



# Full Context

An International Objectivist Publication

May/June 1999

Vol. 11, No. 5

## Rand Leaves Her Stamp on Philatelic History

by Chris Matthew Sciabarra

When I arrived at the Postage Stamp Mega-Event at Pier 92 in New York City, on the morning of April 22, 1999, I had no idea what to expect. Though I've purchased a few choice stamps of my own through the years, I'd never attended a First Day Ceremony, let alone a postage stamp convention. The event was billed as "Big Enough to Launch a Literary Giant," and it sure was Big. Over 150 dealers, societies, and clubs were represented.

To avoid the crowds after the ceremony, I quickly got in line to purchase the new Ayn Rand stamp. The stamp is part of the Literary Arts Series, which also features commemorative releases for such writers as: Stephen Vincent Benet, Thornton Wilder, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tennessee Williams, James Thurber, Dorothy Parker, William Saroyan, Marianne Moore, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, T. S. Eliot, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edith Wharton, and John Steinbeck. After purchasing the stamp, I quickly proceeded to the Cancellation Desk to get a First Day of Issue imprint, and encountered lots of other Rand fans who had come from all over the country to celebrate this historic event.

The ceremony began at High Noon—which was apropos considering the factions in attendance. On my way to the festivities, I actually came upon two booths that were in rather close proximity to one another. The first booth, celebrating the "Stamp of Greatness," featured literature from the Institute for Objectivist Studies. Four or five booths away, the Ayn Rand Institute provided a reprint of Rand's classic 1971 *Minkus Stamp Journal* article, "Why I Like Stamp Collecting." Both tables seemed to attract equal amounts of attention.

Vinnie Molloy, New York Postmaster, presided over the ceremony. After Mary Pryor sang the National Anthem, and the guests of honor were introduced, Mary Elcano, the Senior Vice President and General Counsel of the U. S. Postal Service, dedicated and unveiled the stamp to enthusiastic applause. She presented ceremonial plaques to several individuals, including Phil Jordan, designer of the stamp, and Nicholas Gaetano, its illustrator. None of these individuals had been the recipient of the first official plaque of the day; that one had been presented to President Clinton at the White House. A few groans went through the audience on hearing this news, but decorum was maintained.

Decorum was also maintained when Leonard Peikoff made a few brief remarks on the importance of the stamp, and of Ayn Rand's philosophy. He observed that this was the first time a branch of government had ever recognized Rand's contribution; he hoped that, in the future, other branches would follow. I could not help but notice, however, that when Peikoff conveyed his best wishes to the many admirers of Ayn Rand who had shown up for this ceremony, he was in direct view of both David Kelley, standing to my right in the back of the makeshift auditorium, and Nathaniel Branden—who was seated in the front row, right in front of Peikoff. This was theater, I thought, and while I feared that the event might degenerate into a familiar scene from an Italian wedding, I am happy to report that everyone was on their best behavior.

Other speakers at the event included Charles Sures, a stamp collector, and long-time friend of Rand, and John Hotchner, President of the American Philatelic Society. Sures recollected how he had attended several stamp conventions with Rand. She would take a fixed amount of money with her, and tell Sures that this was her budget for the day. Invariably, however, she would come upon that one stamp, at the end of the day, which would lead her to reconsider her self-imposed budgetary limitations. Debating those limits with Sures, she'd give into temptation, finally, and purchase the stamp she desired. Sures also remarked that when Rand attended these conventions, she was always impressed by the "brotherhood" among collectors, something she once described as a "lighthearted benevolence." Rand dealt with serious collectors, who recognized her not for her celebrity, but for her keen interest and passion in stamp collecting.

When the ceremony concluded, each of us was presented with a Souvenir Program upon exit.

Ayn Rand once wrote that "[t]here is constant change in the world of stamps and a spectacular display of human imagination." How fitting, I thought, that a stamp had honored the memory of this advocate for change and for the power and potential of the individual's imagination.

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