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Photography, Physiognomy, and Philately:

A Study of Four Portraits on Stamps

The history of photography is not complete without the story of its impact on postage stamp design. Innovations in photography improve printing processes, image reduction, and design creation that affect the production of stamps. This paper discusses photographic portraits as sources of design for stamps depicting four famous American authors and poets. Viewing these photographs with a focus on physiognomy (analyzing facial features to identify personal characteristics) may help to understand why modern stamp designers picked one photograph over another to use as a model.

The first physiognomy subject is from a 1940 series of stamps featuring people important in seven areas of the arts and sciences. The Postmaster General and his advisors selected five



Figure 1: Walt Whitman stamp from Famous American series. 150% actual size.

famous Americans each from seven categories: authors, poets, educators, artists, inventors, scientists, and composers. Bureau of Engraving and Printing artists used photographs as models to engrave most of the Famous American images. They searched for portraits “that would form an esthetically pleasing design for each stamp,” and that came from each Famous American’s most productive period (Treasury 134). One example from this series is the 5-cent Walt Whitman stamp [fig 1].

The source of design for the Whitman stamp was a photograph from the Public Library in

Washington, D.C., with the caption “Walt Whitman in 1871” [fig 2] (Glass 97). Whitman was 52 years old when he sat for this photograph in the Henry Ulke and Brothers studio. Whitman later voiced his own opinion of the photograph:

Some of them say my face there has a rogue in it.
 [William] O’Connor called it my sea-captain
 face. Some newspaper got hold of a copy of the
 photograph and said it bore out the notion that
 Walt Whitman was a sensualist. I offered one to
 a woman in Washington. She said she’d rather
 have a picture that had more love in it. It’s a little
 rough and tumble, but it’s not a face I could hate.
 (qtd. in Whitman Gallery)

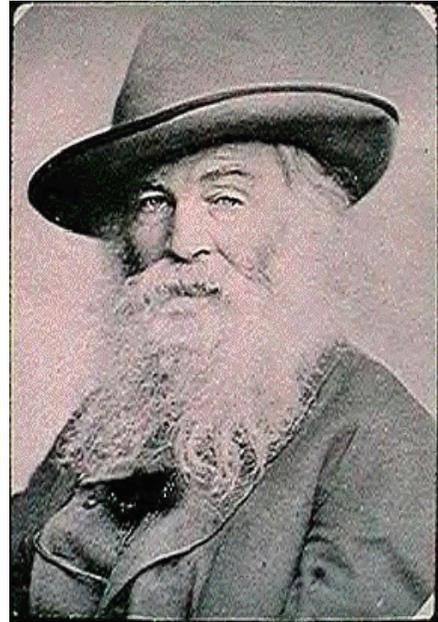


Figure 2: by Henry Ulke and Brothers, Washington, D.C. in 1871. Ohio Wesleyan University, Bayley Collection.

Cropping the print below the shoulders brings all the viewer’s attention to Whitman’s head and face.

Contrasting dark shade on the underside of the hat sets off Whitman’s white hair and face also. The tilt of his hat, his heavy eyelids and slightly open mouth, all contribute to the sensualist or rogue impression.

The Whitman Gallery shows more than one hundred photos of this poet; he was evidently a popular target of photographers and became comfortable with his celebrity status. Perhaps he even enjoyed having his picture taken. Two other photographs from that source could have been candidates for the Whitman design model.

This one [fig. 3], taken in 1862, shows Whitman dressed casually in just a shirt. The Whitman Gallery reports Whitman's own view of this photo: "a sort of Moses in the burning bush look." This photograph might be from the time he worked as a war correspondent and cared for the wounded during the Civil War (Allen xi). His craggy features, graying beard, and weary gaze make him appear much older and care-worn than a 43-year old person usually looks today. Maybe the heavy eyelids give a false impression of fatigue.

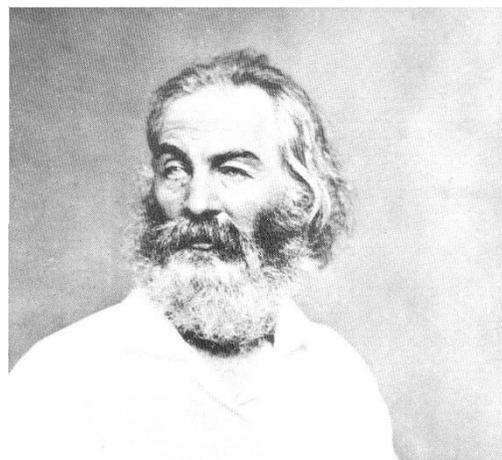


Figure 3: Brady studio, New York, circa 1862. Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

By removing the hat and increasing the light, the photographer produced a harsher image. A photograph can help us make assumptions about facial expressions that are not always valid.

