

Cats on Stamps

With Royal Mail issuing more cats (and dogs) stamps in February, James Mackay looks back at earlier philatelic felines

It is strange to think that the domestic cat, probably the commonest and most familiar of animals throughout the world, was one of the least represented on stamps until recent years. Up to the 1960s, in fact, you would have been hard put to find more than a dozen examples, and in every case you would have had to look closely to find the cat tucked away in a corner of the design.



The first cat on a stamp—Lindbergh's cat, Patsy

The first cat stamp was an airmail issued by Spain in 1930 to commemorate the solo trans-Atlantic flight of Charles Lindbergh in 1927. The stamp (SG 650) portrays Lindbergh and shows his monoplane *Spirit of St Louis* beside the Statue of Liberty. In the bottom right-hand corner of the stamp, however, is Patsy, a tiny black kitten which should have been Lindbergh's mascot on his epic flight—only the tender-hearted aviator handed her over to his ground crew shortly before take-off. He didn't mind risking his own life, but couldn't risk any of Patsy's nine lives.

Cuba celebrated the golden jubilee of the Young Helpers' League by issuing a stamp in 1957 which depicted a boy fondling a cat (823). A boy holding a kitten was featured on one of the stamps in the Dutch Child Welfare set of 1952 (761) and Luxembourg showed a cat on one of its Animal Protection stamps of 1961 (692).

Wicked witch

Cats in folklore fared little better. In 1959 Hungary issued a series of stamps depicting various fairy tales. The 30f. stamp showed the Sleeping Beauty and, peeping round the foot of the bed, was a black cat (1622). The following year Hungary issued a second set and this time Puss in Boots himself appeared on the 60f. stamp (1705). Germany issued a set of Child Welfare stamps in 1961 depicting scenes from Hansel and Gretel; two of them showed the wicked witch with her black cat (1284/5).

One or two 'strays' could be found on stamps depicting works of art. East Germany issued a set of stamps in 1959 showing famous paintings in the Dresden Art Gallery. The 10pf. featured Gabriel Metsu's *Portrait of a Needlewoman* and her cat appeared beside her in the picture (E428). Belgium's 1960 anti-TB set featured various arts and crafts, and the top value, devoted to ceramics, showed a porcelain cat (1764). The previous year Belgium issued a set devoted to various local festivals; the 3f. depicted the town jester of Ypres in fancy-dress and holding a cat (1709). A Roman terracotta figure of a cat appeared on one of the stamps in the Dutch Cultural Welfare series of 1962 (921) and Renoir's *Woman and Cat* was reproduced on a stamp of Burundi in 1968 (350).

Cats associated with literary celebrities made fleeting appearances on stamps. Monaco's 1f.30 stamp of 1972 marking the 150th anniversary of the birth of Baudelaire included a black cat and a tabby in a montage of images associated with his writings (1026), while France's 50c.+10c. stamp of 1973 marking the centenary of the birth of Colette showed the shadow of her cat in the background (1992).

Colourful cat sets

Cats really came into their own in the mid-sixties. In 1964 Poland brought out a magnificent set of ten large stamps featuring various types of European, Siamese and Persian cats (1469/78). This was the sequel to a very popular series on dogs. This encouraged Rumania and Yemen to produce colourful cat sets in 1965. The Rumanian series (3255/62) consisted of eight multi-coloured pictorials showing a wide range of cats, ranging from a tabby (5b.) and a ginger tom (10b.) to the more exotic White Persian (40b.) and the haughty Siamese (11.35). Kittens at play, with an old shoe (55b.) and a ball of wool (60b.), proved that cats were cats, no matter which side of the Iron Curtain they lived on.



Early cat stamps from Cuba, Netherlands and Luxembourg
Right: Folklore cats from Hungary and Germany; Roman terracotta cat, Colette's cat and a kitten from Poland



The Yemeni series depicted three different kinds of Persian cat—the Black, the Cream and the Silver Tabby—as well as the Tortoiseshell, the Red Tabby and the Seal-point Siamese (R99/104). In 1966 Albania had a set devoted to farmyard animals and depicted a cat on the 50q. value (993). Later, Albania jumped on the bandwagon with a set of seven showing different breeds (1051/7).

British cat stamps

In the past 30 years the trickle of cat stamps has become a positive deluge. Britain was slow to catch on, our first stamp in this theme being issued in 1979 when the 13p in the Year of the Child set featured Alice and the Mad Hatter with the Cheshire Cat (1094). The grinning Cheshire Cat appeared on one of the 20p stamps in the Smiles booklet of 1990 (1486), re-issued the following year as a first class stamp (1553). In 1986 the Nature Conservation series included a Scottish Wild Cat (*Felis silvestris*) on the 31p (1322). Although this species is quite distinct from the domestic cat, it has been known to interbreed with feral cats (domestic animals which have reverted to the wild state).

