

Art of the mail



Philip
Dine

Combine one of America's great universities, students scattered by the pandemic, and an art historian with an abiding appreciation for the magic of the mail, and what do you get?

You get a testament to the letter carrier craft. You get students discovering the value of the mail in today's world. And you get positive publicity in unexpected places about the U.S. Postal Service.

Recently, looking at our daily press clips, I noticed one headlined "Mail Art by the Numbers." It cited postal statistics, comparing the numbers of mail pieces USPS processes every second and of tweets sent in that time; and it evoked postal history, discussing Benjamin Franklin and

Mary Fields, aka "Stagecoach Mary."

You may recall a discussion months ago in this space about compelling essays by historians, authors and scholars in these tumultuous times that address the meaning and relevance of the Postal Service. So, I'm thinking, this is another of those—which, of course, would be fine. But then I get to the ending:

"Hereby I do solemnly declare: the ITALIC Mail Art Gallery is Open.

"In California, in New York, in Georgia, in Florida, in Arizona, and on all the routes in between, we will create a roving gallery of art. We will send out a fleet of fliers, a cadre of cards, a welter of watercolors; they will be borne aloft on the wings of ideas, of inspiration, of art.

"This site documents the work of Stanford University students in the 2021 course, 'Mail Art.' We are creating art together, remotely, in a series of workshops led by master artists. While we can't meet in person, these artworks will be our proxies and the USPS will be our gallery."

Those last seven words—what on earth?

Reportorial curiosity took over, and soon I'm on the phone with Kim Beil, who'd penned what actually was a Stanford website intro to a popular art course. As associate director of ITALIC (Stanford's interdisciplinary art program) and Stanford lecturer, she's taught the class for seven years, but reinvented/rebranded it to meet pandemic-related challenges—not easy, since students create physical works of art and share them with each other. She had to go virtual but keep it tangible.

Normally, the course consists of freshmen interested in the arts who live together on campus. Now, they're thousands of miles apart. Kim's first step was to mail each student art supplies: watercolor paints, paper, colored pencils, glue sticks, envelopes and stamps; she pronounces herself "super grate-

ful for the \$15.10 Flat Rate box."

The reaction to the class, ending in late March, has been notable.

"The students have been delighted to receive things in the mail that their peers have made," she said. "This has been a wonderful experience, to hold something in your hand and then share it via the mail."

Kim grew up in Albany, NY, earned her Ph.D. at the University of California, Irvine, and last year wrote a book, *Good pictures: A history of popular photography*.

Turning to postal workers was no stretch for her. "I've always been fascinated by the mail," she said. "It's such an interesting thought, that we're all connected by pieces of paper. I'm curious about what happens to the mail once it leaves my hand, that it goes so many places without me, arrives somewhere, and what's happened in between.

"I appreciate getting to see my letter carrier every day; there's a lot of joy associated with something new and surprising coming in the mail."

That sentiment has only intensified: "During the presidential election, I felt a kind of renewed responsibility to support the USPS. Our country relies on it. Especially during the pandemic, we've become aware of how important it is. When people aren't able to leave their house we still connect, because the mail gets through."

Kim hopes that beyond delivering the coursework, letter carriers also enjoy it. She's provided an option for students to include their art on the envelopes.

"At first, I thought of the audience as just the students who are making and sharing their artwork with each other, but then I realized that the art would pass through the hands of letter carriers and other postal workers," she said. "I'm wondering if letter carriers will find some beauty in a museum that's all across the nation."

The Mail Art class is about to get additional attention, with a story set for Stanford's daily news email to faculty and staff, the online portal for the university community, and Stanford's news web page, linking to this issue of *The Postal Record*. So, tens of thousands of inquiring minds will get, shall we say, instruction in matters postal.

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