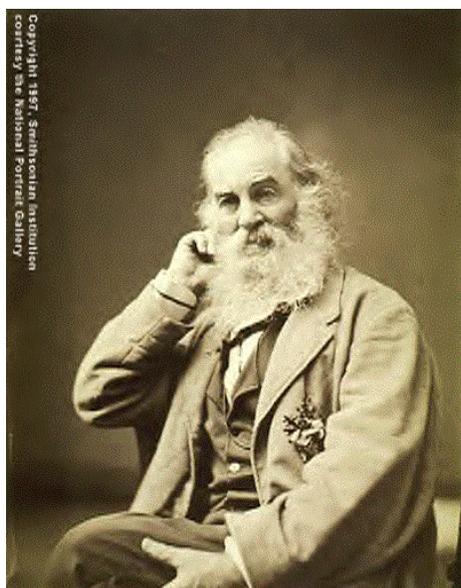


Figure 4: Brady studio, New York, circa 1867 or 1870. Albumen Silver Print, 23.9 x 18.7 cm.

Whitman commented on this picture in 1888: "Somebody used to say I sometimes wore the face of a man who was sorry for the world. Is this my sorry face? I am not sorry—I am glad—for the world." (qtd in W. Gallery). The gaze, in this case, meant less than we thought.

In this Mathew Brady Studio portrait [fig. 4] taken between 1867 and 1870, Whitman's features seem the same as they appeared five years earlier. The albumen silver print shows more of the subject, however, and that creates a

problem. Portrait photographers of that period worried about what to do with hands and often directed a subject to place his/her hands in a particular position (Goin). Whitman appears to be unconsciously tugging on his ear while staring into space, deep in thought. Either the photographer intentionally positioned him that way to convey a pensive mood and occupy a hand, or Whitman habitually played with that ear. Another photograph [fig. 5] from the early 1870s shows him doing the same thing. Except for the hand at ear, which detracts from any attempt to create a sense of dignity, the Brady portrait could have served well as a stamp model. Stamp designers probably rejected it because, in the 1940s, they believed portraits had to be formal, in “noble repose” (Brazer 133).

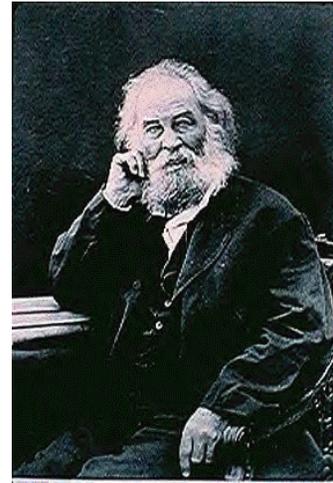


Figure 5: Attributed to Brady studio because of Lincoln chair, circa 1871.

Style of presentation adds formal dignity and importance to any subject. The BEP created a classic lettering plan and framing style for each of the seven Famous American categories [fig. 6]. Each category also had a distinctive symbol; for example, the Poet series features a Pegasus centered below the portrait. Birth dates determined postage denomination and stamp color [fig.7].



Figure 6: Different text, framing, and symbols represent seven categories of Famous Americans.



Figure 7: Color scheme denotes denominations.

Of the five poets honored, Henry W. Longfellow (one-cent rate) was the oldest, and Whitman was fourth in line. These text/frame and color schemes served as a visual code for the public, to identify the seven categories and values of stamps (Treasury 133).

The Post Office Department issued 22,207,780 of the 5-cent Walt Whitman stamp (Postal Service Guide 101). The Ulke Brothers could not have dreamed their photograph of Whitman would get such wide distribution. When the Famous Americans stamps came out in 1940, they were welcomed as a fresh change from the stuffy statesmen and soldiers of previous issues. Now, 61 years later, beginning stamp collectors consider the Famous American series old-fashioned and dull. Older collectors identify the series as marking the start of the Modern Era of stamp production, admiring the blend of engraving art and technology available then.



Figure 8: Engraving from photo portrait, 1967.

While the engraving process still dominated stamp production in 1967, Leonard Baskin, professor of art at Smith College, designed this 5-cent Thoreau [fig. 8] (U.S.P.S. program).

