

Rubber Stamp Art

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Since the invention of rubber stamps in the 1860s they have been used mainly for the purpose with which most of us associate them: the rapid replication of printed preselected messages upon any paper surfaces and documents.' Post offices and banking institutions are the most consistent and familiar users of rubber stamps, but stamps also have been popular as an inexpensive form of printing for sign making, business forms and personal stationery, for certifying government inspected meats (with edible inks) and as a toy for children. The almost universal availability of specialized stamps in the 20th century--almost every business used several, and many households contained address stamps--increased the likelihood of stamps being applied outside their intended contexts, and when this took place, the self-conscious exploration and exploitation of rubber stamp images as a self-sufficient medium became inevitable. With increased awareness of the decorative possibilities of rubber stamps? came availability of stamps not dependent upon existing formats: instead of the vocabulary of words and numbers available from traditional rubber stamp manufacturers, more playful lexicons consisting of images of animals, objects, machines, persons and plants were manufactured and sold commercially.³

The first adult use of rubber stamps in self-conscious attempts to create "art" goes back to 1919, although the late 1950s probably represented the first real widespread recognition, in Correspondence Art, of the form's potential.+ Correspondence Art, also called Mail Art and Postal Art, began with a small group of artists exchanging art works through the U.S. mails, but the practice soon grew in scope with increased participants and more and more elaborate works exchanged until there was, inevitably, formal recognition by the art establishment. Because of the limits imposed by the U.S. mail regulations, this art focused upon the embellishment and decoration of otherwise conventional postcards, envelope and small packages. The essentially ephemeral nature of this form of artistic expression, and the built-in insecurity created by the uncertainties of the postal delivery system, made rubber stamps, with their low cost, replicability, flexibility and potential for cheaply producing shocking and

amusing juxtapositions upon any flat surface, a natural choice of medium for these avant garde artists.

Post Office personnel, used to the appearance of conventional "First Class," "Air Mail" and "Special Delivery" stamps, no doubt found fish, dancing couples, palm trees and the like distracting presences when these images appeared stamped, in colored ink, across the face of envelopes and postcards, shifting attention from names, addresses, and Zip codes (which may themselves have been stamped in unmatching and unconventional type faces). Businesses and individuals receiving rubber stamp correspondence may have been similarly jolted when whimsical collages of animals and objects swarmed upon their letters in artful and perverse juxtaposition. These practices have become increasingly frequent since the 1960s, first as self-conscious manifestations of the Correspondence Art movement, then as embellishments, gratuitous or serious, inspired by the ownership of rubber stamps. However, all rubber stamp practitioners, whether self-styled artists or not, are involved by their actions in an enterprise much more interesting than mere decoration.⁵ Their manipulation of images, whether self-conscious or only playful, involves the same aesthetic issues concerning depictions of time and space which have always governed iconic representations upon two-dimensional surfaces. The uniqueness of the rubber stamping process, when compared with other representational formats, allows special effects difficult to achieve in other media and which, even if achieved there, would not have the success they have with rubber stamps. The materials and activity of rubber stamping also impose severe limits upon the kind of work which can be produced. However, in what I am calling rubber stamp art-image-making activity with rubber stamp impressions for aesthetic effects-limitations of the format are transformed into successful design elements, producing images which are representational in appearance and conceptual in effect.

The contemporary rubber stamp art movement is international in scope, with works regularly exchanged between American and European practitioners. Amsterdam, for example, is an important center for rubber stamp activities, supporting a number of permanent galleries and stores devoted to the exhibition of rubber stamp art and the publication of writings about the movement. What is interesting is how rubber stamp activity in this country tends to be decorative in appearance and recreational in motive, whereas for European practitioners the act of stamping has an anti-

authoritarian and political dimension usually absent from American rubber stamp art. For many European artists, the rubber stamp, as the traditional certifying mark of governmental bureaucracy, that marker which makes official one's documents of existence-birth, education, employment, marriage, death and the like-is considered a symbol, just by its existence, of political power and individual oppression. Therefore, when individual citizens appropriate, imitate, parody or in any way employ rubber stamps they symbolically reclaim the validating tools of individual identity and hence participate in their own liberation. Or so the argument goes.

For this facet of the rubber stamp movement words are at least as important as images in communicating appropriate messages. In this discussion, however, my interest lies with the more aesthetic dimension of the rubber stamp art world, that which stresses images more than words, decoration more than protest, aesthetic pleasure more than political opposition, even though on the symbolic level any use of stamps asserts individual autonomy. Specifically, I wish to examine the iconic potentials of rubber stamping which make it such an attractive medium for artistic expression for so many serious as well as amateur practitioners.

