Calligraphy in Philately: Part 1
Kathy Bell, retired Professor of Art History, Art Education, and Professional Calligrapher

The word calligraphy derives from the Greek words kalos plus grafos meaning beautiful writing. Calligraphy is created using a specially shaped pen that has a flat, wide tip. Held at a constant slant, when the pen is moved sideways it makes a thin line. When it's moved in a perpendicular direction, it produces a thick line. That is, as the calligrapher changes the direction of movement, the line thickness varies from the thinnest to the thickest possible. Initial letters, in contrast to textual calligraphy, are drawn with a pointed pen and painted in.

When compiling my personal calligraphic stamp collection I had to make choices. Austria, for example, uses a beautiful blackletter typeface for the country name on stamps, but I decided I wanted unique specimens of calligraphy. Several European countries have shown the decorated initial letters found in their ancient historical documents. That was closer, but not quite what I wanted for my collection. I desired the actual hand-written material that originally followed the initial letter. Over several years I found interesting specimens, particularly enjoying research of the original document and the purpose for which it was written. The following documents and coordinating stamps are arranged according to the age of the original document.

EBERS PAPYRUS, 1550 BCE; GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC, SCOTT #2207, 1981

The Ebers Papyrus, the oldest example examined in this article (Fig.1), was written in Hieratic script in 1550 BCE by Egyptian scribes. Evidence of amazing ancient Egyptian medical knowledge, the Ebers Papyrus contains descriptions of simple surgeries, a sizeable pharmacology, and instructions for the setting of broken bones. Egyptian medicine, both incredibly sophisticated and superstitious, abounds with magical incantations and “foul applications” to drive out disease-causing demons.

The Ebers Papyrus was only decipherable after the Rosetta Stone revealed the interpretation of Egyptian Hieroglyphs. Interpretation was still difficult because some content was rarely seen medical terminology.

The Papyrus is in the form of a 110 page scroll (scrolls were made by sewing together pages of papyrus) about 20 meters in length. Hieratic symbols, written horizontally from right to left in parallel rows, were derived from Hieroglyphs somewhat abstracted from the original pictographs. Though Hieroglyphs were generally carved in stone and painted, Hieratic was usually written in ink with a reed brush on papyrus. Hieratic script, which existed parallel to Hieroglyphic writing, was originally useful cont. on page 4

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for financial and business records or, as in this case, instructional texts, and later was used for religious purposes.

The Ebers Papyrus was purchased in Thebes by George Ebers in 1873. Ebers was professor of Egyptology at the University of Leipzig, where the papyrus is housed in the library.

HUAI-SU, TANG DYNASTY, 772 BCE; REPUBLIC OF CHINA, SCOTT #2100, 1978

In China, calligraphy has long been accorded a reputation equal to, and at times superior to, painting. The unlikely looking writing on Sc 2100 (Fig. 2) is an example of wild style Chinese cursive from the Tang Dynasty (907-618 BCE). Wild style cursive involves joining and rapidly writing characters that were normally written separately. The line traces the writer's movements from one stroke to the next, connecting them.

Calligrapher Huai-Su lived in the late 8th century, 799-737 BCE. By his early 30's he was already being recognized as one of the greatest writers of cursive characters in the Tang Dynasty. His style was described as "galloping and surging," and "unrestrained," yet it retains enough of the essential form of the character to be readable. Wild style was so unique it established a new appreciation of the individuality of the artist.

The writing on Scott 2100 (Fig. 2) was part of Huai-Su's autobiography, a handscroll over 24 feet long. This autobiography contains 126 vertical lines of characters and is unique among scrolls of the Tang Dynasty because of its size and number of characters. There were originally three scrolls in the collection of the National Palace Museum, but this is the only survivor. It dates during the twelfth year of the Dali era, about 777 BCE in the western calendar, when the scribe was around 40.

THE ALEPPO CODEX, 930 CE; ISRAEL, SCOTT #1420, 2000

There can hardly be a more dramatic story woven around one hand-written book than the story of the Aleppo Codex, the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible.

The Codex (book with pages sewn on one side) was written in 930 CE by Slomo ben Buyda in the city of Tiberias (Fig. 3).

The writing was done with a quill pen on parchment or vellum. Since Hebrew is written from right to left, but the individual letters are written from left to right, the scribe has to visualize the next letter to place it in correct relation to the preceding one. The pen is held in a vertical position so all horizontal lines are thicker than the vertical ones. Letters are spaced as close together as possible and suspended from a horizontal line at the top.

