

War artists

The horror of war and the hope of peace have been movingly captured on Royal Mail poppy stamps by some of Britain's best artists, designers and photographers. So as Royal Mail reintroduces two poppy stamps, the Common Poppy from 2014's Post & Go Symbolic Flowers and the Shattered Poppy from this year's First World War 1917 set, we reveal how these creatives uniquely interpreted the meaning of the Remembrance flower in philatelic form

Shattered Poppy Stamp / First World War 1917 issue. Details: Vol 54 p340



John Ross

Photographer

John Ross butchered his poppy just as bullets butchered a generation in the trenches. Ross portrays the delicate flower

shattered into tiny fragments, using a poppy frozen by liquid nitrogen and smashed with steel tweezers. 'The poppy is deemed a fragile flower that sanctifies the fields

in which it grows. But here it is shattered, when a peaceful land is torn up with war,' says Ross. He photographed the flower in a barn by a poppy field. 'I had

to shoot quickly – no more than six seconds – as the poppy thawed so fast. A frozen poppy seems even more fragile, like glass, which is somehow symbolic' ●



Fiona Strickland

Artist

Botanical artist Fiona Strickland transforms the gentle poppy into an eruption of violence. She achieved the effect to show the viciousness of war, after discussing the idea of the poppy as a bursting shell with stamp designer Gareth Howat. 'It had to be

flame-like, representing those first explosive shots of the war,' she explains. The fiery effect of shells going off came from mixing colours and building up paint layers to create texture and light, painting the folds of a poppy I'd picked, to resemble a flash of light radiating from the centre of an explosion' ●

Howard Hodgkin

Artist

Hodgkin was famously reticent to talk about meaning in his work, exhorting viewers to 'look, just look!' and make up their own mind. And Hodgkin, who died in March, said only of his poppy stamp: 'I used real poppies in Normandy. I used different thicknesses of paint, carborundum printing in vermilion,

cadmium and natural, red oil-based inks.' This prosaic explanation prompts us to analyse his searingly bright poppies, and in their sunny hues see signs of hope rising from the misery of war. In his only other stamp design, 'New Worlds' from 1999, a red-orange dawn rises out of the 20th century, the most violent century in history, to offer us hope in the 21st ● ▶



Giles Revell

Photographer

'I was struck by the desolate environment where soldiers were sent into battle,' says Giles Revell of the emotional effect of working on his poppy image. The desolation of war is indeed reflected in his work, with roiling smoke from bursting bombs

simulated by dyes in water. 'The image was made in a water-filled tank, with pigments delivered through catheters as streams of colour,' says Revell. 'I hope my depiction of the poppy conveys the chaos of war, whilst offering a symbol of enduring hope and survival, despite its fragility' ●





Poppy power

Gareth Howat

Designer

Just when you think the poppy is sufficiently symbolic of sacrifice, designer Gareth Howat brilliantly saturates it with still more motifs of suffering and hidden messages of hope.

In this poignant stamp triptych, peace in poppy form blooms from the barbs of war; troops advance under the fiery 'sky' of a poppy petal; life grows fresh as a green-stemmed poppy bearing the face of the fallen.

The semi-concealed imagery, deftly woven into the fabric of the flowers, encourages you to stop and contemplate the nature of war and the importance of remembrance.

'From a design perspective, we wanted to give each image a

graphical twist – you look, see a beautiful flower, but then discover a hidden visual message,' says Howat. 'This is about getting people to look again, more closely, to stop and remember.'

These Lest We Forget stamps, now considered classics by collectors and design experts alike, were released one at a time from 2006 to 2008 and commemorate the 90th anniversary of major events of the First World War.

The barbed wire stamp of 2006 commemorates the Somme, the advancing soldiers Passchendaele, and the face-in-the-poppy stamp from 2008 remembers the Armistice.

Yet Howat, creative director of design agency Hat-trick,

which also produced the First World War sets, had originally been briefed to do a one-off stamp as part of a single country stamp miniature sheet.

'The brief from Royal Mail was very open – they wanted something to commemorate peace,' recalls Howat. 'We tried lots of ideas, from doves to poems, but also poppies as they are such a universal symbol of commemoration.'

'I was playing with this photo of poppies by a Japanese photographer, in a backlit style called a photogram, and the stems seemed to tangle around each other like barbed wire. And then I had the idea of the stems actually being barbed wire, and worked up an image.

'So just as poppies –

new life – grew from earth on the battlefield churned up by artillery, so something good and hopeful comes from the horror of war, as represented by the soft and gentle poppy emerging from the sharp wire.'

The rest is philatelic history – the barbed wire stamp was so well received on its release that Royal Mail wanted a series. And the series became a classic, each stamp giving up their own poignant message on second glance, yet seamlessly bound to each other visually with the blood-red palette splashed across a stark white background.

For the second stamp, Howat took a still frame from a contemporary film of troops going 'over the top', used his Mac to 'pinch' it so the figures

were closer together and digitally darkened the group so they formed the black *trompe-l'oeil* centre of the flower. But look still closer, and naturally radiating lines on the petals look like shell fragments soaring skywards...

For many, Howat's third stamp is the one. 'We wanted this stamp

to be very personal, to show the face of a soldier whose sacrifice was followed by the peace of the Armistice,' explains Howat.

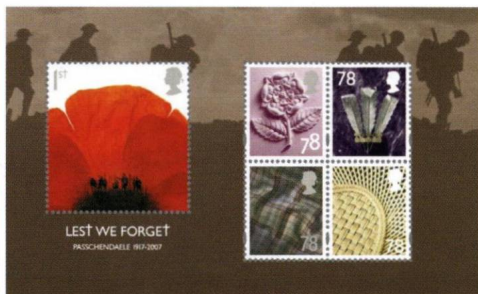
Ghosted into the poppy by the finesse of Howat and his Mac, floating pallidly in the billowing petals, is the face of infantry captain James Cooke, gassed to death near Ypres on

14 April 1918. He was 23. Howat selected Cooke from around 30 images of war dead sent to him by the Imperial War Museum. 'I was struck by his haunted stare,' says Howat, 'but to be honest it was simply important to show someone real who was a victim of war.'

'We wanted just one person because you

read so much about the millions who died, and the casualty figures are so huge that they almost distance us from the tragedy.

'Yet by presenting just one face, just one man, we are reminding people that when you see a field of poppies, each one of them represents someone who gave their life' ●



The three miniature sheets in the Lest We Forget series commemorate the fallen at the Battle of the Somme and Passchendaele, and the Armistice. Each carries a poppy stamp and four Country Definitives. All poppy stamps shown in this feature are available from www.royalmail.com/stamps. Stamp images © Royal Mail Group Ltd.

Post & Go remember them

The Common Poppy stamp from the 2014 Symbolic Flowers Post & Go issue has been reintroduced as Remembrance Day approaches. The Common Poppy is

available on reels of self-service stamps with just the one design, so Post Office Post & Go machines could carry them in the run-up to Remembrance Sunday on 12 November ●

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