

rubber stamps

ARTICLE BY

correy baldwin

VINTAGE COLLECTION BY

mark e. sackett

Years ago I worked for a small literary publishing house, in a basement office amid precariously leaning towers of books. One of my duties was to mail out review copies. The envelopes were pre-printed with our company address and logo, but the publisher insisted we use two rubber stamps: one marking “Esplanade” for the fiction line, the other “Signal” for the poetry. *Ink, stamp. Ink, stamp...* I became very familiar with those wooden-handled tools of the trade.

The publisher kept these stamps in use for love of their simple elegance. He also had them made at a local shop, just a 10-minute walk away, providing a special connection to the community. It was an attitude I always appreciated. I have never needed a stamp for my own business, but recently I decided to get one made anyway, just for myself.

First, I turned to my talented sister, commissioning an illustration from her that I could place on a rubber stamp. She came up with a beautiful linocut of two wheat stalks, a tribute to the family farm we grew up on, and which I heartbreakingly hadn’t been able to visit for far too long, given recent restrictions. Next I called up Central Stamp—the same rubber stamp company used by my former employer.

When I arrive, Diana, one of the two managers, quickly takes me behind the counter to show me around the functional and somewhat dishevelled workshop. When the large, family-run stamp and engraving business A. Derome relocated to an industrial park in the 1970s, they set up Central Stamp as a way to continue servicing their clients in the city. Today it is a much-loved business, popular especially with small businesses looking to personalize their product and packaging.





Diana admires my sister's wheat carving, and tells me of the stamps that have passed her way: the "ex libris" stamps for home libraries, stamps made from children's drawings, repeat pattern stamps for crafters and even stamps made as gag gifts. I feel like I have been welcomed into a community.

Artwork by
Myla-Rae
Baldwin

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The Story of the Rubber Stamp

Stamping is as old an act as they come. For millennia, humans have stamped decorative repeat images onto everything from pottery to clothing, using stones, bones, clay and wood. Early written messages were sealed with wax and stamped, while still soft, with a family crest or coat of arms. Kings and governments used brass to stamp authoritative insignia onto documents and decrees. Letterpresses and typewriters are built on the idea of stamping, using small metal type.

But it was rubber that allowed the stamp to become truly widespread, bringing it into offices and toy boxes around the world.

The word "rubber" comes from one of its earliest uses in the Western world: to erase, or "rub out," marks from a lead pencil. Initially, however, the substance known as rubber had limited applicability, due to it being a persistent gooey mess.

Europeans were introduced to rubber in 1736, by the Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica, who collected the viscous latex they called *caoutchouc* by tapping the Hevea tree (or rubber tree). They used the thick, elasticky substance to waterproof clothing, or to make rubber vessels, and rubber balls for sport.

At first, European uses for rubber moved along similar lines, until 1839, when chemists discovered a process by which to stabilize and harden the substance. This "vulcanized" rubber, made using chemical additives

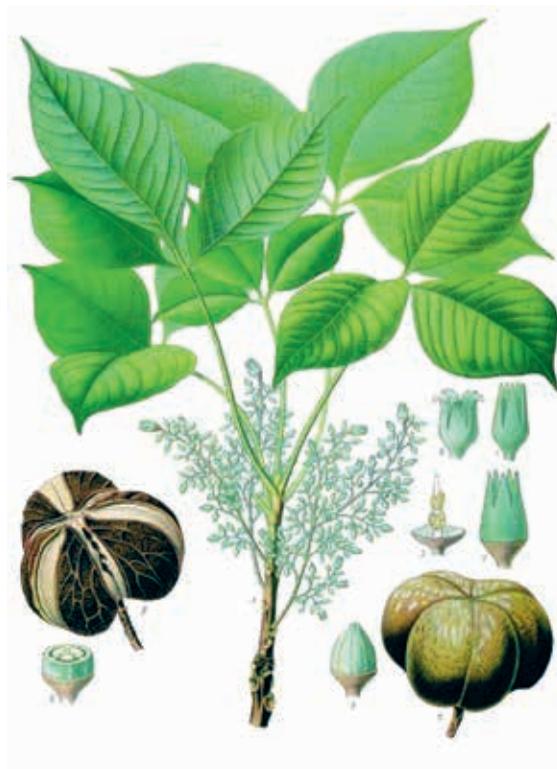
and a heating process, could finally be shaped, cut and carved, down to the tiniest details.