In this perspective rubber stamps can be compared with other printing methods, since in everyday use they perform as an archaic manual printing medium; their use of represented images upon a plane makes them similar to graphic media and painting, except that using rubber stamps involves a limitation to predetermined images.⁷

The parallel of rubber stamps with printing methods of various sorts comes immediately to mind, especially since in everyday use rubber stamps perform as a kind of do-it-yourself printing medium. When the image shifts away from words into representational images the parallel remains. Like other printing techniques rubber stamp imprinting depends upon preexisting forms, a high degree of technological expertise to create the image and inks, flat surfaces with particular characteristics to receive the image and finished products which can be duplicated. In being duplicated, however, the stamped product will always exhibit slight variants whenever it is recreated, and multiple copies must always be tediously reproduced by hand. With rubber stamps as with print, image size is predetermined by type or stamp size, although photographic processes offer the printer flexibility impossible to someone working with rubber stamps. Stamps are more restricted in the ink colors available, but unlike print formats the

placement of images within the frame is always flexible. With rubber stamps the imprinter's decision can wait until the moment of final copy; with print such freedom is impossible. Both formats easily blend images with language.

Many of these subject matter similarities extend into a comparison with painting: the work is in a plane, within framed space, allowing both linguistic and nonlinguistic signs, focusing upon images which evoke recognizable fragments or contexts of everyday reality. Although stamped images can be duplicated more easily than can paintings, both media share the freedom and spontaneity of the creative act; working with the limits of available images, inks and surface, the rubber stamp artist is like the painter with palette, paint and canvas: both artists will have immediate effects upon their final surface. The significant difference here, of course, is that the rubber stamp artist is limited by the images owned in stamps, whereas the painter is as unlimited as his or her vision and ability. A less significant difference is the relative ease of changing the final copy: a painting can always be altered, a rubber-stamped work almost never.

The collage medium offers even closer parallels to the nature and potential of rubber stamp creations. Like collage, rubber stamp art uses "found images" and must do something with them more than their face value would allow. Preferably this will be something witty and clever involving deliberate distortion, rearrangement, or alteration of the original forms into larger wholes, usually ones unpredicted from the parts. The frequent use of language to help point to larger meanings and establish appropriate contexts within which to view the images is also similar. An especially interesting parallel between collage and rubber stamp creations, and in important element of creativity in rubber stamps, is that in many cases the artist's creation derives from the mechanical means of production (or reproduction), instead of from some preexisting concept. Unlike a painter, whose choice of subject is usually independent of the available paints and brushes, an artist working with collage or rubber stamps may very well derive an idea from a particularly interesting artifact or rubber stamp, and construct the art work around this item. The collage artist has a wider range of material to select from, but often is limited by its uniqueness. The person working with rubber stamps can duplicate images endlessly, but is severely restricted to those images for which stamps are owned. Hence for the rubber stamp artist, working from idea to art may be frustrating, if a large enough variety of images is not owned; working from

owned image to idea will be more satisfactory, in allowing the finished product to be achievable: thus the tools of imagination coincide with the means of production.

Because the rubber stamp artist elects to work with the limitations of using only available stamps, the kind of image development possible is easily predicted. (Of course many artists use rubber stamps in conjunction with other media: Saul Steinberg is the best known example. This discussion, however, restricts itself to issues arising from the exclusive use of rubber stamps in the creation of art.) If given five objects to paint, a cake, a seashell, a shoe, a fish, and a hat, a painter endlessly could explore different ways of rendering each item, as well as constructing still life combinations. By varying light, color, and relative realism of reproduction, a painter might never exhaust even one of these subjects. Monet's cathedral, haystack and water lilies series are obvious examples of creative potentials in simple images. However, if the representation and scale of the subjects is already determined, as it would be with rubber stamps, the possibilities for artistic development become severely limited to variations in placement, color, and intensity of image (controlled by relative pressure and quantity of ink). Limited to these five images the rubber stamp artist has little option but to mix them up to achieve novel variations upon normal patterns of order. The fish may come out of the shoe, or sit on the cake, or ride upon the seashell, or be depicted eating the hat, and so on. The tendency toward surrealism is clear, as is the need for wit and humor.

It seems likely that this limitation to predetermined images, which would be intolerably restrictive to a painter, is one of the appeals of rubber stamp art, for the other side of the limitation is almost complete freedom from the need for painterly skills. The ownership of rubber stamps makes anyone a potential artist, with no need for special training and hand-eye coordination. The work is quick to create and allows any individual to become a creator of art rather than a consumer of other artists' compositions.^o Without the need to train one's talent, skill is replaced by wit. execution comes closer to conception, and the satisfactions of creative work become available to all. This democratic quality should not be dismissed as a minor part of rubber stamp art's appeal. Stamps in one catalogue begin at twenty-five cents each, and by decorating one's correspondence, on letter and envelope, one is guaranteed captive, and usually appreciative, audiences.

One further point should be made in this comparison of rubber stamp images with those in graphics and painting. Unlike these more sophisticated media, rubber stamp images can never pretend to be more or anything other than what they are: there is no illusion or realism involved. Rubber stamp images are not only artificial signifiers, but they call attention to themselves as such, by their limitations in detail, reduction of complex planes to outlines and line shadings, limitation in size possible, disregard for consistency in perspective, style, color and complexity, and the frequent emphasis on wit, humor and satire. As we shall see, this impossibility of creating any sort of realism with rubber stamps is an important element in keeping appreciation of rubber stamp art in the conceptual area, a definite factor in viewer appreciation. Each rubber stamp impression has intrinsic merit, since its constituent images are always adequately rendered and therefore capable of evoking associations within the viewer. The limits of rubber stamp art, therefore, are the limits of the materials plus the limits of the artist. The intangible limits of artists exist whatever the medium, but it is possible to examine the unique qualities of rubber stamp art that derive from the nature of the materials used.