Aaron ben Asher carefully proofread and corrected the text of the Aleppo Codex and added vowel points below the letters. Hebrew was often written with only consonants, but as the language had fallen out of daily use, the addition of vowel points was necessary to indicate pronunciation. Once synagogues introduced the singing of the Torah (the books of Moses), cantillation marks were added to aid the Rabbis in singing the text. The original Codex had 380 sheets of parchment of which 295 still exist.

After about 100 years, the book was moved from Tiberias to Jerusalem; then, under attack by the Crusaders, it was sent to Cairo, Egypt. During the 14th century, it was moved to Aleppo (which has been part of Syria since 1920) where there was a large Jewish community. Its text is seen as the most accurate Bible text, almost identical to the wording preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were written about 1,000 years earlier. The Codex was in demand for use in correcting other manuscripts, but the Aleppo community guarded it so tightly it was almost impossible for scholars to access it, as it lay in a vault under the Aleppo Synagogue.

When the United Nations recognized the State of Israel on November 29, 1947, riots broke out in Aleppo.
and the synagogue was burned. For years, it was assumed that the Crown, as the Codex is called, had burned along with the synagogue. The Codex’s discovery and retrieval makes a good detective story as written in 2012 by Matti Friedman in *The Aleppo Codex: A True Story of Obsession, Faith, and Pursuit of an Ancient Bible*. The Codex now resides in the Museum of the Book as part of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

**ILLUMINATED CODEX, CONSTITUTIONES JACOBI II REGIS MAJORICUM, 14TH CENTURY; SPAIN, SCOTT #2528, 1987**

The Constitutiones Jacobi II Regis Majoricum is a codex outlining the laws and privileges of citizens of Majorca during its brief period as an independent kingdom in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. It has been preserved in the Albert I Royal Library in Brussels. Part of its content describes the postal system of Majorca.

In form, calligraphy in the Constitutiones is very typical of a late gothic manuscript, featuring illuminated initials that contain a miniature (small illustration) and gold leaf. The codex is authored in Latin, and the calligraphy is in blackletter style. Blackletter was so named due to its compactness in space between both letters and lines. This approach to layout creates a very dense, black rectangle on the page, hence the name blackletter.

In the first line of Sc 2528 (Fig. 4) are some rubricated words (written in red or blue as a means of emphasizing certain words). Extra decoration, such as the spirals seen at the top and bottom of the square containing the initial letter, usually occupy the top, left and bottom margins of the page. The spirals shown, which have been cut off, probably occupied most of the left margin.

**BANNER OF ST. FRIDOLEIN, 1388; SWITZERLAND, SCOTT #819, 1988**

A Swiss stamp, Sc 819 (Fig. 5), commemorates the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Näfels (1388) in which 500 men of the Canton of Glarus, Switzerland defeated a large troop of Austrians. The Glarus mountain men may not have been superior soldiers, but they knew the mountains. Summoned by the banner of Fridolin, they retreated to the hills and rolled large boulders down on their attackers. After the victory, several rural areas united to form the Confederacy of Glarus. Their coat of arms displays St. Fridolin in his priestly robe backed by a red ground, as seen on the stamp.

Fridolin was an Irish monk/missionary to Säkingen on the Rhine river in the 11th century. His appearance on the Coat of Arms of Glarus is due to an early convert, Urso. Urso was a wealthy landowner who, in gratitude to Fridolin, willed him large land holdings that comprise the modern Canton of Glarus. Urso’s brother was unhappy over the will and challenged Fridolin in court. Fridolin produced the deed Urso had given him before his death, which settled the lawsuit.

On the stamp, a manuscript backs St. Fridolin and his red banner. This manuscript is written in a freehand version of medieval *batarde* script, French for bastard, composed of blackletter with added cursive connections and curved flourishes. According to a translation of the few words that can be seen, it seems to commemorate the battle.

**FLATEYJARBÖK, 1374-94; ICELAND, SCOTT #418, 1970**

The Færeyinga Saga, written shortly after 1200, was a history of how the Faroe Islands were converted to Christianity. The original manuscript has been lost, but parts of it were copied in Flateyjarbók (Flatey or Flat Island Book), a medieval manuscript originally written in Old Icelandic. The Flateyjarbók (spelled phonetically since the original spelling has been lost) was compiled in 1387-94 on Flatey Island, off the west coast of Iceland. It is extremely rare to know the name of a scribe of this time period, yet we know Jon Pórðarsun was the scribe, and the illuminator was Magnús Prestr Thorhallzsun.

