



Divine by design

A selection of religious art that has inspired the design of a variety of UK Christmas stamps



Above: the stamp featuring Louis le Nain's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, which was one of the three works on the first UK stamps featuring religious art

SINCE THE 1ST CENTURY the story of Jesus's birth and life has inspired creativity among all kinds of artists. Their devotional work has provided a rich source of images for Christian-themed Christmas stamps.

The painterly approach Britain's first stamps featuring religious art were issued for the Christmas of 1967. The *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Neapolitan), Madonna and Child by Murillo, and the *Adoration of the Shepherds* by the le Nain Brothers share the grandiose quality of the Baroque period and were probably painted within 20 years of each of other – between 1618 and 1640. Interestingly, both of the Adorations have had their attributions changed since the late 1960s. The Neapolitan Adoration (c 1630) was first recorded in Seville in the 1770s and may be the work of a Sevillian painter influenced by Velázquez. In 1967 it was attributed to the School of Seville but now carries the Neapolitan monicker. The Le Nain Adoration (c 1640) is now attributed by the National Gallery to Louis rather than all three brothers.

It wasn't until 2005 that religious paintings featured on stamps for a second time. Although the subject – the Madonna and Child – is universal,



this time the focus was international and demonstrates how different cultures interpret the Bible. The images include works from Haiti, Italy, Australia and the USA. They also span a wide range of artistic styles from Aboriginal to Native American and even unusual media, including in one instance an image made using coloured sand.

In 2007 two paintings of the Madonna and Child, by Lippo di Dalmasio (above, right) and William Dyce (above, far right), were featured on Christmas stamps. They were created in two very different ages but both convey the same strength and poignancy of this special relationship, even when miniaturised to stamp size. Bolognese artist di Dalmasio's *Madonna of Humility* was painted in the 1390s and is the earliest painting on canvas owned by the National Gallery in London. It has been damaged and repaired many times over the centuries, but the grace and the glow of The Madonna has survived – crowned with 12 stars against a disc of golden light and with the moon at her feet.

William Dyce's work looks as if it might have been painted shortly after the Dalmasio, but in fact is a Victorian composition in the Nazarene style, which was heavily influenced 15th-century Italian art. Both of these beautiful Madonna and Child stamps are being redistributed this year.

Pages of beauty The 1970 Christmas issue (above) took its inspiration from further back in art history. The three stamps feature images of the 'Shepherds and Apparition of the Angel', 'Mary, Joseph and Christ in Manger', and 'Wise Men Bearing Gifts' – all taken from the Psalter of Robert de Lisle. This great monument to the European Gothic style is among the finest manuscripts in the British Library's permanent exhibition and was first documented in 1339 but dates from even earlier in the century.

In 1991 illuminated letters from the 14th-century Venetian 'Acts of Mary and Jesus' manuscript (also known as *Vita gloriosissime virginis Mariae atque venerabilis matris filii dei vivi veri et unici*), now in the Bodleian Library, were chosen as the subject matter (right). Dripping with the golds, reds and blues synonymous with illumination at the time, the stamp images depict ▶

Above left: the three 1970 stamps inspired by the Psalter of Robert de Lisle. Above: the popular 2007 issue which is being redistributed this Christmas



Left: the 1991 Christmas issue, inspired by the Bodleian's 'Acts of Mary and Jesus' manuscript, which includes the page shown above



Above: illuminated manuscript and stained glass in the Spirit & Faith issue of 2000.

Below: one of the 1971 stamps featuring sections of a 13th-century window in Canterbury Cathedral, as shown above, right



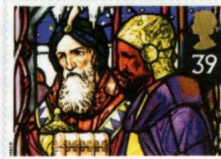
Below: two of the Pre-Raphaelite inspired stamps of 2009



the 'Adoration of the Magi', 'Mary and Jesus', the 'Holy Family and Angel', the 'Annunciation' and the 'Flight into Egypt'. Also hailing from the Bodleian Library, one of the 2000 Millennium Projects – Spirit and Faith issue shows illuminations from the 12th-century Latin Gradual, originally from Downpatrick (above, left).