Because of the predetermined nature of the images in rubber stamp art, the artist working in this medium may feel his or her creativity is to a large extent determined by the stamps that are owned. Rubber stamps composed of words are readily available on special order from any office supply store, but until Miller and Thompson somewhat reluctantly listed their sources in *The Rubber Stamp Album*, locating unconventional stamps was a matter of pursuing rumor, frustrating correspondence and serendipity.¹⁰ Miller and Thompson list about two dozen catalogs devoted exclusively to rubber stamps, one containing 1400 different designs. Stamp prices range from 25¢ to \$15. Altogether there are probably three or four thousand stamps listed for sale, although looking through the catalogs reveals that many feature the same designs. This is not surprising since many stamps have been created from old printer's cuts used in the early 1900s (the largest stamp catalog is based upon such a collection, and the type catalogs which supplied early 20th century printers with these ornamental cuts tended to feature identical designs.¹¹ Since any black and white graphic or drawing can be made into a stamp (photography does not reproduce well) catalog creators have also used drawings taken from comics, advertisements, medical manuals, textbooks, old and new magazines, tattoo designs and of course original drawings. The Dover Pictorial Archive is an important source of old designs for many catalogues; it comprises dozens of books

collecting examples of art available for copyright-free duplication. The range in style and sophistication is vast, and encompasses medieval woodcuts, steel engravings, cartoons, amateurish drawings and even photographs. Some stamps are at the level of advertising art, others derive from the quality etchings of name artists; cartoons coexist with cartouches, sketches with silhouettes. This diversity of source can provide richness and complexity or fragmentation and conflict within a composite work.

Rubber stamps, then, are available from various catalogs, may be custom made, or are sometimes found in toy stores, at swap meets and flea markets or in other unlikely locations. There is, in fact, some quality of bricolage in rubber stamp circles: making do with the simple and available rather than indulging in new, expensive stamps composes an anti-aesthetic. The expensive stamp calls attention to itself as a purchased item, especially to viewers familiar with the catalog from which it was ordered; using inexpensive, common and unassuming items and from them creating interesting images, superimposes a pauper's aesthetic upon an artist's one. Making more with less can be a very real goal with rubber stamps.

At the same time, however, familiarity with available offerings in the standard catalogs may create pressures in the opposite direction: originality and uniqueness of image may become the goals, even though this quest contains its own paradox, specifically, the desire to uniquely possess an item whose essential characteristic is its ability to endlessly duplicate its own trace. The quest for originality also tends to be restricted to certain categories of subject matter, as will be discussed shortly.

Furthermore, the highly technological nature of rubber stamp manufacture makes any quest for uniqueness a highly dependent one. Mass industrial processes are necessary to supply the rubber stamp artist with both tools (paper, pads, ink) and images, however unique the particular image selected for reproduction may be. Within limits, though, there are choices possible, and just as a modern graphic designer can work only with available type faces, there usually are available sufficient possibilities so that real creativity can be revealed in whatever choices are made.

The problem for the rubber stamp artist, however, will be guaranteeing sufficient items from which to choose, and this, unfortunately, is very much a financial matter. Although individual stamps sell for under a dollar, the more interesting ones average three to five dollars, and having a stamp

custom-made can cost ten dollars or more. Although stamps are endlessly reusable, the desire for new and original ones to supplement one's collection is strong, and cost quickly becomes a limit upon creativity. The cost factor also can be seen to contradict the essentially democratic nature of rubber stamping as an art. Only those individuals with the finances to spend on creating new rubber stamps can actually be involved in the process of making new images for rubber stamp art, and not all these individuals will be willing to sell duplicates of their new stamps. All the others will have to limit their image-innovations to various combinations of existing stamps. Similar financial constraints may create pressure to purchase ten inexpensive, small stamps rather than one large and more interesting stamp, choices which may result in financial questions determining the size, complexity and complexion of the subsequent creations. Again this issue derives from the peculiar image-based nature of rubber stamping as an artistic medium. A painter unable to afford more paint simply stops painting; limited means may mean small canvases, but the resources available will not determine the images selected for depiction, as is the case with rubber stamps.

Size of image is almost an absolute limit in the rubber stamp art of even the wealthiest practitioner. Stamps larger than four inches square are rare and unless their designs are simple will not reproduce successfully. Most stamps are between one and four square inches in surface area. Therefore realistic life-size representations are limited to subjects such as insects, small mechanical items like nuts and screws, eyes, and the like. Every other item is rendered part scale. These factors tend to result in rubber stamp art works which are small and multi-elemented, and if larger, employing large masses of blank space between images as a design element, or representing complex interactions because of the large number of smaller elements used. The duplicatability of rubber stamp images lends itself to serial images, so often larger surfaces are subdivided into small areas within which particular images may be repeated with significant variations.