This medieval manuscript was joined to the Saga of St. Olaf, possibly by Carl Christian Rafu (1795-1864), to make up the complete book we have today. Flateyjarbók was owned by Jon Finnsson, who lived on Flatey Island... cont. on page 6
Attempts to purchase the ancient book for a national archive were refused by Finnsson who valued it as an heirloom, despite the offer of a large tract of land. By 1651, King Frederick of Norway required all ancient books be donated to the state, either as a gift or for payment. Finnsson surrendered his precious heirloom in 1656. Flateyjarbók was added to the Royal Library in Copenhagen and remained outside of its home for three centuries before being returned to Iceland in 1971 as a national treasure.

The text is written in a casual blackletter. Compared to the Constitutiones Jacobi II codex, it is clearly less controlled and consistent. The page represented on the stamp also gives us a good look at illumination extending down the left margin of the text.

HENRY IV & THE EDICT OF NANTES, 1598; FRANCE, SCOTT #1261, 1969

The French Wars of Religion (1562-1598) was a period of violent fighting between Catholics and Protestants (Huguenots). King Henry IV of France had been raised as a Protestant. He became King of Navarre (the small kingdom in the Pyrenees where he was born), where he supported the Huguenot cause. He converted to the Catholic Church in order to marry Margaret of Valois, the daughter of Catherine de Medici in 1572, but reverted to Protestantism four years later.

He became King of France in 1589. On April 13, 1598 he put a temporary end to the Wars of Religion with the Edict of Nantes. The Edict was a cautious step toward religious tolerance granting religious freedom to the Huguenots while reaffirming Catholicism as the established religion of France. The Edict returned the country to the religious structure in place before his reign.

The only part of the Edict featured on Sc 1261 (Fig. 7) large enough to be read, even with a magnifying glass, is the introductory line. It says, “Henry par la grace de Dieu Roy de France et de Navarre” (Henry by the grace of God, King of France and Navarre). This largest writing is a blend of medieval elements, such as the ‘r’ that is only half written and leans on the proceeding letter and the use of a ‘u’ in place of the ‘v’ in Navarre. The capital letters are highly ornamented with elaborate flourishes, and the introductory letters are taller than those in the rest of the document. The writings on the right side of the stamp are signatures similarly flourished. The luxurious amount of space within and between lines however, is more typical of Humanist writing used in Renaissance Italy than of medieval writing.

FURTH DRAGON LANCING FESTIVAL, 1590; GERMANY, SCOTT #2134, 2001

The origin of the Drachenstich Furth im Wald, Slaying of the Dragon, was a violent battle between the armies of Bohemia and Germany. The Bohemian attack was vengeance for the burning of their reformer, Jan Hus (Anglicized to Jon Huss), at the stake. Hus was executed by the Catholic Church to quell reformers. A hundred years later, Martin Luther would complete the reforms Hus had begun.

The legend, distantly related to the Bohemian rebellion, was about a dragon awakening from an ancient curse. The evils, violence and bloodletting inspire the evil power of the dragon and loose a formidable threat to the Castle of Furth and its lands. The only way of stopping the dragon was for a fearless knight to kill it. The knight Udo was determined to battle the dragon until he was captured in a mortal conspiracy. The only other hope was for a young lady of the Castle of Furth to sacrifice herself for the people.

For over 500 years, the town of Furth im Wald has celebrated the Slaying of the Dragon festival, which takes place in August. In 2000 however, the ancient pageant took on a high-tech format. More than 20 companies, including Hollywood’s Magicon, took part in building a mechanical dragon designed by Sikander Goldaus. The mechanical, fire-breathing dragon created a celebration worthy of the turn of the millennium. The dragon is accompanied by fireworks, beautiful maidens, and sword-wielding horsemen.
The design of Sc 2134 (Fig. 8) takes the traditional Fraktur blackletter form of ‘F’ (Furth) and alters it to portray the fire-breathing dragon facing a sword.

The examples included in this article bring us from ancient Egypt up to the renaissance. The second half of the story will take us from the 17th century to the 20th.

