

Pretty Stamps/ Ugly Stamps

## Obscure allegories — the special case of the UN

The United Nations got off to a decent start in 1945, though it didn't help that one of its architects, Alger Hiss, later was convicted in a spy trial. Another

leader who worked on the Universal Declaration of Human rights was Jan Smuts, the brilliant general and president of South Africa, a nation that imposed the racist practice of apartheid from 1948 to 1990. Alas, the high-minded UN principles have not become universal across the years. Able, sometimes brilliant and brave UN diplomats have managed to contribute a little to peace. The UN also fought a war in Korea under its banner, at

the behest of US powers who supplied most of the troops. The UN saved lives in its refugee work and peacekeeping operations, notably in the Congo, where

Dag Hammersjold did heroic work before being killed in a plane crash in 1961. The dashing Sergio Vieira de Mellor of Portugal was trying to broker peace in Iraq in 2003 when he was killed by a bomb at the Canal Hotel in Baghdad.

I was raised in a family that revered the UN. My grandmother was an Eleanor Roosevelt internationalist, and my Aunt Eleanor became an avid collector of UN stamps. When I inherited her collection, I donated it to the Cardinal Spellman museum near Boston, which has quite a UN trove. (I was able to claim a small tax deduction.)

### About UN Stamps

*UN stamps are approved for postage by the Universal Postal Union. Current issues are sold at face value by the post office in the UN building at 46th Street and 1st Avenue, NYC. Correspondence must be mailed from the UN Plaza. UN Stamps are not valid as US postage.*

*The UN issues different stamps at its offices in Geneva, as well as Vienna. UN stamps have not increased much in value over the years. Perhaps collectors sense the obscurity and futility of the whole enterprise ...*

*No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attack upon his honor and reputation. ...*

— Universal Declaration of Human Rights



HEY, THAT'S NOT THE SUN. The first stamp from the first UN set got things off to an obscure start. I guess it means the UN is the Way and the Light. At least it's a nice engraving.

The UN Association was an active group in the 1980s when I went to work for The Post-Standard newspaper in Syracuse. There was a storefront downtown where Sarah Auchincloss and other UNA matrons sold

international wares, with some success. In 1986 the UNA bankrolled a study tour of the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. I joined other

observers on a memorable trip, which included a briefing interrupted by news that Chernobyl's nuclear reactors had just exploded about 600 miles to our northeast. (First question: How are the prevailing winds?)

I suppose the UN always has meant well. The inherent flaw is that the United Nations is only as good as the nations it unites. Not surprisingly, it is set up so the most powerful countries have the final say. One nation's misbehavior

may be seen by other nations as justified or praiseworthy. No, we can't all just get along. Russia, China, North Korea, Iran — the USA can't get along with any of them, or vice versa. The UN can't change that. At most it seems to have been able to take collective action on

*No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.*

— Universal Declaration of Human Rights

worthy goals — land mines, climate change, infectious disease, child health, historic preservation, the oceans and so forth. UN peacekeeping missions have a mixed record, though on balance they serve a necessary, lifesaving purpose. The world court shows its stuff now and then, until it doesn't.

I can't remember the last time the UN achieved a breakthrough. Camp David in 1978 was President Carter, Sadat and Begin. The Soviet Union fell in 1991 without a push from the UN. In 1995, it was Bill Clinton and Sen. Mitchell who worked out the Belfast Accords that brought peace to Ireland. A few years later Clinton, Sen. Bill Richardson and others worked their magic in the Balkans. The Trump administration's Abraham accords between Israel and Persian Gulf states could yet blossom to include Saudi Arabia. The cease fire in Gaza brokered by Biden and Trump may take hold and lead to something bigger.

*Everyone charged with a penal offense has a right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defense.*

— Universal Declaration of Human Rights

No UN leadership in any of this — or if so, in the background. But the UN is hardly in the background when it comes to high-priced international civil servants. The Secretariat and General Assembly, the myriad missions and commissions eat up every available dollar, while the world burns.

The UN has become little more than a hand-wringing bureaucracy. Like the pope, only with no religion and even less power. Just the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights. Apparently Hamas never read it. Or Hezbollah, the Houthis and Iran. The list of offenders goes on: Russia, China, Venezuela, Congo, Myanmar, Guatemala ... Israel? The UN has taken symbolic action against Israel for its brutal counterattack on Gaza. It faltered in delivering emergency aid in Gaza. The organization seems to be spinning into irrelevance, stymied by superpower vetoes, fractious members and wicked problems.