The kind of images most suitable for rubber stamp creations is highly dependent upon the creative ingenuity of the user. However, certain kinds of images seem more appropriate for rubber stamp art, if only because of the ease with which they can be combined with other images or because of their evocative potentials, in both symbolic and literal realms.

Some of the most successful images are those which, by their referential

value, create the illusion that a blank surface has been transformed into an area with particular qualities. Stamping clouds, a sun, birds, balloons, blimps airplanes and skydivers in the upper part of a page effectively identifies the area as privileged space within which atmospheric phenomena can be expected to occur. Fish, sea creatures, swimmers, divers and boats do the same for a watery environment. Vehicular, animal, architectural and human images easily define their surroundings as familiar land. By placing even single images in the appropriate vertical distribution the reference to conventional landscape is secured.

"Detachable" images which can be thematically combined with others are especially useful, since they contain within themselves both ideas and licenses for use. A dirigible image, with its suggestion of potentials for lifting and carrying heavy loads, may be combined with any number of other images deemed suitable (or, if desired, unsuitable) for being moved through the air: a piano, an elephant, an automobile, a large pig. Images evoking the idea of forcible combination, or ingestion, may allow for other witty juxtapositions: a meat grinder may swallow whole animals, or trees, or small images of meat-packing factories; a mouth may be seen consuming everything in sight. (The animated graphics of the Monty Python television show make frequent use of this theme.)

Likewise, conventional landscape may not be desired; at times no orientation is needed or wanted, and so these potentially establishing images may be used in inappropriate settings to free them from their usual references. Automobiles mixed with fish obviously call for different decoding than autos with trains, or fish with ships.

Images which already imply the breakdown of normal perceptual categories also work well in rubber stamps: cartoon characters, mythical beasts, distorted or grotesque images, images of pre-existing images, skeletons and the like. Similarly, images which potentially suggest disorder, chaos and any feelings of inappropriateness or violations of communal standards are also successful: insects, spiders, flies, death's heads, demons (and angels) all fit into this category.

When language is combined with image in stamps, or evoked by the context, it tends to involve images creating illusions, such as fake "official" rubber stamps, or stamps of already printed items, like paper money. Images whose names evoke multiple meanings or puns are suitable for satirical effect (the image of a screw, a pig, a skunk, a turkey) or for use in

word games, like rebuses: deer to stand for "dear," an eye for "I," rabbit/hare for "hair," and so on. Specific messages formalized into rubber stamp form change meaning and literal "con-texts": love letters, Dear John or Dear Mary letters reprinted with blanks left for inscribing alternative names, or other intimate messages which by being printed lost their traditional valorization, all have been used for their satirical or inventive effect ("I love you," "Sincerely," "My dearest.....»").

Completeness is another important quality in rubber stamps suitable for successful design integration. Heads without bodies, legs without torsoes, parts of cars and other incomplete images all can be used, but impose rather stringent demands upon their use, since rubber stamps' mimetic qualities tend to evoke the remainder of the form whose absence must therefore be somewhat accounted for in the overall design; they are less flexible than total images (which may, if necessary, be truncated appropriately by covering the undesired area with scrap paper when stamping). At the other extreme, images which are too complete and self-contained may be difficult to integrate with other elements. Emblems and medallions, like any stamp with enclosed borders, create separate and privileged spaces within whatever larger space they are employed, characteristics not always desirable. Partial borders, base reference lines, and other fragments of surrounding environments, like waves from a ship's prow, also demand particular treatment, since they limit the potentials for symbolic interaction and evoke larger settings which may be inappropriate in the rest of the design. Some surrounding markers, such as motion signs around airplanes, may be tolerable, but in general, the more pure and neutral an image, the greater its potentials for being successfully incorporated into a larger design. A single complex, complete scene may be used as the basis or focus for elaboration by other less complete images, but it would be difficult to incorporate more than one complete scene if they don't thematically and stylistically work together. Each complex scene tends to impose its perspectives upon all available surrounding space within the larger frame, and thus requires any additional stamps to comment upon or somehow modify this central element.

The conventions of perspective, with single points of view and vanishing points to create stable contexts and guidelines for interrelating different elements within complex constructions, rarely are, or can be, respected. Different parts of a work may depend for their effects upon image decipherment according to perspectival clues, but the nature of rubber

stamp images makes illusionism and the problem of "depth" irrelevant to their concentration on surfaces and the play over surfaces. The eclectic nature of any collection of stamps, and the inconsistency or scale renderings, only emphasize the priority of surfaces and the subordination of other visual systems and devices. Stamps of flies may be larger than stamps of people; people may be larger than airplanes; airplanes may be smaller than fish; fish may be the same size as automobiles. Furthermore, each image will present a different view of itself, some being rendered in strict front, side or top views, with others suggesting angle views of different sorts.

