

## **An Exhibitor's Wish for More Variety in Cachet Designs: The Steinbeck Issue**

When attending my first stamp show in 1981, I was pleased to discover that exhibits are a way to both write about and collect a favorite topic in something like a researched and illustrated academic theme paper. For me, the joy of exhibiting my philatelic material is in the story telling. I love to write, and while telling the story surrounding a favorite topic, I want to convey all I can about it. Competitive exhibiting standards, however, discourage one from writing too much. Judges don't have time to read a lot of text. They want to see your story unfold by viewing your philatelic material. The text should merely help the viewer understand what they are seeing.

Therein lies a problem: I write too much. I have exhibited eight or ten times in the past thirty-plus years, sometimes earning a gold or silver or bronze medal and sometimes receiving only a certificate. In every instance, the judges asked me to write less. Perhaps I can comply with that advice for two or three of my collections if I stick with explaining the stamp development, history, and purpose. The usual practice is to collect something first and then talk about it.

But here I must confess that for my collections of American authors and poets on stamps, I do things backwardly. I have a story first and then try to find material to illustrate it. I want to explore an author's background and include samplings of his/her work. Most American authors are portrayed on only one stamp, which is why I collect first day covers. The same stamp appears on a multitude of FDCs, each with a different cachet. Ideally, those cachets should help me tell everything about an author without having to write a lot of text on the exhibit page.

Alas, most cachets are not doing the job for me. The trend in cachet designs is to illustrate the most obvious "low hanging fruit." That is, a portrait of the author and/or a list of the book titles that brought fame and philatelic commemoration. Sometimes, the artist will provide an image evoking the subject of a famous novel or poem. Some designs include birth and death dates and honors awarded. These are all necessary parts of the story, but not enough for my selfish wants. I am often wishing for cachet designs that do not exist.

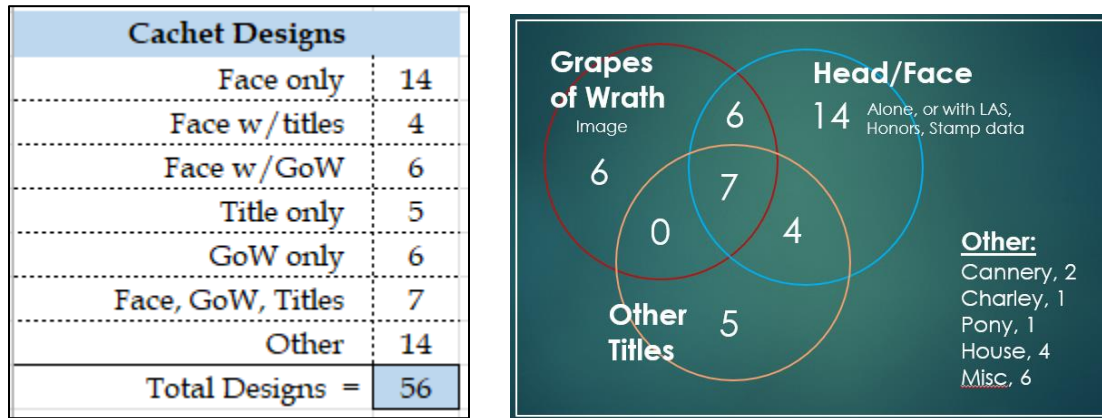
I could talk about cachet "wishes" for almost any of the authors in my collection, but this study looks at cachets produced for the John Steinbeck stamp of February 27, 1979. It was the first in a series of Literary Arts issues honoring modern authors and poets. While making observations about the limited range of cachet design themes and suggesting after-the-fact ideas, I acknowledge that there were three limiting factors affecting what cachetmakers could do at that time: 1) The Post Office announced the Steinbeck issue thirty days before offering it for sale, 2) Cachetmakers had 15 days to get covers serviced with the "First Day of Issue" cancel, and 3) all subject research probably took place in academic or public libraries since this was before creation of The Internet.

### **Cachet Topic Trends**

Most of my collected Steinbeck cachets follow the same trends. They feature either a portrait of the author and/or a shortened list of the book titles that brought him fame. Many

cachets have an image representing his most famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Some designs include birth and death dates and honors awarded.

I had a sense of these trends before starting to build an exhibit, but I soon found a need to count the specifics. Three main categories of cachet graphics became apparent upon categorizing 56 FDCs. They are based on: 1) images of *Grapes of Wrath*, 2) Steinbeck's face, and 3) the book titles he authored. Some cachets have just one of these three items, while others have a combination. A Venn diagram illustrates the distribution of my findings. A table summarizes the results:



These three main themes are all necessary parts of the story, but not enough for my literary wants. I often wish for cachet designs that illustrate Steinbeck's other novels or text that reveals more about his career and life.