Two years later the set and matching miniature sheet marking the centenary of the death of Edward Lear showed the Owl and the Pussy-cat (19p, 1405) and Lear's drawing of a cat from his alphabet book (32p, 1407). The Good Luck greetings booklet of 1991 had black cats on four different stamps, although you would need a magnifying glass to find three of them. The same applies to the 31p of the British Fairs set of 1983 where a black cat appears in the bottom left-hand corner (1230). In the Christmas set that year, you'll find a black and white cat rubbing against the Three Kings chimney pots on the 16p (1232), while a pantomime cat is shown on the 34p Christmas stamp of 1985 (1307).

The first British stamp to do justice to the subject was one of the four stamps of 1990 marking the 150th anniversary of the RSPCA, showing a rather wistful kitten (1479). Orlando the Marmalade Cat was featured on one of the greetings stamps of 1994 whose theme was characters in children's literature writing letters (1807).

Royal Mail made up for past neglect when it released a set of five cat stamps in January 1995 (1848/52). Not only were these identifiable breeds, but it transpired that they were actual cats, owned by the designer Elizabeth Blackadder or her neighbours on the outskirts of Edinburgh. The black cat, Sophie (19p), was named after Sophia Loren 'because she's so elegant'. The 25p depicted the Siamese named Puskas, after the Hungarian footballer and the Tabby, Tigger, while a ginger cat named Chloe graced the 30p. The Tortoiseshell Kikko and the Abyssinian Rosie spurred on the 35p, while the 41p showed Fred, a black and white moggy named after Fred Astaire, because he resembled the song and dance man 'in white tie and tails'.

The Isle of Man, world-famous for its tailless cats, has featured this breed on many stamps since the definitive sets of 1973-5 (28) and 1978-81 (125). A little girl with her teddybear and a cat appeared on one of the Christmas stamps of 1979 (163), while one of the 24p stamps in the publicity booklet of February 1994 showed a Manx cat beside the Laxey Wheel (595). A set of four showing different variants of the tailless cat appeared in 1989 (399/402), while a set of five and a miniature sheet of 1996 depicted Manx cats round the world (678/82).

The fashion for cat stamps really got under way in the late 1980s. In 1988 the USA issued a set of four stamps, each featuring two breeds: Siamese and exotic Shorthair, Abyssinian and Himalayan, Maine Coon and Burmese, American Shorthair and Persian (2334/7). In 1994 Jersey celebrated the 21st anniversary of its Cat Club with a set of five (650/4): four fancy breeds, but the place of honour on the top value was reserved for common or garden moggys.

Disney cats

The countries in the Inter-Governmental Philatelic Corporation ensemble produced some of the most colourful cat stamps of the past decade. As a rule, these have

Manx cats



Non-pedigree and British Shorthair



Exotic cats

A wistful kitten; Sophie, Puskas and Tigger, Chloe, Kikko and Rosie, Fred



been produced in sheets of eight to 12, showing different breeds on individual stamps. Good examples of this genre are the sheets of eight from Guyana, the Maldiv Islands, Uganda and Nevis, the two sheets of 12 from Ghana and the similar sheets from The Gambia and Sierra Leone. Literary cats from IGPC countries included Figaro, from the Disney film *Pinochio* (on stamps of the Maldives, Grenada and the Grenadines). The Grenadines also featured Duchess, the white cat from Disney's *Aristocats*, on a souvenir sheet.

Poland's set of 1996, marking the 50th anniversary of UNICEF, featured characters from children's literature. One of these, entitled *Tales from the Bergamot Islands* by Jan Brzechwa, shows a humanoid cat sitting cross-legged, watching a girl-mouse playing with a skipping-rope (3624). If any reader can enlighten us as to the significance of this whimsical scene, I would be very grateful.

Elsewhere, cat stamps began bobbing up all over the place. In May 1993 Venda issued a set of four devoted to domestic cats (247/50). In March Italy issued a set of four 600L stamps featuring a European, a White Persian, a Devon Rex and a Maine Coon (2199/202). In September Belgium produced a set of four featuring European breeds (3184/7). In July one of New Zealand's Health stamps showed a girl with a kitten (1742). Previously \$2 and \$2.50 greetings booklets of 1991 had featured a ginger rascal up to all sorts of mischief (1604/13). In December the Falkland Islands issued a set of five stamps based on photographs of islanders' pets. The 34p showed a puppy with a cat (693) while the

39p featured a playful kitten on its hind legs (694). Even Tonga's Family Planning series of January 1993 showed silhouettes of kittens on the *se-tenant* pair of 60s. stamps (1209/10).

Year of the Dog?

1994 may have been the Year of the Dog in the Chinese Lunar Calendar, but it was the year in which cat stamps really came into their own. In February the Falklands stamps were re-issued with an overprint publicising the Hong Kong stamp exhibition (698/9). St Helena's set for this event included a Common Tabby on the 25p (660), while Cuba issued a set of six cat stamps (3875/80).

In March Sweden released a booklet containing two panes of 4k.50 stamps showing Siamese, Long-haired Persian, Abyssinian and European (1724/7). Later in the year a booklet of greetings stamps showed a black cat with the caption 'Puss och kram' (love and kisses)—a Swedish pun, for 'puss' is the word for 'kiss' in that language (1747).