All the material qualities of the rubber stamp medium that can be considered—the rubber itself, sources of stamps, their cost and workable size, appropriate subjects, considerations of complexity, completeness, style, perspective, plane and alignment, and considerations of ink, color and printing surface—are at the same time limitations upon and inspirations for the kind of work that can be produced with rubber stamps. These material considerations are given, identical for every individual who chooses to work in this area, much like the availability of paints and canvases would be for painters. What can be done with these tools is of course dependent upon the user's ability, but with rubber stamps the condition of replicability itself makes the artist's ability more intellectual than dexterous, more inspirational than laborious, more witty than painterly. Rubber stamp images can be employed together in ways which further extend the potentials of these pre-existing forms, uses that are inevitable consequences of the basically representative nature of all rubber stamp work. This representational quality of rubber stamps forces rubber stamp art to be essentially narrative in quality, with all the problems this implies. In traditional representational narrative art, the single moment depicted within the frame must evoke the temporal sequence of the narrative while it establishes the spatial interrelationships of the narrative elements. In other words, the separate images create the impression of a moment in time, and from this moment must be evoked the story being told by the images. 13 Time and space come together within the frame in a way that creates the images' power for the viewers. This power can be seen to depend upon three essential combinatorial principles available to the user or rubber stamps, with relative success dependent upon the cleverness, aptness and sophistication employed. These principles, the only ones applicable with the predetermined images of rubber stamps, are juxtaposition (as the spatial dimension), repetition (as the temporal

dimension), and distortion (as the intellectual dimension, combining spatial, temporal and other abstracting qualities).

A single impression of a rubber stamp (in a neutral context), whatever its beauty or intricacy, may be dismissed as having little of anything to qualify it as artful. The derivative nature of rubber stamps shifts whatever appreciation of design that is present toward the original source or artist. However, the self-conscious transformation of a single image, through duplication or alteration, or the appearance of a second image, immediately creates complex inter-image potentials, and from the nature of these interactions will come the power of the art. And of course, in rubber stamp work, as in any two-dimensional art, all image interactions are based upon proximity.

Because every image evokes the spatial dimension appropriate to its nature, with single impressions of birds, cars and fish capable of transforming otherwise neutral planes into air, land and water masses, the spatial dimension of image combination is always the dominant one. Within these spaces, the inevitability and unavoidability of juxtaposition, with its enormous evocative powers, must be recognized as one of the foundations of rubber stamp art (and a factor heightening the parallel with surrealism).

Rubber stamp image juxtapositions are logistically simple to create, symbolically powerful in their potential effect, and emotionally evocative as they employ human and animal images interacting upon the representational surface. Juxtaposition can create effects involving illusions of penetration, intrusion, or ingestion, can create, through superimposition, a sense of depth in the picture plane, as well as evoke effects of paradox and surprise, the quality of effect limited only by the artist's wit and imagination.

Along with juxtaposition, repetition is the other design principle whose ease, potential and impact immediately occur to every person attempting any creation with rubber stamps. Once a stamp is in hand, repeating the impression, with or without subsequent re-inkings, can create a variety of effects upon the picture plane. Repetition of image duplicates the image either literally-where once there was one bag of gold, now there are two and three-or symbolically, suggesting that the subsequent images represent the original image later in time: the high diver's three and a half

somersaults can graphically appear in the line of descent. In this way repetition evokes the temporal nature of rubber stamping as a process-the duplicated images are the visible trace of the successive impressions contributing to its creation-while suggesting movement through time within the image frame itself.

Some single images are able to evoke this temporal dimension, of course: images of moving creatures or objects such as running horses, speeding trains, and airplanes rushing through clouds all suggest actions which began before, and will continue after, the representational moment captured by the picture plane. But the repetition of an image immediately suggests either duplication or movement, and if the latter, the rubber stamp artist is able to exploit the large vocabulary of convention that computer animation has made popular, especially visible in television commercials, program titles and network logos. If an image is dragged on the surface, or its impressions are superimposed, it creates the familiar stop-image retinal lag effect of computer-generated graphics. Even if effects of such sophistication aren't desired or attempted, any multiple images, of whatever sort, evoke their own history as they are simultaneously creations and the record of their creation. With rubber stamps the temporal process of multiple creation is inevitably present, unlike printing, where multiple images exist in the plate and require only a single impression to come into being. (Although multiple colors require multiple impressions in printing, each color is inked in one impression.)

Juxtaposition and repetition are obvious techniques, immediately rediscovered by anyone who plays with rubber stamps for five minutes, although such play may not reveal immediately the full potentials available. The third principle comprising and determining the artistic potentials of rubber stamp art may not be discovered as easily because it requires greater self-consciousness and control in the manipulation of the stamps. This principle is that of distortion, by which I mean any violations of the integrity of a stamp's image. This may involve altering the image itself, most frequently through truncation, or altering its orientation within the plane (actually a kind of juxtaposition but considered as distortion here because of the effect of this transformation).