He apparently used an often-seen image from the Concord Free Public Library as his model [fig.9]. That light-enhanced print is the lateral reverse of a daguerreotype [fig 10] attributed to B. H. Maxham.



Figure 9: Stamp source of design, from Concord Free Public Library.

Thoreau had three daguerreotypes taken in 1856 at the request of a Walden reader from Michigan who sent the money to pay the photographer (Harding 173). The fact that Thoreau hired the photographer out of obligation to his fan might explain the simple face-forward pose in front of a plain dark backdrop. The photographer probably could not persuade his subject to strike a

stylized pose or sit in a decorated setting. The stiffness and formality may also come from the hold-still neck brace common in daguerreotype studios. Long exposure time also produces the unblinking stare; the sitter blinks, but the camera does not capture it. The result reminds one of the passport photos or police mug shots produced today.

We know our famous naturalist preferred to be hiking through the woods in work clothes, which may explain his disheveled appearance in this photograph. On the other hand, his hair may have been current for that era and the beard needed for other reasons. Harding writes about the beard: “[it] had been grown the previous winter as a precaution against throat colds” (173).

The stamp engraver made his version of the writer’s face appear out of kilter by lowering the right eye and adding shadow, which could have been artistic exaggeration of characteristics described by Thoreau’s contemporaries. Physiognomy not being an exact science, friends of Thoreau gave two different opinions of his facial features. Ellery Channing wrote in Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist:

His face, once seen, could not be forgotten. The features were quite marked: the nose aquiline or very Roman...;

large overhanging brows above the deepest set blue eyes ...eyes expressive of all shades of feeling, but never weak or near-sighted; the forehead not unusually broad or high, full of concentrated energy and purpose; the mouth with prominent lips, pursed up with meaning with the most varied and unusual instructive sayings. (qtd. in Harding 173)

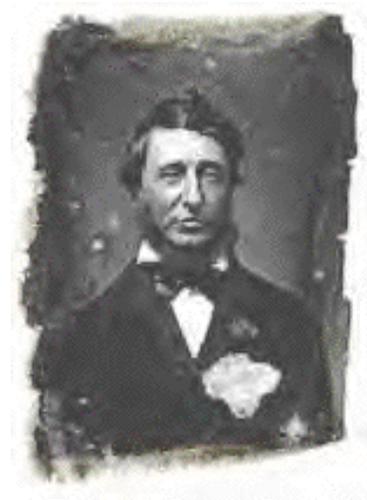


Figure 10: Source of the source -- a daguerreotype, by B.H. Maxham.

When Nathaniel Hawthorne met Thoreau in 1842, he was favorably impressed with his character and uniqueness, but took a different view of his appearance:

He is ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed, and with uncouth and somewhat rustic, although courteous manners, corresponding very well with such an exterior. But his ugliness is of an honest and agreeable fashion, and becomes him much better than beauty. (qtd. in Harding 137)

When Thoreau sat for the original daguerreotype, he was 39 years old and suffering from tuberculosis. Five years later, a year before his death, he sat for this ambrotype (Harding 137). [fig. 11] Although he traveled and wrote continually until that time, we don't often associate this version of his appearance with the peak of his creative output. The Maxham daguerreotype became a part of our visual language years later when it appeared in books about Thoreau. By reproducing it on a stamp, the US Postal Service introduced that version again to hundreds of thousands more Americans. Whether or not that image is representative of the Thoreau his contemporaries knew best, it is the one we all now identify and regard as truthful.



Figure 11: Ambrotype taken at age 44, a year before death.

In the eleven years following the Thoreau issue, several other writers and poets appeared on U.S. stamps. They were: Edgar Lee Masters in 1970, Emily Dickinson in 1971, Sidney Lanier in 1972, Robinson Jeffers and Willa Cather in 1973, Robert Frost in 1974, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar in 1975. All are fascinating subjects for analysis of design source photographs, but the materials available to this writer and the focus on physiognomy led to another poet/writer, honored on a stamp in 1978.

The year 1978 marked the hundredth anniversary of Carl Sandburg's birth in Galesburg, Illinois. Sandburg enjoyed a long successful career that brought him great acclaim for his prose and poetry. He was much in the public eye, especially in his later years, and became the cooperative subject of many photographers. He was brother-in-law to Edward Steichen. They began a life-long friendship soon after the day they met in 1907 when Edward's younger sister first brought Carl home to meet the family (Steichen *i*).



Figure 12: 1978 stamp, 125% of size, showing Sandburg with scarf.