References:


http://aleppocodex.org (has a searchable digital copy of the Aleppo Codex)

www.home.ix.netcom.com/~byamazak/mysh/faroese/faroese-index-e.htm (has photographs of several pages of the Faroese Ballads)


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Origami:

One, two, three, four, hat (made) of, hat (made) of. One, two, three, four, hat (made) of paper.

Theo Huisman, Netherlands
Translated by Amanda L. Morgenstern

Long before I heard of origami, I had already dealt with the art of paper folding. Many of us, like me, spent their childhood folding paper planes (Fig. 1), boats (Fig. 2) and paper hats, or walking with paper windmills.

In the 20th century we found paper windmills at the fair (Fig. 3). In some countries like Chile, the windmills are a part of their national, cultural heritage. Those mills we all remember, interestingly, can be found in a painting by Pieter Brueghel in 1560 (Fig. 4-5). Only recently do all these ‘folded fabrics’ fall equally under the heading “origami,” like the more traditional cranes, frogs, flowers, angels and postmen (Fig. 6).

As we know, paper is a Chinese invention. Early examples of paper folding are by monks (the Buddhist Doncho and Hoso, the Korean Ranjin.) The invention of paper came to Japan in 610, which developed its own way of making paper and paper folding (creases, folds, plaits). The oldest references to this concern gift wrappers (noshi熨斗), a kind of ceremonial origami fold entirely distinct from “origami-tsuki.” They are not certificates, but are attached to gifts to express “good wishes.” Noshi consists of white paper folded with a strip of dried abalone or meat, (considered a token of good fortune) and envelopes. For centuries, the folding instructions were transmitted orally. *cont. on page 8*
Calligraphy in Philately: Part 2
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EXPLORATION OF AUSTRALIA, 1642-3; AUSTRALIA, SCOTT #949-50, 1985

In 1642-43 Dutch explorer Abel Tasman, sailing on behalf of the United East India Company, became the first European to reach Tasmania. He had circled the northwest shore of Australia, finding Tasmania and New Zealand and sighting Fiji. He circumnavigated the south shore, and then returned to Europe. The island was named Van Dieman's Land, later changed to Tasmania, in honor of Abel Tasman.

The Eendracht was a 17th century wood-hulled sailing ship launched by the Dutch East India Company in 1615. Their route took them from the Indian Ocean and headed to the southeast toward Java, or so they thought. Instead they sailed to approximately 26° south and found a group of uninhabited islands, part of the continent of Australia. Continuing northwest, they traced the west coast of Australia, mapping the coast as they went. The maps they drew during this voyage were far more accurate than previous maps with their mythical representations and were used to update older maps.

The calligraphic documents that accompany the images on Sc 949-50 (Fig. 9) are handwritten records of the explorations alongside various references to navigation: a compass, latitude, measuring instruments, pictures of ships, and maps.

BASHÔ’S HAIKU: OCEAN WAVES, VERSE AND CURRENT, 1694; JAPAN, SCOTT #1781-82, 1988

During the 17th century, Japan closed its doors to outside trade and cultural influences. The overall result of this isolation was the development of a national culture not influenced by others. One of those positive cultural developments was a unique form of poetry called haiku, a poem about nature written in three lines of five, seven and five syllables.

Matsuo Bashô, born in 1644, came from a lowly farm family. His opportunity came when he began working for the son of the local lord, where he was exposed to literature. When his patron died young, he moved to Kyoto and then Edo (now part of Tokyo) and began studying with a distinguished local poet. Around 1684, Bashô made a long

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walking journey the subject for a new type of poetry called haibun. In haibun, Bashō alternated prose with haiku to create a record of his journey, experiences and meditations about them. The trip covered 1,200 miles in five months. Bashō’s best-known haibun is “The Narrow Road to the Deep North,” which he continued revising until his death on November 28, 1694. The book was published posthumously in 1702. One of his haiku may express his experience on this last journey: “I’ll on a journey / my dreams roam around / over withered fields.”

Sc 1781-82 (Fig. 10) are part of a second set of a sizeable stamp series dedicated to Bashō, where each poetry example is accompanied by a painting. Poets were not just authors; they were also calligraphers of their poetry and, oftentimes, painted the accompanying picture. There is a close relationship between calligraphy and painting in both Chinese and Japanese art. The same tools, brush and ink or watercolor, were used for both art forms, and they were regarded as principle examples of the art of those countries.

