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M. S. Pathak

Postage Stamp Designing and its Limitations

Though postage stamp collecting dates as far back as 1850-60, with the passage of more than a century, philately has come to be one of the most widespread and specialized hobbies. A stamp or affixing of a stamp on letters, in olden days was introduced with the idea of creating a source of revenue. But advancement of art and science has culminated in ushering in 'stamp' as a silent ambassador of a country.

Stamp designing is a highly specialised art and artists who are used to work on large canvases would always view with great disfavour work on a stamp design, which demands the minutest attention, but hardly yields commensurate remuneration. Yet another reason for this less attractive feature is that a stamp cannot be a product for a competitive market. But with all this, there is a wide field for an artist to experiment in this branch of art, with good themes and layouts, which have as permanent a value as any other work of art.

The production of Stamps in India, though of recent origin, has made considerable strides. One hundred years back we were depending on the world famous printers M/s Thomas De La Rue & Co. of London. With the establishment of the Security Press at Nasik Road around 1925, stamps were printed in India by the Offset and Letterpress processes which have now become antique and archaic.

Two very important interdependent elements involved in making a stamp are the design and the process used for printing them. The need for printing the stamp to thumbnail size imposes extreme limitations of fineness in its designing. To ensure that all the details are reproduced properly on the stamp, the artist has to be thoroughly acquainted with the processes used for printing them. For the Letterpress and Offset process the original is drawn either in tone or line. The former i.e. the tone method, however, is not much favoured for stamp printing, since it is very difficult to maintain uniformity in printing, for, unlike other printing, uniformity is the main criterion in stamp printing. Line work, however, affords a lot of scope for maintaining uniformity apart from giving it a security value. The design is, therefore, converted into lines and dots i.e. the picture to be reproduced on the stamp is so drawn that the darker tones are represented by thicker lines or dots and the lighter tones by thinner lines or dots. In other words the whole design is broken into lines and dots. The design is first drawn to a sufficiently large size so that the artist can work out the lines and dots with advantage. The limitations in this particular process are that the artist has to restrict his line work to a particular number of lines per inch so that the lines are not too coarse or too fine. If too fine, they are likely to smudge in printing. The stamps on the Post Cards are printed by Letterpress from stereos and the printing is done on rotary machines which print quite fast and hence the design has to be worked out with a minimum of lines to achieve maximum effect. As compared to Letterpress the Offset process has more advantages in that the design can be a little finer.

The third process, viz. the photogravure process, with high speed presses, makes it possible to achieve higher production in a shorter time. The postage stamp design for the photogravure process, consists of a continuous tone original and the design is kept within a particular tonal range with the densitometer reading ranging from "0" in high lights to "2" in dark tones. The design is photographed and then at a later stage of the photogravure process, an extremely fine ruled screen is introduced, which breaks up the reproduction into tiny squares. These squares over the

whole of the reproduction are etched into a copper cylinder forming recesses or minute wells of ink of different depths therein. These recesses are almost uniform in size but vary in depth according to the strength of the tone of the original they represent. All the recesses thus formed, hold the printing ink which is lifted up by the printing under pressure on the machine. Different tones are indicated by different thicknesses of printing ink on the paper. This process produces, more nearly than any other, the effect of a continuous tone photograph. This in short is the process involved, but the designer has many problems to face before the stamp is finally printed.

The design for a postage stamp to be printed by the photogravure process, be it a mere representation of a portrait or any other picture, is usually drawn six times the actual size of the stamp required. Simplicity in the design is absolutely essential, as too many details do not print effectively, especially in a reduced size. It is often necessary to accentuate the finer details with bold representation, keeping in mind at the same time that, when reduced to the size of the stamp, the details are not out of proportion. This sometimes necessitates elimination of fine details. The tones play a vital part in photogravure design and each tonal strength has to be crisp and clear, for often the tones, though they may look alright on the original due to their deceptiveness, are not sufficiently clear for the camera to record. It is, therefore, essential during the designing stages to photograph the designs to reduced stamp sizes and scrutinize them until the desired effect is achieved.

Another limitation in which a stamp designer has to work, is the capacity and potentiality of the printing machine which is going to print his design. Where a gravure machine is not designed for pinpoint register and has to make use of the floating register as is the case with the present photogravure machine we have, the designer has to plan the original in such a manner that a slight deviation in register will not, on the whole, affect the impression. The proposed equipment at the Nasik Press with a multicolour printing machine will, however, afford greater freedom in designing.

The other important factors in the designing of the Postage Stamp, are the inscriptions of the denominational figures and the name of the country, which demand a good knowledge of typography. To achieve a well balanced composition the inscriptions and the main pictorial representation have to be composed with precision. I use the word 'precision' because in the reduced size every millimeter of the space has its com-

positional value. The typographical selection for the inscription must necessarily be done keeping in mind the limitations of the process. Any type with seriffs in smaller size loses its characteristics in printing. Grotesque, Gothic or Sanseriff go well from that point of view, but with them too, the harmony of the type in relation to the picture, has to be given due consideration. A design with brevity of inscriptions gives an elegant appearance, but the same if overcrowded with inscriptions mars a good theme.

Of the many restrictions that are required to be observed in the design of a stamp, the size of the stamp is a very important one. The designer of a stamp has to select a suitable size from amongst the standard ones. Perforation, which is the final stage of stamp production, is done mechanically with the help of perforation boxes. There are a fixed number of perforation boxes designed for particular sizes. Hence the artist, even before planning rough visuals has to take into consideration the limitations of this factor and a stamp designed at random size cannot be processed. Here again the size has to be absolutely correct and in perfect square to the fraction of an inch because, as pointed out above, stamp designing and printing demand great precision.

In spite of the limitations that limit the creativity of the designer, stamp designing does leave a good deal of freedom to the artist designers. For, after all, in all fine arts, he alone can best use his freedom, who acts with the knowledge of the handicaps that the medium he uses, places on him.

There is yet another process of stamp printing and that is the recess printing popularly known as Intaglio printing. Intaglio printing is easily recognisable with its clear lines and sharpness of print as the ink is deposited on the surface of the paper in relief. The original plate is manually etched or engraved in steel from which at a later stage multiple impressions are transferred on the printing plate. This process, though it ensures greater safety from the forgery point of view, is a very expensive and time consuming process and hence not suitable to meet the demands of ever increasing postal requirements and hence has not yet been adopted in India.