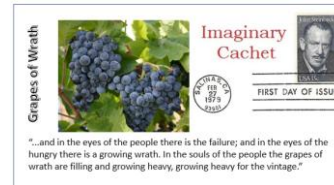
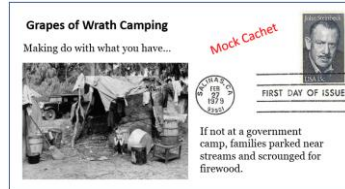
### About The Grapes of Wrath

Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath* in April 1939 four years after the infamous "Black Sunday" dust bowl storm. The story is based on the huge migration of depression-era people leaving their small farms ravaged by drought and poor soil management when banks and corporate agriculture companies forced them to surrender their land. Steinbeck researched for one year and then wrote the entire 619 pages in 100 days—an exhausting marathon of composition. The novel was an immediate best seller and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize the following year.

Cachets with images of the Joad family 1926 Hudson (converted to a truck) are popular and easy to identify as being part of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Even if collectors did not read the novel, they would recognize the truck from the also-popular movie produced in 1940.

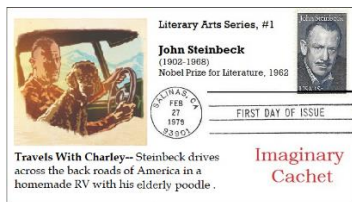
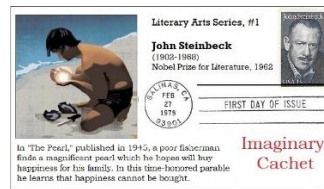
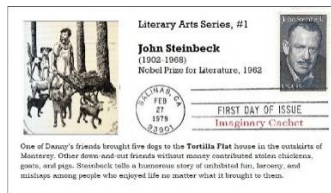
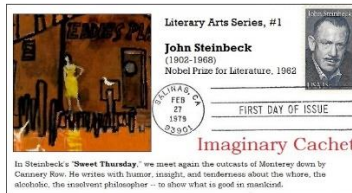
I have some ideas for other images that could have been inspired by *The Grapes of Wrath*. Mine are illustrated here with help from internet clipart, but artists in the 1970s could have used print media for inspiration. First, a cachet depicting the scarcity and cost of food as described in the novel. Next, a photograph or drawing of a typical migrant campsite where

travelers had to make do with what they had. Third, an image of grapes playing on the title and the writer's quote from which it came.



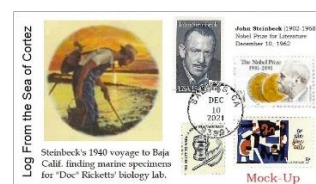
## Other Novels by John Steinbeck

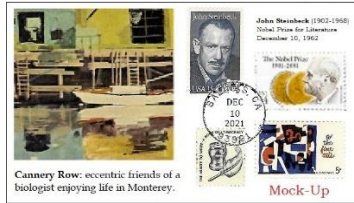
By 1979 when the Literary Arts stamp honoring Steinbeck was issued, readers would have been familiar with many of his novels published after *The Grapes of Wrath*. I would have liked to see cachets featuring those novels. The first Xerox electrostatic color copier was released in 1973. Perhaps a cachetmaker could have taken old paperbacks to such a machine and captured images of their front covers, reducing the output size to cut and paste on an envelope. If not using the entire book cover, one could clip a portion of it and thus have room to add explanatory text below. Here are four mockups using book cover images from other novels by Steinbeck.



## Making My Own

Last year while starting on this "wished-for cachets" project, I planned to create genuine event covers. I even bought the appropriate stamps to go with the Steinbeck issue to equal the then-current first-class rate. Unfortunately, I failed to follow through with making the covers and sending them to the USPS for the Salinas cancel I wanted. Still, you get the idea. It could be attempted in the future with a different date and more postage.





Canary Row: eccentric friends of a biologist enjoying life in Monterey.

## Conclusion

With 20-20 hindsight and the advantage of modern technology, I have shown what can be done to expand the scope of cachets. The kinds of cachets I wish for could help me (and maybe other exhibitors) to prepare a better exhibit and reduce the need for excessive text. I encourage current cachetmakers to consider ideas beyond the obvious when planning future cachets. I also encourage exhibitors of modern material to request specific cachet approaches from their favorite producer when planning to collect a just-announced new issue.

As a cachetmaker myself, I too have been guilty of taking the easy path for many issues and topics. To demonstrate that I have occasionally tried to follow the suggestions in this article, I offer these examples of past author and poet covers for which I focused on their works rather than their faces.