For decades, former colonial powers France and the UK (with the USA) engaged in peacekeeping and development in Africa. Now Russian mercenaries are in sub-Saharan Africa, and China's Belt and Road initiatives is in east Africa, creating new diplomatic sight lines. Meanwhile, violent islamists roil the Mideast and Horn of Africa, and threaten vast, lawless regions of the Sahel down into west Africa. In none of this do I detect a UN footprint. Does the UN have a suggestion about China's ambitions to extract Africa's minerals for its own uses? How to soothe the savage Shabab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and associated killers in Chad, Mali and beyond? How about migrants fleeing failed states and narco-terror in Latin America? Is it just an US border problem?

Figuring out how to make the world a more peaceful place was never easy. It's just that the UN is worse at doing its job than it's ever been. It operates mostly in obscurity. I couldn't even remember the name of the secretary general. Is it Gutierrez? Or was that the last one? (I was almost right. I looked it up and it's Guterres, in office since 2017.)

The UN certainly spends a lot — much of it American money. But for what? As I try to figure out an answer to that question, let's take a little tour of UN philately, most of it from the early, hopeful days. Now that the hinges have peeled off my eyes and I see the UN as the failure it has become, I am able to take a new look at UN stamps and their allegories. I find them increasingly inscrutable, so much so that I need a caption to explain what I'm seeing. Even then, sometimes the allegory just doesn't work, or seems to work against the avowed purpose of the stamp. Have I made myself plain? Or sufficiently obscure?

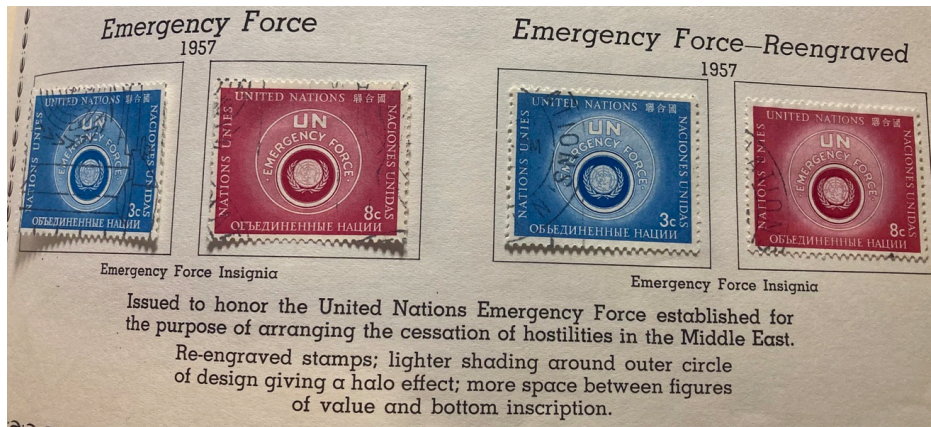
OK, look at these beauties — or should I say, obscurities. In the texts accompanying the illustrations, I offer a snarky first impression (all caps), along with a brief critique. These stamps come from the 1950s and 1960s, when the pattern of obscurity began that has been a hallmark of UN stamps ever since. Sure, it's a challenge to design stamps promoting abstract concepts like peace and comity. Perhaps the obscurity inherent in that mission was a clear message from the beginning that the UN just wasn't going to work out.



WATCH OUT! EARTH ABOUT  
TO CATCH FIRE

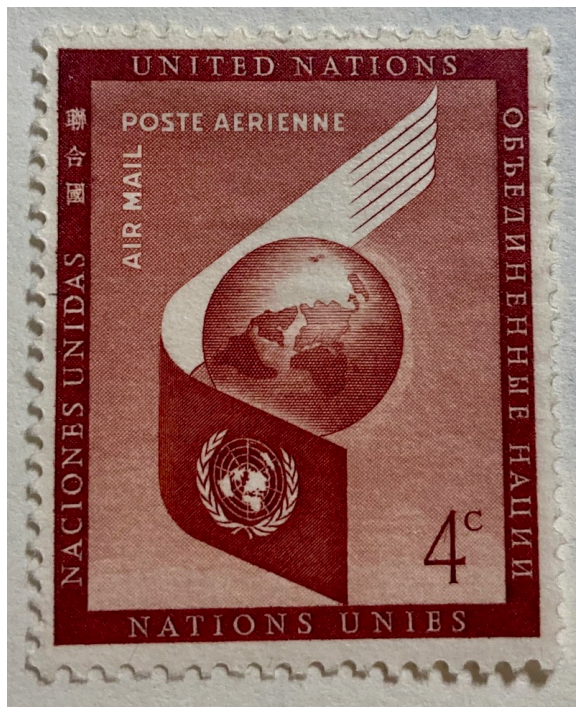
The theme of this stamp is human rights — spelled out in at least five languages. In my UU church the flaming chalice is a symbol of faith. Does it also symbolize human rights? If so, that's news to me.





