

Centurions on Stamps

The Century is an association of over two thousand authors, artists, and amateurs of letters and the fine arts. For the club's purposes, "amateurs" are defined as men and women "of any occupation provided their breadth of interest and qualities of mind and imagination make them sympathetic, stimulating, and congenial companions in a society of authors and artists." The Century is a quintessentially New York place: despite its debt to London clubs and the national and even international character of its membership, it could exist nowhere else. Its main activity is conversation.

Members of the Century are referred to as Centurions, and the "Centurions on Stamps" exhibit honors those distinguished members whose image or work has appeared on a U.S. or foreign stamp. There are an impressive 112 Centurions and counting who have been featured on stamps, some three-fourths on American issues. If we cast a slightly larger net to include designers of stamps, artists on Christmas seals, tax stamps and the like, we would easily reach 125. I am certain there are omissions. In many cases, the creator of a piece of sculpture, artwork or building shown on a stamp is not identified, and discovering who appears on foreign stamps can be difficult. Where a Centurion is mentioned in the text, his or her name is in lowercase caps.

When the exhibit was originally conceived we thought that there might be only some fifty members represented. When the number turned out to be more than double that, only 57 of the honorees were featured in the exhibit, which ran from January 26, 2010 to February 26, 2010. This was properly labeled "Centurions on Stamps: the Early Years," since those featured were elected to the membership between 1847 and 1926. The later members will follow in another exhibit in 2011.

Of the 112 Centurions honored, there are eight Presidents, two Prime Ministers, a Governor General of Canada, three Chief Justices of the U.S., four arctic explorers, 22 artists and sculptors, 12 architects, and eight authors and journalists (to be accurate, many of these Centurions are authors). Seventeen Nobel Laureates have appeared on stamps—an impressive number—but another eleven of our Nobel Laureates do not appear anywhere! Indeed, a case could be made that the Club should issue its own stamps to honor notable members, since the list of those who do not appear on a stamp reads like a Who's Who. The last member—#112—I discovered was one of our most distinguished members, ELIHU ROOT, who was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, was Secretary of State in two administrations and president of the Century for a decade. I kept looking in vain for Root until

I finally discovered that he appeared on a stamp issued several years ago. But it was not a U.S. issue: it was Togo.

To write about these gentlemen in 300+ words does each an immense disservice. Decades are skimmed over or ignored; projects that each spent an enormous effort conceiving and pushing forward are given short shrift. As every writer knows, the research is the most fun, and with this project, it was very educational as well, especially when researching lesser-known names.

The photos used in the exhibit come from a variety of sources, including the Century Archives collection, the Library of Congress, family holdings and universities. Where the source is not noted, the image came from the Century Archives.

Each person is represented by just a single stamp or two—not by every stamp we discovered. Between TEDDY ROOSEVELT and FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, there are at least 500 stamps depicting their images issued by more than 100 countries. DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER is shown on over 75 stamps; GEORGE GOETHALS is featured on at least fifty.

The members featured in this first exhibit are of course all deceased, but that will not be the case with any subsequent exhibit, which would include the more recent

members. Some are very much alive. To have one's image on a U.S. stamp one must have been dead for five years, or one year in the case of a deceased President. But while the U.S. Postal Service will not show the image of a living person, they will picture the work of one; hence, we have a few living artists and architects represented on American stamps.

When I proposed this exhibition I was unaware of the marvelous collection of Centurion stamps put together by the club's most distinguished philatelist, THEODORE STEINWAY, up until his death in 1957. There are five albums in all: two are nearly empty; one features stamps of Presidents, primarily Roosevelts; another focuses mostly on designers of stamps; while the last contains many notables, including sculptors, architects, engineers and a few artists. The albums were displayed just once, between December 7, 1945 and January 6, 1946, in the Gallery. Some of the stamps featured in this exhibit come from that collection. Steinway's knowledge of stamps and of his fellow members whose work was on stamps was very helpful to me.

I want to thank JAN WHITE, whose design of the exhibit and keen eye and wit were most welcome, and Jerry Fielder of the YOUSUF KARSH Estate for their help and support.

JIM CHARLTON