

# Modern Art on U.S. Stamps: A Story in Seven Covers

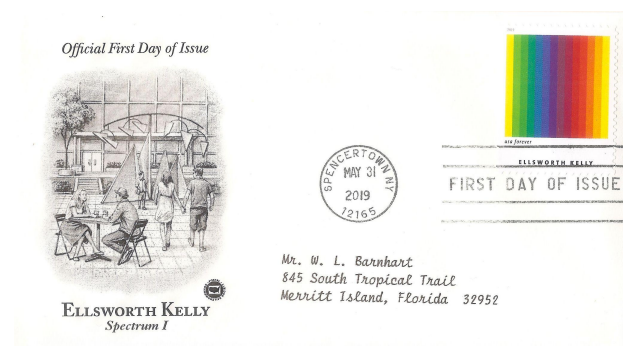
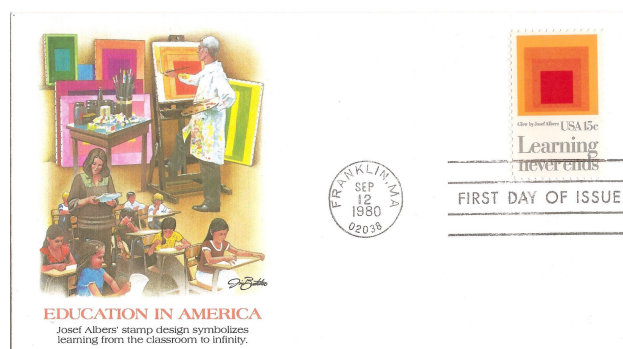
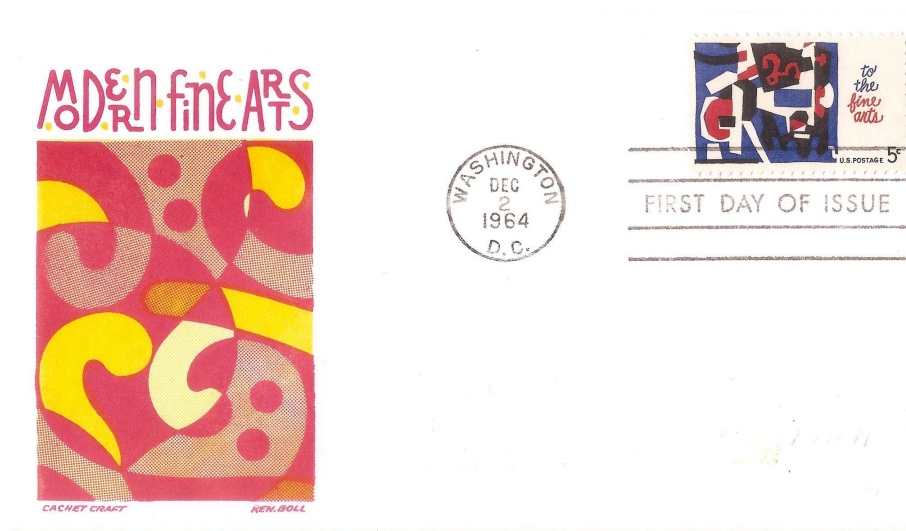
by Simon Vozick-Levinson, AFDCS 29729

"To the Fine Arts" (Scott 1259), issued December 2, 1964, features a colorful work by the American abstract artist Stuart Davis (1957's "Detail Study for Cliché"). Davis won the honor of designing the 5-cent stamp in a competition run by the Society of American Graphic Artists, but died just a few months before it was issued — sparing him the indignity of seeing the public's furious reaction to his work.

This was billed as the first U.S. stamp to feature a work of abstract art, a fact which drew considerable controversy at the time. "Feelings Run High Around Nation About That Abstract Art Stamp," read the *Washington Post's* headline. People seemed to see Davis' design as beneath the dignity of the U.S. Post Office, or somehow threatening in its lack of representational order. There were newspaper stories about all the angry mail from members of the public, and Postmaster General John A. Gronouski's steadfast refusal to be cowed: "If I were to use popularity as the sole criterion for our stamp program — to reduce our designs to the lowest common denominator — our commemorative stamps would be unimaginative indeed," he declared.

It's funny to think now that a stamp design like this could lead to such *Sturm und Drang*, living as we do in a time when modern art plays a central role in many of USPS' best new issues. Let's thank PMG Gronouski for giving avant-garde visual art a place on our postage, as seen in these seven representative first-day covers, issued between 1964 and 2021.

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Covers featured, with original dates of artworks

Top: Sc 1259, Stuart Davis, "Detail Study for Cliché" (1957), cover by Cachet Craft  
 Row 2: Sc 1833, Josef Albers, "Glow" (1966), cover by Fleetwood; Sc 32361, Mark Rothko, "Number 12" (1951), cover by Fleetwood  
 Row 3: Sc 5385, Ellsworth Kelly "Spectrum I" (1953), cover by Artcraft; Sc 5384, Ellsworth Kelly "Blue Red Rocker" (1963), cover by Artcraft  
 Row 4: Sc 5504, Ruth Asawa, three wire sculptures (ca. 1958-1978), self-serviced cover by exhibitor; Sc 5594-97, Emilio Sanchez, four paintings (1972-1981), cover by Panda Cachets