AN OVUM? A RETINA? A DISTANT PLANET?

None of the above. It's actually the insignia of the UN Emergency Force (a forerunner of peacekeepers). In the enlarged stamps at right you can see the UN badge in the center of the insignia. It sort of makes sense. Then we learn that the stamp was redrawn and re-engraved to soften the outside circle of the insignia. (See difference between top and bottom stamps, right.) But why? Do the changes enhance the image and what it stands for? You could say it creates a halo effect, You could also say it creates a hazy environment that makes the insignia look even more obscure.



WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED!

This routine airmail stamp (4 cents for airmail? Quaint!) purports to show a wing encircling Earth. The wing is embroidered with the UN logo. Doesn't look much like a wing to me. More like a barrier, an enclosure. A backdrop? A bookmark?



HOPELESS QUEST?

This stamp is supposed to honor labor, specifically the International Labor Organization, a UN subsidiary agency. It's plain enough the "workers" in this allegory are pushing a cogged wheel up an incline. The allegory calls to mind the myth of Sisyphus, who was condemned to push a boulder up an incline for eternity. Don't think this is quite what the designer was intending. But it is what I was thinking.





### BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

This 1962 design looks like an album cover for Dylan or Donovan. It's actually a beautiful engraving — you can lose yourself in the mesmerizing circular grooves ... But it's not a whimsical wisp from the counterculture. It's a hopeful paean to “peaceful uses of outer space,” or in the French example, “Utilisations pacifiques de l'espace extra-atmosphérique.”

My stamp album describes the design as “Laurel leaves in orbit around the earth.” Laurel leaves symbolize victory. Victory over outer space? I think not.



### WHO'S IN CHARGE?

This appears to be a useful stamp, displaying a clear daisy diagram of how the UN works. The plenipotentiary is the General Assembly, the big blue circle in the middle. Clustered around it are petals of the various ancillary groups, including the Security Council (where superpowers have a veto) and the Secretariat (sanctuary of highly-paid international civil servants.) Oddly, another petal is the “Trusteeship Council,” which seems to have no relevance to the modern world. This diagram doesn't show where power resides — though the bold title “secretariat” top left gives a clue. Overall, I'd say the stamp obscures as much as it explains.



### I'M FALLING INTO THIS IMAGE ...

I wonder if this is the polished floor of the lobby of the IMF building in Washington, D.C., with its badge and motto underfoot?

It reads: “Promotion of international monetary cooperation and expansion of world trade.” Walk this way into obscurity.





### A TIGHTENING VISE?

Doesn't this 1961 stamp design look like a collar around Latin America, a white vise tinged with red? Obscure to be sure, if not ghoulish. Of course it is nothing of the sort. My album caption describes it as "Gear encircling

Central America, symbol of economic development." It goes on to describe the Economic Commission for Latin America as "promoting both economically and socially the countries under its sphere of influence." So, how has that worked out?



### WHO CROSSED OUT THE COTTON BALL?

Did a Sharpie cancel this stamp? No. The blue "X" is part of the stamp itself, which is against nuclear weapons proliferation. Uh, OK. But who picked that awful background color? This looks like a middle school student science project poster that didn't make the cut.