In the 1860s, James Orton Woodruff of Auburn, New York, saw washtubs in a shop being marked with a rudimentary rubber marker—a curved wooden block mounted with thick rubber letters. Inspired, he set out to create a small vulcanizer that could produce rubber stamps of a much higher quality.

He found his answer in dentistry. Dentists had also taken up vulcanized rubber to make cost-effective denture bases, using plastic moulds and small, round vulcanizers they called "dental pots." With the help of his dentist uncle, Woodruff tweaked the dental pot design to produce the first hand-held rubber stamp, which he mounted on a black walnut base.

Manufacturing and marketing began in earnest. One of the most popular products was the rubber stamp set, containing the full array of letters, numbers and punctuation. These were ideal for businesses, for creating signage and price tags. But they were also popular as an educational tool, giving children an entertaining way to learn about numbers and alphabets.

Just as popular were entertainment marker sets. These featured not just numbers and letters, but a host of picture stamps, including animals and cartoon characters, along with fully themed sets, like "Wild West" and "Circus." Individual picture stamps were also sold and collected, including those placed by Kellogg's in their cereal boxes as prizes, starting in 1938.



Hevea
brasiliensis
Köhler's
Medizinal-
Pflanzen,
Franz Eugen
Köhler, 1897.

HAND DATING STAMPS

WITH PATENT CUSHION BASE.

THE LIGHTEST AND MOST DURABLE
DATER MADE.

Price Complete with Die and
Dates Good for 10 Years, **85c.**

THESE SPECIMEN DIES ARE SUGGESTIONS ONLY.
ANY DESIGN SHOWN IN THIS BOOK CAN BE
FURNISHED ON A HAND DATING STAMP.



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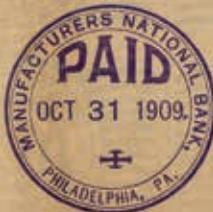
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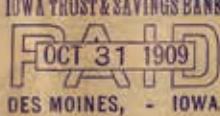
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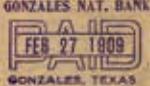
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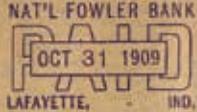
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GOODS ON THIS PAGE SENT PREPAID TO ANY PART OF THE U. S. OR CANADA.

FLEXIBLE HANDLE DATING STAMP

WITH PATENT CUSHION BASE.

For Rapid and Continuous Work in has no equal. It is light and does not tire
the hand. A legible impression can be produced at almost any angle.

PRICE COMPLETE
With Die and Dates **\$1.00**

DATES FOR 10
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THE LARGE SIZE
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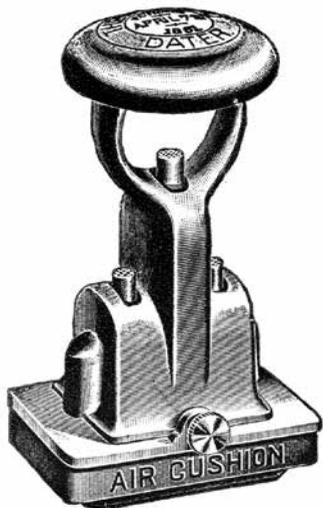


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But it was in the office where the rubber stamp truly found its longevity, especially with such brilliant innovations as the mechanical stamp, the self-inking stamp, and automatically incrementing number stamps. Business logos, date stamps and product inventory; "Received," "Delivered," "Cancelled," "Paid"—there was no end to their usefulness.

The rubber stamp and a new, burgeoning bureaucracy went hand in hand—which was not always a good thing for the rubber stamp's reputation. As corporate, government and institutional offices became more complex and entrenched, rubber stamping became synonymous with the often impersonal and bloated nature of these labyrinthine systems. The phrase "to rubber stamp" came to mean approving something without giving it the thought or attention it deserves.

Thankfully, the pictorial stamp had a life of its own. The origin of picture stamps may be educational, but today their popularity lies just as much in the worlds of art and crafts.

This phenomenon is often traced to neo-Dada Fluxus artists of the 1960s, specifically the mischievous Ray Johnson, who used stamps in his book art and playful, performance-inspired correspondence—or mail art. Artists like Johnson celebrated process over product, and believed that anyone could make art, and that anything could be art, even the simple rubber stamp. This movement is alive and well today, encompassing mail artists, scrapbook artists, stamp art enthusiasts and visual poets, all making creative use of rubber stamps.

A Stamp Is an Old Friend

A stamp is a basic mark-making tool, like a pencil or a paintbrush. And like with any physical, tactile tool, it comes with a special sort of thrill. But a stamp is something different, too, for a couple of reasons. First, unlike with a pencil or paintbrush, the image you want to create is already there. A stamp comes out like a fully formed thought, a ready-made idea. And yet it remains, undoubtedly, an act of creation.