Given the static nature of stamps, the user's freedom is severely limited to varying their placement, their repetition, their color, and finally their integrity. By intentionally deviating from the complete and clear

impression the stamp was designed for, desirable effects may be created. Blurring an image, especially by dragging the stamp after the initial impression has been made, is a technique allowing the user to create a sense of movement within the represented plane, or to suggest some alteration in ontological status (as in ghostly images). Limiting the image, by blocking parts of it with a piece of paper, also allows interesting possibilities. If a single image is truncated, the incomplete image can be used to suggest depth within the picture plane (as in showing just the upper torso of a person emerging from an implied hole in the ground or floating on the surface of an ocean). By letting a stamp overlap the paper's edge, effectively truncating it by omission, a slightly different illusion is created from those created by partial images existing entirely within the picture frame.

Within the frame, a split image creates the illusion of violated space, fragile integrity, or insecure borders. When the actual picture border is responsible for the image limitation the viewer is forced to acknowledge the artificially framed boundaries of the total picture surface, while the absent image parts may imply their continuation within some hypothetical plane surrounding the bordered one.

If we keep the aforementioned characteristics of the materials and how they may be manipulated in mind, it will be no surprise that the nature of the art possible with rubber stamps is very much a factor of image subject, realism, variety and size modified by the process of image impression, the intellectual or conceptual component of image making, and aesthetic or design questions. Virtuosity in individual images tends to favor realism. accuracy, fineness of detail, all factors tending to discourage any abstract imagery, while reinforcing literal combinations or those which can successfully play off representational images. The retention of horizontal and vertical alignment and other appropriate placements reinforces this stress. Questions of economics and availability determine the quantity and quality of images available, with two responses possible to the familiarity of commercially-sold stamps: pressure toward variety of image, seeking the new, rare or unusual, and pressure toward conceptual variety based upon uniqueness in the combinations made with conventional imagery.

In all rubber stamp uses the most inventive inspiration tends towards inter-referential complexity, a displaced term for the self-conscious quality of the rubber stamp process. Because every stamped impression successfully creates a recognizable image, every impression, especially

when modified or combined in any way, contains the potential to evoke more or less complex ideas within the viewer. Random stamping, except as mere pattern and form, contains mainly the merit of chance operations as such. Combining stamped images in order to evoke "sets" or "oriented" responses is the motivating factor in rubber stamp creations. Because juxtaposition, repetition and distortion of form, combined with color flexibility, are the techniques available to the rubber stamp artist, wit and cleverness in combinations of images are already caught up in the network of achievable effects. If time factors are introduced, in simultaneous or serial format, then suspense and surprise also become possible. Serious subjects and tragic effects seem less appropriate to the rubber stamp format; the strength of association of particular images could evoke political or ethical concerns, and combined with language any message can be conveyed, but the essential playfulness of stamps (and their "grotesque" character)¹⁵ makes such usages inappropriate if only at the level of replication itself.

Since intellectual rather than emotional responses are most suitable with rubber stamp art, the quality of image and image placement may become subordinate to the conceptual requirements of wit, surprise and uniqueness. However, aesthetic considerations are always present. Even a single image upon a surface, when presenting itself for observation, evokes design considerations, and the multiplication of images multiplies questions of balance, weight, placement, rhythm and similar design factors. The use of color, the proportion of blank space, the implied relationship between contiguous images must all enter into appreciation (and certainly evaluation) of rubber stamped art. Conceptual components and logistical limitations of image placement and alignment are built-in design components, yet success for a rubber stamp work must also consider idea, design and execution as equal elements.

Considering rubber stamp images in isolation from language, as this discussion has done in order to explore the purely design considerations of image formation, restricts the reality and the potential of rubber stamp compositions severely. Historically, rubber stamps were designed for rapid, private printing of specific messages: non-linguistic signs were added only as embellishment and were developed separately only as children's toys, before the recent interest in rubber stamp art. The coexistence of image and language in contemporary rubber stamp works is certainly suitable, even if not historically grounded. By treating the impressions as art a parallel

tradition, of painting, within which language and images have always coexisted, if not on the canvas then with the title and frame, is evoked. Many contemporary painters (Steinberg has already been mentioned) paint words in their compositions, and collage frequently employs actual printed items taken from public sources. In these works the language serves as an accessible public dimension, balanced against what may be private imagery in the nonlinguistic elements.

In any rubber stamp work the presence of language creates the intellectual dimension so important for successful interaction of representational stamp images. Bare stamps, whatever their quality, cannot help but call attention to themselves as the relatively weak and limited graphic images they are; within the conceptual realm created by the presence of language signs, the rubber stamp images can work successfully. It is almost as if the presence of language floats the represented surface above the literal one, allowing the stamped images to interact in conceptual rather than literal dimensions, dimensions in which intention can excuse inaccuracy, and as has been discussed earlier, wit can excuse execution.

Of course language is so powerful as a determiner of context that a few words can control the interpretation of a complex image series. A series of objects beginning with a football and ending with a modern jet aircraft might have no meaning uncaptioned, but labelled "A Twentieth Century History of Experimental Heavier-than-Air Craft, the images immediately take on special meaning. Such captions or titles may function to reinforce or contradict the apparent meaning of the images, as well as to clarify or reorient.