Finland marked the centenary of its confectionery industry in 1991 with a 2m.10 stamp showing three ginger kittens with a Kiss-Kiss sweet (1264), but in 1995 produced a booklet containing six stamps featuring different breeds (1402/7).

Germany's Child Welfare set in April 1994, depicting characters created by Heinrich Hoffmann a century ago, included little Pauline with her two cats tugging at her skirt (2569). Cats in literature included a Faroese 6k. showing Ormar slaying the giant's cat in *Brusajökil's Lay* (263). By contrast, Postman Pat and his black and white cat Jess visited the Isle of

Maine Coon and White Persian



CATS OF THE WORLD



Man in September 1994 and inspired a set of six stamps (614/9), a miniature sheet and a prestige booklet. On two of the stamps Jess was also shown with Manx tabby or ginger cats for good measure.

Black cats for good luck

Caricatures of black cats for good luck appeared on one of Jersey's greetings stamps of 1995 (689). Jersey also featured a black and white cat on the Cinderella 23p in the Christmas Pantomimes set in October the same year (728).

For St Valentine's Day, 1995 Slovenia issued a 20 tolar stamp. Apart from the visual pun, highlighting the letters 'LOVE' in the country name, the stamp showed two cats gone a-courting with a flurry of red hearts above them. This stamp, entitled 'Kittens in Love', was designed by 12-year-old Jure Kos (256). Since 1995 the Czech Republic has had an annual Children's Day stamp and featured cartoon cats on the first two of them (91 and 133).

Interestingly, some of the IGPC issues since 1994 added another thematic dimension. Thus the set from Uganda featured the different breeds alongside famous landmarks associated with the appropriate country, the Devon Rex being portrayed with Stonehenge in the background (1352), while Mali's sheet of nine Cats of the World was set against the background of a lace tablecloth.

Cat paintings

Kerri Schiff's two sheets of 12d. stamps and pair of matching 20d. souvenir sheets reproduced cat paintings by famous artists, ranging from works by Harunobu, Hokusai and Hiroshige to Renoir's *Woman with a Cat* and several works by Steinlen. By contrast, several designs were derived from the genre scenes on turn-of-the-century Christmas cards by Prang and Raphael Tuck, while *Naughty Puss* was actually painted to advertise Jayne's Tonic Vermifuge (a patent medicine for worming cats).

In April 1995 St Vincent broke new ground with a sheet of nine different \$1 stamps depicting cats of the world in a composite picture of a West Indian verandah and a coterie of cats engaged in various activities (2872/80). This concept was also used for the set of six cat stamps issued by Alderney in July 1996 (A89/94). The stamps were issued in separate sheets, but a miniature sheet with all six side-by-side formed a composite picture. In March

that year Russia issued a sheet of ten containing pairs of stamps showing five different breeds (6579/83). Australia's pets series of October 1996 showed two ginger kittens on one stamp (1645) and a cat and a puppy playing on another (1649). The ginger kittens design was also used for self-adhesive coils and booklets as well as appearing in a miniature sheet that was subsequently overprinted for various national and international exhibitions.

Literary cats got a boost from France, which included the tale of the Cat, the Weasel and the Little Rabbit in a series celebrating the tercentenary of the fabulist Jean de La Fontaine (June 1995). The stamp shows the wise old cat Raminogrobis weighing the litigants on his scales of justice before devouring them both (3280).

More literary felines

In 1997 the Europa theme of myths and legends yielded a pair of literary felines. Austria's 7s. stamp (2477) featured the Town Band of Bremen (a donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster). 1997 was actually the tercentenary of another collector of fables, Charles Perrault, whose most famous character, Puss in Boots, was the subject of the 3f. stamp from France (3384). As well as Hungary (1960), this most resourceful cat had previously been depicted on stamps from East Germany (1966), Mali (1972), Monaco (1978), Paraguay (1982), Brazil (1994) and Jersey (1995).

Among other 1997 issues is a charming set from North Korea (January) showing kittens up to no good as usual, a stunning sheet from Tanzania showing a tabby and a ginger with a strip of four 300s. stamps along the bottom depicting different breeds, a miniature sheet of four from Turkey forming a composite picture of an Angora cat, and a whimsical greetings stamp from France, showing a mouse placating a black and white tomcat with a gift-wrapped Christmas present (3455).

This survey of cat stamps is by no means exhaustive, neither does it include any of the vast number of cats on stamps to have appeared during the last three years, but I hope it will convey something of the scope and variety of this theme.

Far left: Cats of the World—Abyssinian, Chocolate Colourpoint Shorthair, Silver Tabby, Persian, Maine Coon, Brown Shaded Burmese, Siamese and British Shorthair
Left and below: Family pets



Above: Siamese, Persian, European and Abyssinian cats and ginger kittens
Below: Postman Pat and his black and white cat, Jess



Cartoon cats, Devon Rex and Puss in Boots

