

This Day in History... November 1, 1966

First Traditional Christmas Stamp

On November 1, 1966, the US Post Office issued its first Traditional Christmas stamp, picturing the *Madonna and Child with Angels*, by Hans Memling.

By the early 1960s, the US Post Office was receiving 1,000 letters a year (for several years) asking for a Christmas-themed stamp to frank their holiday mail. The idea was approved and the US issued its first Christmas stamp on November 1, 1962.

The stamp was wildly popular, featuring popular holiday decorations of a wreath and candles. The Post Office Department had expected there would be a great demand for the issue, so they printed 350 million stamps – the largest print run for a special stamp up to that time. Those 350 million stamps sold out quickly, leading the Bureau of Engraving and Printing to produce more stamps – reaching over 860 million by the end of the year.



1967 stamp features a larger version of the same painting.

While the Christmas stamp was very popular, it wasn't without its detractors. Some didn't agree with the idea of the post office issuing a stamp honoring a religious holiday. Others wanted Christmas stamps that were more religious. The Post Office would continue to issue Christmas stamps in the coming years that featured the national Christmas tree, seasonal plants, and an angel in 1965. The angel was considered less controversial because angels are included in many religions, not just Christianity.

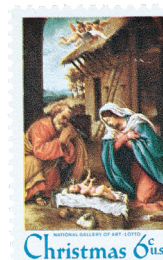
Then in 1966, the Post Office had a new idea. They could produce Christmas stamps utilizing classic paintings of the Madonna and Child. These stamps wouldn't violate the separation of church and state because they were a celebration of culture. So on November 1, 1966, they issued the first US Madonna and Child stamp in Christmas, Michigan. The stamp featured the 15th century painting, *Madonna and Child with Angels*, by Flemish painter Hans Memling.

That stamp was very popular and over 1.1 billion were printed. The design was so popular, it was used again on the Christmas stamp of 1967. However, the 1967 stamp was larger and showed more of the painting. The stamp's continued popularity led the Post Office to issue another traditional Christmas stamp in 1968, this time picturing the Angel Gabriel. For the 1969 issue, they reverted back to the non-religious theme, with a stamp picturing a painting called *Winter Sunday in Norway, Maine*.

Then in 1970, the Post Office made a big change. To keep people in both camps happy, they issued one traditional Christmas stamp, picturing a classic painting of the Nativity, plus a block of four picturing Christmas toys. That decision proved popular and they have continued to issue stamps with both traditional and contemporary Christmas themes ever since.



The original painting hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.



1970 stamp picturing Christmas Nativity by Lorenzo Lotto.

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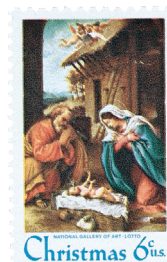
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