Just as words can add to the images, so can images enforce language. Stamped images upon mailed envelopes or packages obviously are subordinate to the postal directives in priority, if not beauty. As counterpoint to correspondence stamped images are widely used. Stamps can be used to control responses to imagistic language, elaborating upon poetry, or narrative, or even playing with the ambiguous potentials of everyday language. When used in rebuses, rubber stamps are punning with the inherent confusion found in homonyms. And of course the wit so characteristic of rubber stamp compositions is most easily signalled, and its aims indicated, with appropriate language. The pre-formed, standardized quality of stamps works well to create ironic self-commentary when intimate messages are rubber stamped; here, though, the stamping process

descends from the strictly commercial history of rubber stamps. It is not inconceivable that some early 20th century wit played with stamping "I love you" long before the self-referential humor inherent in this act was rediscovered recently. Even if the potential reference of the words is not being used to evoke parallel or counterpoint meanings, words- or letters or punctuation symbols-can figure as design elements, gaining added resonance from the literal connotations of language which never are entirely effaced or displaced. Wit and cleverness in these usages become localized in the recognition of the design potential of individual letter formations, so rubber stamp art can aspire to be the hand-made version of computer-assisted typewriter graphics, a typical example of which features the Mona Lisa created from a handful of typed letters; such productions tend to demonstrate more virtuosity and ingenuity than artistic integrity. Hand-made images of this sort will suffer in any comparison with the precision and accuracy possible in computer-interfaced graphics; their interest must reside in originality, unless the sheer magnitude of their effort serves as an end in itself. 16

Viewer appreciation of rubber stamp art, whatever its complexity and composition, must involve recognition first and then response. The simple recognition of the rubber-stamped nature of the work is important in establishing what conventions concerning the nature of the art can be expected to apply. As has been mentioned, rubber stamp images can only suffer in any comparison with more sophisticated graphic techniques, because of the putative "crudity" of image, the "imperfection" of printing registration, the imprecision of color, the nonuniformity of line, and the inconsistency of image, style and perspective; but when considered on their own the peculiar conventions which allow and excuse these seeming inadequacies then take over. These very inadequacies become advantages, allowing the viewer to participate in the work by filling in and deciphering individual images, comprehending the rationales for their placement and extracting whatever intellectual and aesthetic pleasures the work contains. Marshall McLuhan's notion of cool media, with low definition requiring high viewer completion and participation, applies perfectly to rubber stamps, and his ideas about contemporary culture may in part account for the current popularity of rubber stamps.17

Rubber stamping demystifies multiple-image printing, and its availability allows it to be an expressive medium appealing to everyone. And since printing with rubber stamps is so easy, every viewer of rubber

stamp art is a potential dialectical creator of more rubber stamp art, a condition which cannot be said to apply in many other artistic media. Furthermore, as actual or potential artists themselves, viewers bring to their appreciation an added dimension of actual or imagined experience. This last notion, of imagined experience, is not as far-fetched with rubber stamp art as it would be in other forms of expression: going from idea to art with rubber stamps is a relatively direct and foolproof process, given the materials, unlike the gaps in time, detail and execution which prevent all the imagined masterpieces of painters, sculptors, novelists and poets from achieving tangible form

The rubber stamp medium allows an individual to achieve more results more rapidly with less schooling, training, and practice than any other creative graphic medium. It is a perfect playground for amateurs wishing to create art, an ideal form of expression for untrained but otherwise creative individuals, and an attractive option in the repertoire of serious artists and designers. The status of rubber stamps as a creative medium for serious art may already be established, if the existence of international exhibits, gallery shows, annual competitions, articles, magazines, books, bookstores, archives, museums, and other art-world phenomena are reliable markers.

In transforming common images into art the rubber stamp movement follows pop art's iconic successes. In extending the tools for artistic production to anyone with interest and a few dollars the rubber stamp phenomenon echoes the participatory ideology of 1960's social movements. Ownership of the tools of art creates often irresistible pressures to use them in all sorts of ways, purely decorative as well as artistic, and possessing a handful of rubber stamps is a sure way to increase one's correspondence. Such self-advertisement and the playful element of rubber stamping are Certain to increase its popularity. But transforming the inherent weaknesses and limitations of rubber stamps as a representative medium into the predominant positive characteristics of rubber stamping as a form of art, adding wit, humor and delight in the process, represents the quintessential nature of the medium and contains the keys to its future. Such flexibility, along with accessibility, such intellectual challenge for both creator and viewer, along with pleasure and humor, such possibilities of graphic stimulation, along with aesthetic rewards from image, design and color, seem to guarantee that rubber stamp art will continue to grow in technique, repertory, sophistication and popularity.

Notes

1 "Joni K. Miller and Lowry Thompson, *The Rubber Stamp Album*, (New York: Workman Publishing, 1978), is the best source for information about the history of rubber stamps as it relates to contemporary practice.

2 The term "rubber stamp" used throughout this discussion is categorical, although a recent photographic process using polymers produces stamps more simply than the vulcanizing process used with rubber, and with a capability of rendering line detail even finer than that possible with the traditional rubber stamp. Fineness of detail, based upon stamp quality, ink and pad design, and paper surface, is one limiting factor in rubber stamp work. For convenience I shall continue to use the term rubber stamp to refer to both rubber and polymer materials.