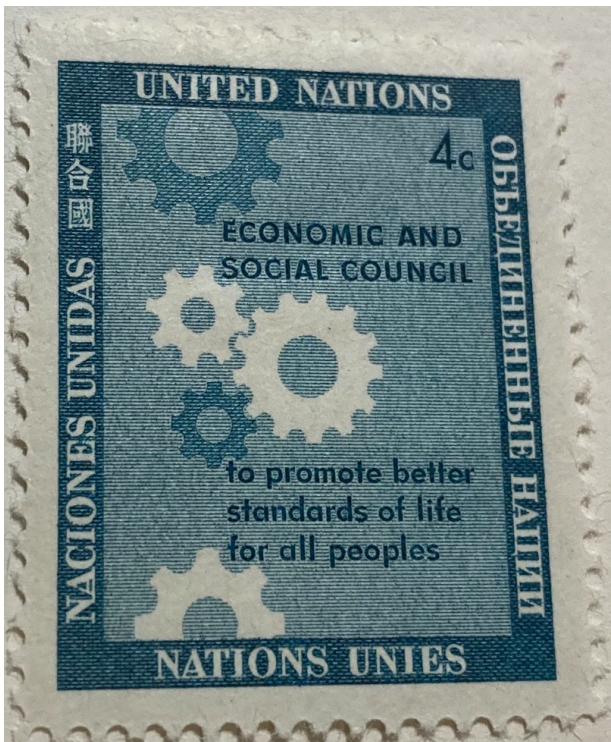
### DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

My stamp album describes this design as "two hands holding up letters spelling UN." I can hardly see the letters because they are obscured by the UN symbol in the middle; the other-worldly lighting from behind the globe doesn't make the foreground any more decipherable. And what is the purpose of holding up the letters? A message? An incantation? A promise or a curse? Electro-magnetic circuitry? Sorcery of some sort?

Below, UN postal authorities gave the design another try, this time multi-color photogravure instead of mono-color engraving. I don't see it as much of an improvement. If anything, the twilight image looks darker, slightly menacing. Is time running out for the UN?





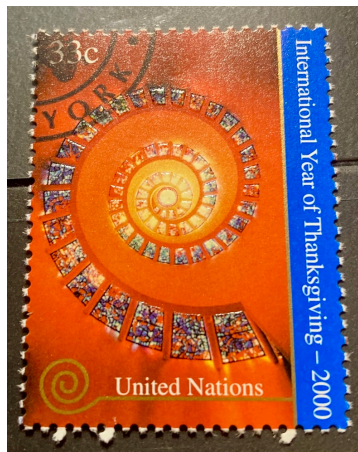


PLEASE DON'T MAKE ME COUNT THE SYMBOLS I get it. It's about farming, industry and trade, dedicated to the Economic Commission for Europe. As a stamp, it's about as boring as they come. Obscure, and boring.

### WE'RE ALL COGS IN THE MACHINE

The text reads: "Economic and Social Council; to promote better standards of life for all peoples." Cogs? Please explain. I guess dark and light cogs denote diversity.

After that, I'm stumped.



### MONSTER FROM THE DARK SIDE?

No, this isn't the UN's entry to topical collectors of monsters on stamps. Or promoting a new Marvel hero. It's about cancer, somehow. Our Hero, apparently naked and unarmed, is in mortal combat with a giant crab. (Frankly, he looks outmatched.) Crab = cancer. Get it? Or is he battling a sign of the Zodiac?



This could go on and on, but it's time to start wrapping up. At left are a couple more obscure UN allegories from recent decades. The top stamp celebrates the Year of Thanksgiving (2010) — not a particularly outstanding year as I recall. The nautilus swirl of colored squares means nothing to me. In the stamp below it, the colorful group that appears to be attending a circus performance is actually a bunch of desperate refugees. See how glum they all are?



HE'S NOT WEARIN' NOTHIN'!

I've always been fond of this number. It's from the UN's early days, and it memorializes the UN's Trusteeship Council and its mission "to promote self-government or independence for trust territories." As a youngster I paid no attention to any of that. I was fascinated by the fact that the strapping young man pictured in the stamp is clearly naked. You can see his pelvic bones narrowing into his crotch; you can't see his privates but you knew they're there, obscured by the frame banner. Maybe he represents struggling nations yearning for self-government or independence. Certainly he is nude.



#### FUTURE FOCUS OF THE UN?

This souvenir sheet presents a Hubble telescopic view of nebulae 170,000 light years from here. Perhaps a future UN will issue a Declaration of Inter-Galactic Rights, laying out a code of conduct extending beyond the stars — with as much impact as the much-abused Universal Declaration of Human Rights here on Earth.

**THE FMF STAMP PROJECT CONTINUES**