The art of glass The Spirit and Faith issue also included a close-up of the 'Virgin and Child' 20th-century stained glass window in St Edmundsbury Cathedral in Suffolk. The Christmas issue of 1971 (left) again uses images of stained glass, featuring three sections of a 13th-century window in Canterbury Cathedrals, shown above – 'The Dream of the Wise Men', 'Adoration of the Magi', and 'Ride of the Magi' show the beginning of the Christmas story. Some of the earliest and finest stained glass of its kind in Europe is found in this window and its partner – there were originally 12 of them but only two remain, ten having been destroyed in the time of Cromwell.

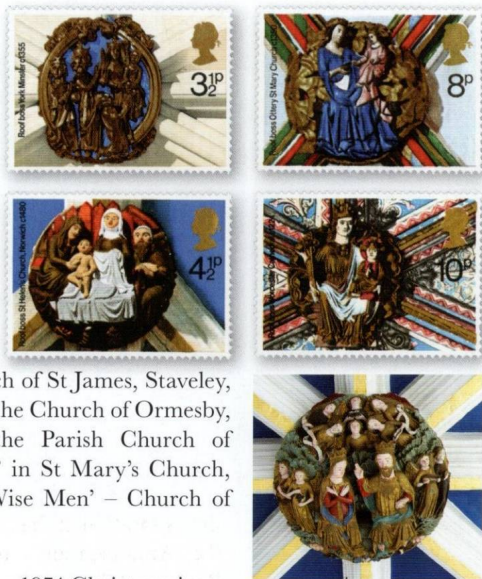
Just over 20 years later, in 1992, stained glass was the inspiration once more (below) – this time the work of two artists working in the 20th



Above and left: the 1992 issue showing the stained glass artistry of Paul Woodroffe and Karl Parsons

century: Karl Parsons and Paul Woodroffe. Parsons (1884-1934) was responsible for the 'Madonna and Child' (St Mary's, Bibury), 'Shepherds' (All Saint's, Porthcawl) and 'Angel Gabriel' (St James, Pangbourne). Woodroffe (1875-1954) designed 'King with Gold', and 'Kings with Frankincense and Myrrh' (both at Our Lady & St Peter's, Leatherhead).

The 2009 Stained Glass Windows issue employed the medium to great effect (facing page, bottom right). It featured the work of Pre-Raphaelites, showing windows created by William Morris ('Angel Playing Lute' in the Church of St James, Staveley, Kendal); Henry Holiday ('Madonna and Child' at the Church of Ormesby, St Michael, Great Yarmouth, 'Joseph' from the Parish Church of St Michael, Minehead, Somerset, and 'Shepherd' in St Mary's Church, Upavon, Wilts); and Sir Edward Burne Jones ('Wise Men' – Church of St Mary the Virgin, Rye, East Sussex).



The bigger picture Church decoration featured on the 1974 Christmas issue, which has church roof bosses as its subject (above). The stamps show the Adoration of the Magi (York Minster), the Nativity (St Helen's Church, Norwich), and two Virgin and Child compositions (from Ottery St Mary and Worcester Cathedral). These intricate works of art were carved and painted between 1224 and 1480 and illustrate the rich imaginations of the regional craftsmen in a time when there was little visual stimulation.

Medieval embroidery was the subject for the 1976 Christmas issue (below). The embroideries, showing the Virgin and Child, Angel with Crown, Angels Appearing to Shepherds and the Three Kings, come from vestments used by clergy in the 14th century. With such a heritage of beauty and diversity of form, there seems no doubt that religious art will continue to appeal to designers and collectors •



Above: the boss stamps and, another example of these extraordinary creations from St Helen's Church, Norwich. Below: a contemporary vestment embroidery from the V&A and the 1976 stamps that celebrated this form of religious art