3 From the beginning of the stamp industry many businesses used rubber stamps combining images with words, especially for logos and in humorous debt-collection reminders, and rubber stamp images of animals were long available in children's toy sets; the phenomenon I refer to here involves the deliberate creation of rubber stamp collections, intended to be sold to and used by adults, designed for the exclusive purpose of decoration and embellishment. The appearance of rubber stamp art is inextricably involved with developments in 20th-century avant garde art; for a fuller discussion see "The Stamp and Stamp Art" by Friedman and Gugelberger, referred to in note 4.

4 **The Rubber Stamp Album*, pp. 118, 158 ff. has discussion and examples. Those interested in the history of rubber stamps can consult *The Rubber Stamp Album* for reference to rubber stamp books, archives, bookstores and museums.

Miller and Thompson are interested chiefly in the playful and recreational use of stamps. In Europe the act of stamping has an anti-authoritarian, political dimension Miller and Thompson have chosen not to explore. The essay "The Stamp and Stamp Art," by Ken Friedman and Georg M. Gugelberger, is especially important as a more balanced history of contemporary stamp phenomena. The essay forms the major piece in the Catalog for the International Rubber Stamp Exhibition, April 23-May 30, 1976, at La Mamelles Arts Center in San Francisco, published as vol. 1, no. iv of *Front* (La Mamelles, P.O. box 3123, San Francisco. Cal. 94119)

5 With "art" such an indefinable, open-ended label today, any manipulation of image might be justifiably considered art, and every manipulator called an artist. Without evoking the questions "What is Art?" and "Who is an artist?" I would like to use the term rubber stamp artist to refer to any self-conscious manipulator of

rubber stamp images, and call every such product rubber stamp art. This terminology is for convenience, since my concern is with the interactive potentials of images, and not questions of definition, intention or quality of achievement.

6 For many of the artists discussed by Friedman and Gugelberger stamped words are at least as important as stamped images. a direct consequence of the anti-elitist, political dimension of rubber stamp activity and its close historical connection with Correspondence Art. My investigation focuses upon how images can be used in rubber stamp activity, especially in self-contained creations (as distinguished from rubber stamps used to embellish preexisting work). and consequently I discuss stamps containing words or combining words with images only in passing

7 Just as a modern graphic designer can work only with available type faces, there usually are available sufficient possibilities so that real creativity can be revealed in whatever choices are made. Modern graphic designers and artists have pushed art, typography, and eclecticism to the postmodern dimension by exploiting these "limits" on a page's surfaces, thereby overcoming the limits of the repertory of tools and accelerating other graphic possibilities.

8 Andy Warhol writes, "In August 62 I started doing silk screens. The rubber-stamp Method I'd been using to repeat images suddenly seemed too homemade: I wanted something stronger that gave more of an assembly-line effect. "In the Beginning On the Origins of Pop Art and Other Matters.." by Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, New York, March 3, 1980, p. 70.

9 The essay by Friedman and Gugelberger, plus the briefer statements by Herve Fischer, Klaus Groh and Carol Law in the same catalog, all bring out this point.

10 Thompson's *Rubberstampmadness*, a periodical keeping enthusiasts informed of new developments (and catalogs) in the field, published its first issue July, 1980.

11 Some of the printers' supply catalogs were *American Specimen Book of Type Faces*, *American Line Type Book*, *Barnharts Stock Cut Catalogue*, *Specimen Book from the Cincinnati Type Foundry*, *Price List of Type*, *Borders*, *Cuts (Curtis & Mitchell)*.

12 A one and one-half by two and one-half inch stamp of The Last Supper is available in one catalog.

13 For many important ideas about these interrelationships I am indebted to Professor Louis Marin of L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes for his lectures at The School of Criticism and Theory in Irvine, California, in the summer of 1978, in a seminar entitled "Semantics of the Representational Systems: Narrative Structures in the Historical Painting."

14 It is possible to cut rubber stamps directly by hand, using a sharp-bladed knife and rubber erasers; a number of artists work in this way. This discussion does not consider this direct involvement in image making, since it is not characteristic of most rubber stamp enthusiasts, but of course everything said here about the formation of overall design applies, and appropriate modifications can be made to my comments about the derivative nature of rubber stamp images when considering such original stamps, or those made from original drawings.

15 See Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Literature and Art* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1963).

For a general discussion of the complex interrelationships between image and language in art, see W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), especially chapter one, pp. 3-39; Michel Buton, "Painting words," *TriQuarterly*, No. 20 (Winter, 1971), 98-112; and Ferdinand Kriwet, "Decomposition of the literary unit; notes on visually perceptible literature," *TriQuarterly*, No. 20 (Winter, 1971), 209-252.

16 Miller and Thompson reproduce the design of an eight by thirteen foot work appropriately titled "Obsessive Analog," pp. 174-84.

17 See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964), ch. 3: "Media Hot and Cold."

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