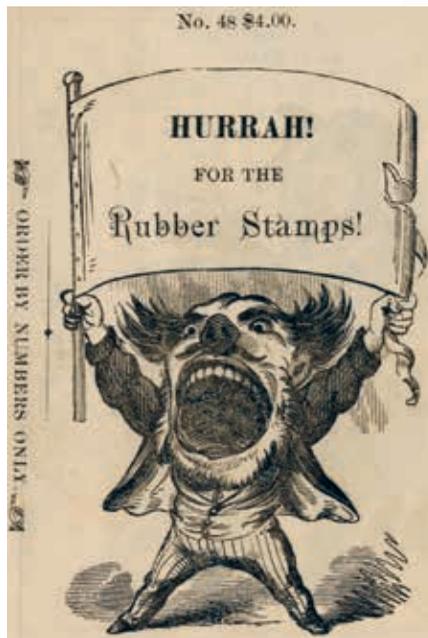
Stamping also comes with the possibility—the promise—of repetition. Repetition and replication. And with repetition comes the potential for pattern. A stamp is reliable. You know what image a stamp will give you—and every time, there it is. A stamp is a familiar face, and one you can trust to always be there.

And yet, it is more than this, too. Because the joy of a stamp arises from a particular contradiction: a stamp provides replication, as well as variation. Each stamped image is the same as the one before it, and yet still manages to be unique.

Unequal pressure will leave one side stronger, the other faint. Images transition from blotchy to thin as a fresh ink pad becomes well used. Definition is lost with repeated stamping, or with coarser paper. And an image will never appear precisely where we intend: it may be off-center, at an angle, too low or too high. Our hand is imprecise—though often we are stamping because no precision is required at all.

Of course, delighting in the imprecise is a particular pleasure in a digital world. The digital has twinned the idea of duplication with precision, and perfection. If you copy-paste a jpg, your results will literally be identical. Until we had encountered the sheer *sameness* of digital perfection, we could never have fully comprehended the beauty, and the personality, of physical imperfection and imprecision.

Yes, a stamp is a familiar face, an old friend. And like with any true friendship, it is never static: there will be variety, inconsistency and, occasionally, misalignment—but just like any good friend, it will always be there. **U**



RAY JOHNSON

The irreverent artist Ray Johnson is often thought of as the father of mail art. He was known to send stamped and doodled pages to his friends through the mail with instructions to add to the message and mail it to someone else. He often stamped the instructions with the large red letters: THIS IS NOT ART, or something more fanciful like GARTER BELT CLUB or BRUE EYES CRUB, or to declare a FESTIVAL (with all the letters scratched out except for the "T"). Johnson often intentionally misspelled his name in rubber stamp, signing his mail art as RAY JOHNSONG or REY JONSHON.



HANKO

The hanko, a small stamp bearing a personal or family name, has been a part of Japanese society for centuries. They are used as a mark of authentication, in much the same way as a signature in the West: for signing documents and contracts, receiving packages, or making an official transaction. A hanko is usually circular or square, and can fit in your pocket, for daily use. The mark made by a hanko is called an inkkan.



MARCEL DUCHAMP

In 1919, Marcel Duchamp, a keen chess player, created a rubber stamp chess set so that he could play through mail correspondence. Duchamp was in Buenos Aires at the time, where chess was far less popular, and he designed his chess stamps in order to keep up his hobby with colleagues back home. These games would become one of the first forms of postal interaction using rubber stamps. Soon after, Duchamp became a competitive chess player, all but leaving the art world behind—though as Duchamp himself said, "While all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists."

Price List of Catalog

RUBBER STAMP INK,

THAT WILL NOT GEM ON THE PADS OR CLOG THE STAMPS.

1 ounce Bottle	25 Cents
2 " "	35 "
3 " "	50 "
4 " "	62 "

PADS

12 x 24 inches, Name Size	12 Cents
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12 x 5 " Large	30 "

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Indelible Ink (Warranted Fast)	25 Cents
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same Bottle	30 "

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No. 1 with die, complete	\$1.00
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Extra Dies each	2.50
Hibbins No. 1	.50
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PORTLAND RUBBER TYPE CO.

Specimens of Name Stamps,

Name and Initial Stamp with complete outfit \$1.00.

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1921, 40 cents. 1925, 40 cents

Handwritten specimens of various styles, including "PLEASE REMIT.", "ATTENTION REQUESTED", and "COMPLIMENTS OF THE SEASON".

