall, the collaborators arrived at a system that’s effective *and* beautiful.

Each of the glass panes is a series of fused layers — some for additional sun protection and security, one for displaying the artwork. These panes work in tandem with a set of retractable shades. Dark shades block UV rays during the day and make the images disappear, and white shades can be lowered at night, pairing with LED lights to illuminate the stamps.

This technical puzzle then gave way to a curatorial question: *Of all the stamps in U.S. history, which should appear on the outside of a building in the nation’s capital?*

“We’re a history museum,” Ganz says. “We tell the story of the American experience and identity; we just happen to use stamps as a lens.”

So in curating the initial group of stamps for the design team to work with, Ganz and Piazza chose a lineup of stamps that shows defining moments in a diverse history. Classic Americana, great turning points, postal history and its icons — these scenes hang together to form a strong visual narrative. When choosing people subjects, they also focused on firsts: the Founding Fathers, Booker T. Washington, Charles Lindbergh, and Jane Addams (the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize).



Working with high-resolution scans of the actual stamps, the design team then did some aesthetic curating of its own. While the final display features both history and modernity, the creative team found that the linear quality of older, engraved stamps translated well when enlarged, while some of the contemporary,

lithographic stamps lost their sharpness and had to be edited out. For the sake of authenticity, however, they let the perforations — which appear somewhat ragged at 5 feet tall — remain fuzzy.

“What we might see as messy or imperfect,” explains Pasch, “[collectors] see as an important part of the stamp.”

The final lineup purposefully creates a subtle gradient of blue, red and sepia tones — colors that are, of course, very American.

The romantic display, when lit at night, is like a Tiffany window, Ganz says. The jewels? Sparkling stamps that entice passersby to explore the philatelic gems inside.

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Images courtesy of Smithsonian National Postal Museum.