John Held, Jr.
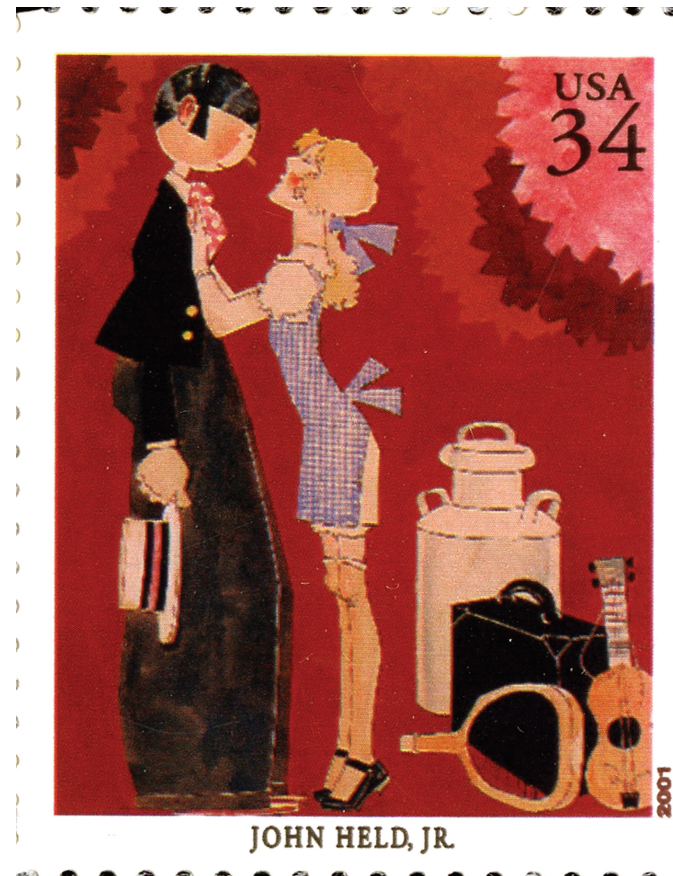
Artist (1889 – 1958)

JOHN HELD, JR.

Held was born in Salt Lake City and supposedly sold his first drawing at age nine. It's certain that he sold his first drawing to the original *Life* magazine at 15 and was hired as the sports cartoonist for the *Salt Lake City Tribune* when he was 16. His early medium of choice was the wood block, to which he returned to several times in various guises.

By 1915, he had moved to New York and his work was appearing in *Vanity Fair*. In 1918, he was recruited by U.S. Naval Intelligence to accompany a pair of archaeologists on an expedition to Central America. Purportedly sent to study Mayan art forms, Held's real job was to sketch the coastline and scout for sites for military operations. He spent most of the time developing his cartooning skills and honing a sophisticated edge to his humor.

By 1927, Held was drawing for a new magazine called *The New Yorker*. Harold Ross, who started the magazine in 1925, was a boyhood friend and Held created a feature called *Gay Nineties*, which poked gentle fun at the previous generation. Done in scratch board, these images have come to symbolize the era almost as much as his flappers are associated with the 1920s.

Held appeared regularly in a half-dozen magazines, designed sets and costumes for Broadway plays, and had two newspaper strips. He even ran for Congress. In 1930, he wrote *Grim Youth* and had his woodcuts for *The Saga of Frankie and Johnnie* published in a limited edition. They turned up a generation later in the first issue of *Playboy*. His most famous book, *Held's Angels*, appeared in 1952. Back were the raccoon coats, the short skirts, bobbed hair and the Charleston; the same style and characters that made him famous were now nostalgia.

Held joined the Century in 1933, when his primary interest was sculpture, and four years later the club purchased his bronze entitled *Clydesdale Stallion* with the stated purpose of donating it to a museum. They did not.

Photograph by Pirie McDonald