

This Day in History... February 27, 1979

Start of the Literary Arts Series

On February 27, 1979, the USPS issued the first stamp in the Literary Arts Series honoring author John Steinbeck.

Leading up to 1979, the USPS began considering a new stamp series to honor American writers. After receiving over 1,500 suggestions, they selected John Steinbeck to be the first honoree in what would become a long-running series.

The stamps were issued on what would have been Steinbeck's 77th birthday – February 27, 1979. They were issued at the John Steinbeck Public Library in Salinas, California. The stamp image was based on a photo taken in the 1940s by Philippe Halsman. A total of 155 million Steinbeck stamps were produced. In talking about the new series, the USPS said, "These skillful wordsmiths spun our favorite tales — and American history along with them."

The Literary Arts Series continued in 1980 with a stamp honoring Edith Wharton, the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her book, *The Age of Innocence*. Designed by Bradbury Thompson, the stamp was based on a 1905 photograph of Wharton. The first several issues in the series followed a similar design format as the Steinbeck issue. They were vertically oriented with the author's name across the top and the denomination on the bottom.

The 1990 stamp featuring Marianne Moore was the first in the series to include additional biographical information. Her stamp included the phrase "American Poet" as well as the years of her birth and death, 1887-1972.

In 1991, the William Saroyan stamp was the first in the series to feature a horizontal design. That stamp was also part of a joint issue with the Soviet Union. On the same day, the stamps were issued in Fresno, California, and Saroyan's birthplace, Yerevan, Armenia (which was a republic of the Soviet Union at the time).

The design of the 11th stamp in the series, the 1994 James Thurber issue, was also quite different from previous issues. While all of the previous stamps in the series were intricate paintings, engravings, or based on photos, Thurber's portrait was a simple line drawing. This was because it was one of Thurber's own self-portraits, which was used at his daughter's request.

The 2010 Julia de Burgos also differed from many other stamps in the series. While most of the other stamps featured very detailed and realistic portraits, the USPS took a more expressive approach with her stamp, to better represent her style and the creative possibilities of the series.

The first 25 stamps in the series were all issued at the first-class rate. The 2009 Richard Wright stamp was the first to depart from this – the 61¢ value paid the two-ounce rate at the time.

After the 2010 Julia De Burgos stamp was issued at the first-class 44¢ rate, the 2011 Mark Twain stamp became the first Forever stamp issued in the series. Then the 2014 Ralph Ellison stamp was then issued at the three-ounce 91¢ rate. And all stamps since the 2015 Flannery O'Connor have carried the "Three Ounce" denomination.



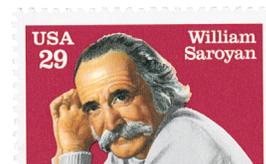
Issued on Steinbeck's 77th birthday.



Stamp issued in New Haven, Connecticut, where Wharton's archives are held at Yale's Beinecke Library.



The "First Lady of Poetry," Moore was the eight honoree in the series.



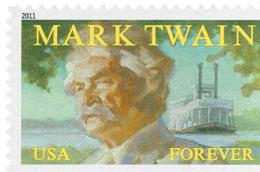
This ninth stamp in the series was based on a photo by Paul Kalinian.



De Burgos was the 27th honoree in the series.



Issued for Thurber's 100th birthday.



The 28th stamp and first Forever issue in the Literary Series.

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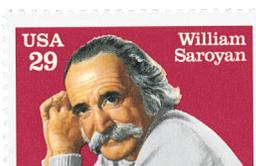
Issued on Steinbeck's 77th birthday.



Stamp issued in New Haven, Connecticut, where Wharton's archives are held at Yale's Beinecke Library.



The "First Lady of Poetry," Moore was the eighth honoree in the series.



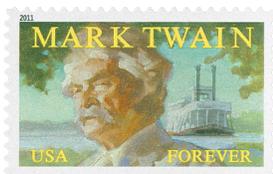
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