The first stamp, Sc 1781, is a painting of ocean waves rolling in to shore. The second stamp, Sc 1782, shows one of Bashō’s haiku, “Birds in Flight,” with a background pattern of water currents. Poetry overlaying a painting is a traditional style under Zen influence; however, the design on Sc 1782 is most likely modern.

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY, 1888; BRAZIL, SCOTT #2132, 1988

Brazilian colonists first chose indigenous people as slave labor, with local slaves being captured by Jesuit bandeiras (slave hunters). In the mid-16th century, Africans began to be imported, yet the enslavement of indigenous people continued into the 18th century. It was not until 1888 that abolition was legally established by the passage of the Lei Aurea, Golden Law, promulgated by Princess Isabel of the Imperial family of Brazil.

Designed by Darlan Rosa, Sc 2132 (Fig. 11) commemorates the centenary of the Lei Aurea. As a young man, Rosa had been apprenticed to his father, a marble sculptor. As an adult, he moved to Brasilia where he currently lives and works. Rosa’s design features the handwritten, legal document behind a large quill pen, with small figures rising up from the bottom of the quill. Their postures rise from a bowed down position to upright, with hands raised in freedom at the top.

LI RIVER IN FINE RAIN, 1950-60; PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, SCOTT #2230, 1989

In view of what we know about his artwork, the westernized blend of Li Keran’s name (originally Li Yongshun) seems appropriate. Born in 1907 in Xuzhou, Jiangsu province, China, Li began painting early, and at the age of 13 was already studying with a local painter. In 1923, Li entered Shanghai Art College where he was exposed to traditional art styles, but as part of his program also studied Western styles. From a series of lectures by Kang Youwei, who emphasized blending of traditional Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE) painting with Western Renaissance techniques, Li began to consider blending these two traditions.

Li was accepted into postgraduate studies at Hangzhou National Art College where he devoted much of his time to sketching from nature as a key to reforming Chinese painting. At the same time, his western art training began to show in the way he combined chiaroscuro, the strong contrast between dark to light, with ancient Chinese painting. The idea of unifying the two made him a pioneer in 20th century Chinese art.

The painting of the Li River on Sc 2230 (Fig. 12) faithfully portrays a scenic river that stretches 83 kilometers from Giolin to Yangshuo. The river
is one of China’s most popular tourist destinations. The painting uses a range of grays to black that are typical of traditional ink wash painting, while the mountains contrast with a variety of grays and black that give a more western dimension. The little houses on the banks of the river are drawn with western perspective. Boats run up the river toward the mountains. Across the top of the painting, Li has written a quotation.

The relationship of calligraphy and painting in Chinese art goes back to the Song Dynasty. As characters are written with the same brush the artist uses for painting, they share a common expressiveness. Chinese calligraphy can express not only a character that can be read, but also the idea and spirit of the writer. His personality and thoughts are communicated in the freedom with which he handles his brush. The quote inscribed on a painting like the one on this stamp can be a simple signature, a topic related to the painting, a short quote by the artist, or a poetic quotation.

CENTENARY OF ISRAEL’S NATIONAL ANTHEM, “HATIKVAH”; ISRAEL, SCOTT #697, 1978

Israel’s national anthem, “HaTikvah” (The Hope) was written by Naftali Herz Imber (1856–1909). Imber grew up in Ukraine (at the time part of the Austrian Empire) and began writing poetry in his teens, winning a poetry award from Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph.

In 1882, Imber fulfilled a Zionist dream when he immigrated to Ottoman-controlled Palestine to serve as a government secretary. In 1886 in Jerusalem he published a book of poetry that contained a nine-stanza poem entitled, “Tikvateinu: Our Hope.” This poem soon became a popular song among the Zionist movement, which adopted three of its stanzas as an anthem. Samuel Cohen adapted the music from a folk song in 1888. Once Israel’s sovereignty was decided, the song became the unofficial national anthem and was adopted officially in November, 2004. Sc 697 (Fig. 13) includes the last two lines of the first verse:

“As long as the Jewish spirit is yearning deep in the heart,
With eyes turned toward the East, looking toward Zion.
“Then our hope—the two thousand-year old hope—will not be lost:
(To be a free people in our land,
The Land of Zion and Jerusalem.)”