White-headed Sandburg appears washed out in contrast to the dark building sign. His complexion appears pale in most black and white photographs, which may be why the stamp designer preserved that impression in his drawing. While waiting for the shot, Sandburg is staring into the near distance with some intensity. It may be that he is only trying to focus. Steichen writes that “for many years he would not let anyone photograph him wearing glasses” (*iii*).

Merely because Sandburg is wearing a scarf around his neck, one cannot assume that Callahan took this photograph in the winter. Steichen reports that Sandburg went through phases

Although Steichen took many photographs of Sandburg, none match the profile view depicted on this stamp [fig. 12]. Instead, this photograph by Harry M. Callahan [fig. 13] may be the source of design. It is cropped (in Steichen's book Sandburg: Photographers View Carl Sandburg) to draw attention to the building plaque quoting a past mayor of Chicago. Carl Sandburg wrote the book Chicago Poems in praise of that city, which makes it appropriate to find the author posed there.

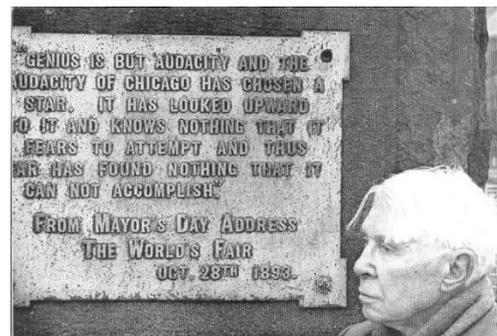


Figure 13: Possible source of design. Photo by Harry M. Callahan.

during which he would consistently wear a scarf or a shawl or place a blanket on his lap regardless of the weather. This was “his method of immersing himself, physically as well as mentally, in the period and personalities he was studying and writing about,” and should not be judged an affectation (*iii*).

I have long admired a photographic montage of Carl Sandburg profiles by Edward Steichen. This cropped version [fig.14] came on an envelope bearing a Sandburg stamp cancelled the first day of issue. The black and white print in Steichen’s book shows two more talking head profiles to the right and measures 10” x 12”. This montage introduced me to the word and concept of physiognomy. Carl Sandburg himself wrote about the subject in a poem titled “Phizzog”:

This face you got.

This here phizzog you carry around,

You never picked it out for yourself, at all, at all – did you?

This here phizzog – somebody handed it to you – am I right?

Somebody said, “Here’s yours, now go see what you can do with it.”

Somebody slipped it to you and it was like a package marked:

“No goods exchanged after being taken away” –

This face you got. (Sandburg)

Light touching only the faces against a black background brings out the changing expressions and mood of the subject. Laughter or squinting wrinkles at the eye corners suggest a sense of humor. The last face (not shown here) breaks into a speaking smile. The whole



Figure 14: Two thirds of a photo montage by E. Steichen.

montage displays a sequence that makes one imagine that Sandburg is first listening to someone else and then reacting with a humorous response. This interpretation seems correct when one reads the quotation from Mark Van Doren printed next to the photo:

Carl Sandburg ... brought something back to poetry that had been sadly missing in the early years of this century. It was humor, the indispensable ingredient of art as it is of life ... Humor is the final sign and seal of seriousness, for it is proof that reality is held in honor and in love. (qtd. in Steichen 57)

Steichen's point of view in this work is obviously that of a close friend. He enjoyed Sandburg's company both socially and in joint work projects such as "The Family of Man" photographic exhibit (Niven 666). Perhaps these montage shots were taken on the same day in 1955 when June Glenn snapped this candid photo in Steichen's studio. [fig. 15] For this sitting, it seems the subject readily agreed to direction from the

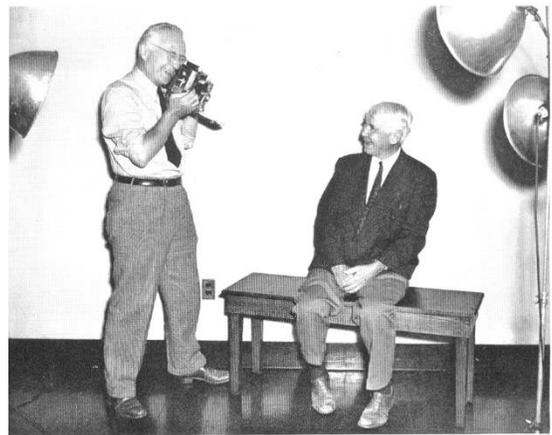


Figure 15: Steichen photographing Sandburg, 1955, by June Glenn, Jr.

photographer and the photographer sought to portray him in a favorable manner.

