

Icons of a century Richard West meets the

Pierre Vermeir, who designed the Design Classics stamps says 'The best stamp designs by miles are those of Great Britain.' Richard West interviewed the designer to learn more about his work on this issue, and his high opinion of British stamps.

PIERRE VERMEIR, having trained as a designer, decided to leave his native Belgium in 1983, and to settle in London. He was convinced then, and still believes today, that London is the Mecca for design, so 20 years ago, with two others who have

since left the company, established a design studio called 'HGV'. In 1993 he took a bold step and made an approach to Barry Robinson, who was then Royal Mail's Design Director – after all, Royal Mail is 'one of those clients every designer in the country would like to work for'. The gamble paid off, and Pierre was asked to design the presentation pack that accompanied the stamp issue marking the opening of the Channel Tunnel, in 1994. Soon afterwards came his first stamp commission, for the Medical Discoveries set, also issued in 1994.

The latest series to be designed by HGV is that featuring British Design Classics of the 20th century, issued on 13 January. As with most new British special issues, a fairly specific design brief was sent to a number of design studios, the brief differing for each studio, so that Royal Mail can assess different treatments of the same subject. One of these was sent to HGV.

Pierre regarded the task as fairly straightforward, believing the designs should speak for themselves – 'why embellish with elements that might distract from the iconic designs?' Of the ten icons finally selected, Royal Mail had already firmed up on six, and Pierre was able to offer his own suggestions. He felt there was a need to ensure a balanced set, and that it was not just about design but also engineering. Thus furniture would fit alongside a double deck bus and Concorde. Not all the possible icons could be used: there are only 10 stamps. Considered but not finally included for example were the iPod and Dyson cleaner, both British designs.

Pierre realised that for the final stamps he would have to use specially commissioned photographs, but initially he mocked-up his designs using images obtained elsewhere, until all were satisfied with the final choice and how the items would be seen. He felt that showing the likes of the aircraft, Routemaster and Mini as frontal views better fills the space on the stamp, and ensures that they become the focus of attention, each shown in a proud way. There is always a need to look at the entire set, and to determine how the designs will fit together, in addition to how they appear on their own. Throughout, he worked with his team at HGV.

Once satisfied came the task of commissioning a photographer able to appreciate the style needed for each stamp: that photographer was Jason Tozer. Now came the real challenge of the commission, finding the objects to be photographed. For example, the Royal Air Force Museum at Hendon has a Spitfire, but clearly not in flight. The Victoria & Albert Museum has a miniskirt, but would not allow it to be worn by a model in order to be photographed; an approach was therefore made to Mary Quant, who was able to supply the right skirt. As Concorde no longer flies, it was necessary to visit a museum in Germany where one is kept; it took some care-

designer of the new Design Classics stamps

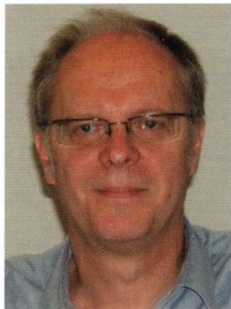


ful manoeuvring to obtain just the right angle. The Mini came from the car collection at Beaulieu. The polypropylene chair was provided by its creator, Robin Day. An enthusiast in Sussex revamps telephone kiosks to ensure they are completely accurate: the equipment seen inside is totally correct. The lamp came from Anglepoise. The book came from Penguin Books; Royal Mail was keen that the cover should be of a work by a British woman writer. The Routemaster and Underground map came from the collection in the London Transport Museum. Although to translate the resultant photographs into the stamp format was fairly straightforward, some retouching was needed, for example, to give the feeling of motion to the propellers of the Spitfire.

As Pierre explains, 'These designs have all evolved over the years, so on the stamps we are not necessarily showing the very first concept, but the form in which the particular item is most recognisable. With designs that remained in use for some time, it is inevitable that modifications occurred, but the basic concept is retained. I admit that having all the items photographed in a proud way, as objects of art, looks very simple, but from a design point of view, we learned so much we did not know before. It was the most challenging of all the designs we have so far created for Royal Mail.'

Royal Mail also asked HGV to design the prestige stamp book to accompany the stamps. It was known that the text would look at design in fairly general terms, but initially nothing had been written: Pierre was thus able to specify the number of words required. The idea was to provide a few facts and figures, and to add a bit of history surrounding the icons featured. Similarly, in selecting the illustrations, Pierre was keen not just to focus on the designs chosen for the stamps, but also to create a feeling for the time during which these objects were created, putting them into context. Thus included is a view of King's Road in Chelsea, at one time at the forefront of all that was innovative in British design. Finding the right images was not difficult: discovering the owners of the illustrations was far more difficult, and took a considerable time. ►

The Design Classics stamps, issued on 13 January.



Pierre Vermeir, designer of the Design Classics stamps.

Looking back on his previous stamp designs for Royal Mail, Pierre found the Medical Discoveries set a challenge because he could not feature recognisable people, and also because he could not predict how the 'pixel' effect between the two illustrations on each design would work in print.

With the Nobel Prize stamps, Pierre felt that, as the prizes themselves recognise innovation, so the stamps had to be innovative, and so used techniques in their printing not previously used for British stamps.

Once it had been decided to use illustrations for the set to honour J R R Tolkien, it was clear which drawings to use. The task was then to fine-tune them to the stamp format: even the typeface used was designed by HGv.

How has Pierre found the task of stamp design? 'I find it very exciting and stimulating. Royal Mail has a fantastic approach to stamp design, and is very sophisticated as a client. The best stamp designs by miles are those of Great Britain. The subject matter chosen, plus the choice of designers and illustrators, stands out in the world of stamp design. Royal Mail is the best client I have and I love the relationship, a working relationship, working together to make the best of the project. There is a need to be accurate and professional, and not controversial, although it is inevitable that those who are passionate about the subject matter of a stamp may offer comments. However, with Royal Mail there is always mutual respect.' ●

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Fourteen passions Martin Robinson looks at the new *Royal Mail Special Stamps 2008*

THE 2008 YEARBOOK contains all of the year's stamp issues, including the miniature sheets, with articles about the stamp subjects, technical details and design briefs. The book's theme is 'Passions', and we meet people who are keenly interested in this year's subjects, from assistance dogs, lifeboat crews and pantomime to collectors of RAF uniforms and James Bond first editions. The book was written by Steve Yelland with portraits by Randal Mackechnie, and was designed by True North. On the cover and throughout the text are featured metal badges supplied by the Badge Collectors' Circle. The book runs to 64 pages and is available from Tallents House.

I was struck by a paragraph from the introduction, which sums up the fascination of stamps: 'Stamps are... today's geography lessons and tomorrow's history books. They're also works of art, financial investments, cultural markers and a source of endless pleasure to millions.' In my days in education I reckoned I could teach much of the school curriculum through stamps, given the chance. As it was, I made do with running a stamp club, and the other week when giving a society display, met someone who had been a member of my first stamp club 40 years ago. What he said about this life-changing experience(!) reinforced my belief in the intrinsic value of stamp collecting, let alone its possible economic benefits in an otherwise uncertain world. So hurrah for a book that enhances our enjoyment of stamps and through them leads us to some heartwarming stories.