CHARLES DE GAULLE; FRANCE, SCOTT #1716, 1980

General Charles de Gaulle was leader of the French armored division that battled the Nazi invasion. Though they fought bravely, they were unable to expel the Germans, and the French Government signed an armistice with the enemy. Having moved his headquarters to London, de Gaulle broadcast messages to encourage his defeated people to trust the power of the allies.

“Someday these forces will crush the enemy. On that day, France….will regain her liberty and her greatness. Such is my goal, my only goal! That is why I urge all Frenchmen, wherever they may be, to unite with me in action, in sacrifice and in hope.”

Fig. 14, Sc 1716.

Sc 1716 (Fig. 14) commemorates the fortieth anniversary of de Gaulle’s appeal as well as the tenth anniversary of his death. The calligraphic element in this design is the freehand, brush-written name Charles de Gaulle across the top of the stamp. The red, white, and blue of the French flag point upward toward the name and evoke patriotism.

HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING; GREAT BRITAIN, SCOTT #1879, 1999

In 1999, Great Britain issued “The Millennium” stamp series, probably the most extensive ever published. This series is the complete output of the year 1999 by Royal Mail and is an overview of accomplishments of the past 1,000 years.

A favorite Christmas hymn, “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” appears on Sc 1879 (Fig. 15). Written by Charles Wesley in 1739, this hymn was originally a poem of 10, four-line verses. Several adjustments were made to the poem: angels singing the message, changing Wesley’s four-line stanzas to eight lines and adding a refrain. cont. on pg 24.
Wesley’s original preference was the slow, solemn tune we associate today with “Amazing Grace.” In 1840, Felix Mendelssohn composed a cantata to commemorate Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press, and from this cantata the tune was taken for the hymn. Mendelssohn felt his tune was not well suited to a sacred song, yet its lively, joyful melody seemed a perfect accompaniment to the Christmas message.

Brody Neuenschwander created the calligraphy for Sc 1879 (Fig 15). Spending time in Germany during his youth, Neuenschwander learned the language and culture, and he became fascinated with calligraphy and medieval culture. As an adult, Neuenschwander studied calligraphy at Roedhampton Institute in England, drawing heavily on Continental art and calligraphy in developing his unique style. Brody wanted his calligraphy to display its own modern rhythm, rather than follow traditions. His work has been described as “tense, black/white relationships that suggest a new metaphysics being born.”

References:

Albert Decaris
Matt Hayes, Australia
A Founder of the ATA Study Unit, World of Engravers Philatelic Association (WEPA)

Albert Decaris, born in Sotteville-Les-Rouen, France, on May 6, 1901, was an immensely talented artist. Not only did he engrave some 600 postage stamps for France and her colonies, he was a draughtsman, wood carver, etcher, illustrator, and painter.

He studied at the School of Estienne and there discovered engraving. He then went on to the College of Fine Arts in Paris. He won the Prix de Rome for his etching “The Fall of Man” in 1919 at the age of 18. In 1935 he engraved his first stamp, a French commemorative for The Cloister of St. Triphime at Arles.

From the beginning of his stamp engraving career it became apparent that Decaris possessed a unique style. His portraits, almost caricature in nature, managed to capture the essence of the subject through the use of lively and frisky lines. An in-depth study of five of the stamps Decaris designed and engraved will illustrate his supreme skill in this genre.

In 1946 France issued a set of six stamps commemorating 15th century celebrities. Albert Decaris designed and engraved two of these stamps. Joan of Arc and Francois Villon. Both stamps are fantastic, but we will here study the latter—Francois Villon.

François Villon, born April 1431, was a French poet—with a twist. It seems that good old François was more than just a poet. He was somewhat of a rabble-rouser. Wikipedia uses the term “ne’er-do-well.” It all started on June 5, 1455. François along with two others—including a priest!—were in the Rue Saint-Jacques when trouble erupted. In a scuffle, a knife was pulled on François who in turn drew his own knife. His assailant struck first, then François responded by stabbing his attacker. But he didn’t stop there. To ensure his attacker would never again do him harm, François struck him with a stone, killing him. Now a murderer, François Villon fled. In his absence he was sentenced to banishment. He was later pardoned for this crime. (Fig. 1)

Taking a close look at the stamp, we can see the skill of Decaris. The look of contrition—perhaps guilt—seems to belie the true cheeky character of Villon. It is an irony that works wonderfully.