Commemorative stamps honoring authors and poets since the Sandburg issue all show a dramatic use of color and increased artistic freedom. The U.S. Postal Service gallery of transformed photographic portraits now includes: John Steinbeck, Edith Wharton, Edna St. Vincent Millay, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Marianne Moore, William Saroyan, Dorothy Parker, and Thornton Wilder. The most recent addition to this Literary Arts series honored Thomas Wolfe.

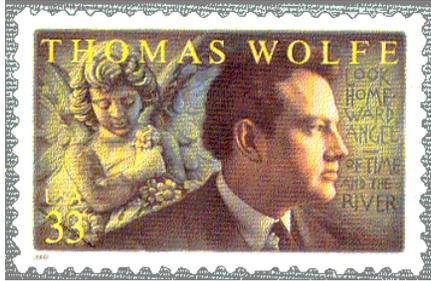


Figure 16: Stamp issued in 2000 adds sculpted angel and text in background to tie in two book titles.

The Thomas Wolfe portrait on this October 2000 issue [fig. 16] came from a photograph by Doris Ulmann. It was a publicity photo [fig. 17] accompanying the release of Wolfe's book Look Homeward, Angel. Ulmann preferred her old-fashioned tripod-mounted view camera to the newer lighter-weight hand-held cameras

available then. She favored soft-focus platinum prints, probably because the warmer tones gave a gentler impression of her subjects. In this shot, Wolfe appears relaxed, sitting in a slightly slumped posture while looking afar, perhaps to suggest looking homeward to match the new book title. This pose could not have happened without some planning. Wolfe was a very large and heavy man who had to sit in a chair sturdy and wide enough to hold his bulk (Turnbull 143).



Figure 17: Doris Ulmann photograph from the Wolfe Collection at the University of North Carolina.



Figure 18: This photo by Carl Van Vechten demonstrates scale of size.

One gets a good idea of Wolfe's size in this photograph by Carl Van Vechten. [fig. 18] The top of his head is higher than the door behind him. The original photo shows more of Wolfe's torso, which adds to the effect. Editor Maxwell Perkins described Wolfe's size in a letter to Elizabeth Lemmon, May 1936:

He was built on a different scale, like some visitor from Mars: though you expected him to be big, you were never quite prepared for the enormity of his broad-shouldered, long-limbed, six-and-a-half-foot frame which had now expanded to a girthy two hundred

and fifty pounds. The hostess leading him to a chair would be thinking, “Will it hold this time or will it give?” and when he made one of his normal gestures in a crowded living room, you expected half a dozen people to fall down ... (qtd. in Turnbull)



Figure 19: Aline Bernstein's favorite portrait, by Carl Van Vechten. Beinecke Library, Yale University.

The source of design Ulmann profile is kinder than other portraits done with full face forward. By comparing these others, one realizes that lighting and soft focus can take away tired shadows under the eyes and make hair look cleaner and better groomed.

The profile view also eliminates a direct gaze from the subject.

At least one person preferred to admire Wolfe's gaze. Aline Bernstein, who was Wolfe's lover for many years, favored this Van Vechten portrait. [fig. 19] She wrote to Van Vechten when he gave her the picture after Wolfe's death:

How can I thank you for Tom's picture. It is superb, the finest photograph of any body I have ever seen. It has all of his piercing quality, I have been looking at it a long time, and felt as though I was looking into his own face. (qtd. in Donald)

Wolfe's face shows some of the strain he experienced when in the middle of a book project. Although his broad forehead, closed full lips, and well-proportioned nose might suggest intelligence and power, it is the eyes that impress a sense of intense scrutiny. The eyes, indeed, say the most important things about a person's character. In this sample of four physiognomies, the eyes affected the impact of each photographic portrait. Whitman's heavy eyelids suggested sensuality. Channing described Thoreau's deep-set orbs as “expressive of all shades of feeling.” I found Sandburg's crinkles indicative of humor and a positive outlook. Wolfe stared with deep-thinking intensity.

Character analysis and approaches to portrait photography influence stamp source selection. Stamp designers do not often use the photograph itself in a stamp, or if used, they reduce the photograph to miniature proportions. Nevertheless, a course on the history of photography should include mention of postage stamps as a product impacted by that medium. Something issued in the millions and used by everyone who pays bills or writes letters certainly affects our collective visual literacy.

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