1927, 25 cents. 1929, 25 cents.

1927, 25 cents. *PLEASE REMIT.*

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2438, 25 cents.

2439, 25 cents.

... Styles of Type and Price List of ...
Rubber Stamps Made to Order.

PREPAID TO ANY PART OF U. S. AND CANADA.



Patent Cushion Stamp.

All Hand stamps made to order are mounted on cushion handles at prices below.

Moulding stamps are not mounted with cushion unless ordered.



MOULDING STAMP
 Sets Less than list below.

Stamp 3 inches long.	Stamp 4 inches long.	Stamp 5 inches long.
1 line 15c	1 line 20c	1 line 25c
2 lines 25c	2 lines 35c	2 lines 45c
3 lines 35c	3 lines 50c	3 lines 65c
4 lines 45c	4 lines 65c	4 lines 85c
Additional lines 10c	Additional lines 15c	Additional lines 20c

¹ History of United States.
² HONEST FARMER.
³ NATIONAL CANDIDATE.
⁴ A NAVY YARD.
⁵ IMPORTED TROUSERS.
⁶ PAY AT THE DESK.
⁷ PRINTED MATTER ONLY.
⁸ OH MY YOU HURT.
⁹ CITY HALL.
¹⁰ Foreign Commerce.
¹¹ Wm. Mc Kinley.
 248
 Burke, Fitzsimons, Hesse & Co., Rochester.

¹² American Golf Player.
¹³ Latest Card.
¹⁴ THE GOLDEN RODS.
¹⁵ TIGER HUNTER.
¹⁶ PRINCE OF WALES.
¹⁷ CONEY ISLAND.
¹⁸ BLAND SMILE.
¹⁹ YOUNG HORSE.
²⁰ Try Our Indelible Ink.
²⁴⁵ U NEED A BISCUIT.
²⁴⁶ When to start for Rochester, N. Y.
²⁴⁷ FROM ENDORSEMENTS GUARANTEED.

²¹ Your Advertisement is in this Paper.
²² National Theatre.

²³ WRITE PLAIN.

²⁴ A GOOD REST.

²⁵ LAUNDRY

²⁶ OH SUCH A HEADACHE.

²⁷ Have a Look.

²⁸ RICH CHILD.

²⁹ Bright Method.

³⁰ EXPERIENCED TRADESMEN.

³¹ ROCKAWAY BEACH.

³² He a Fickle Lover?

³³ Lovers Lane.

³⁴ If You Want Your Money's Worth, go to "Burrer's"

³⁵ STOLEN KISSES.

³⁶ With a Naughty Little Twinkle In Her Eye.

³⁷ Grasp Opportunities.

³⁸ FAST HORSES.

³⁹ BEAUTIFUL LADIES.

⁴⁰ Float Backward.

⁴¹ The Diamond Mines.

⁴² She Wore A Little Safety Pin Behind.

⁴³ GENESEE FALLS LODGE.

⁴⁴ CABLES.

⁴⁵ Dooley Social Club.

⁴⁶ THE FINISH.

⁴⁷ N. Y. CENTRAL EAST FREIGHT LINE.

⁴⁸ PAID

⁴⁹ Advertising Department.

⁵⁰ GRAND HOP.

⁵¹ SLEEPY.

⁵² Steel Stamps & Stencils.

⁵³ THE STAR.

⁵⁴ YOU ARE INVITED TO CALL.

⁵⁵ The Grand Central.

⁵⁶ NEW YORK STATE.



The modern rubber stamp appeared during the 1860s when vulcanized rubber was shaped, heated and applied to letter moulds—in a process previously used by dentists to create dentures. Rubber stamps were quickly adopted in the commercial world and beyond as a way to make life and business messaging more effective and efficient, as well as for a quick and cheap way to market goods and services. A booming

industry soon sprung up to market and sell this popular new tool. Mail order catalogues, such as those featured here, advertised rubber stamps for all uses in a staggering variety of type styles, hand-drawn lettering and imagery, composed of all shapes and sizes. As one catalogue noted: "There is practically no limit to the reproduction in ... rubber of any shape, pattern, or design."

Some of the popular stamps offered were names, signatures, monograms, stock cut designs, borders, business advertisements and everyday office stamps, such as "Paid," "Void," "Rush" and "Fragile." Rubber stamps could be customized to whatever the client desired, and hundreds of script styles (such as Spencerian) and type fonts were used for that purpose. Popular typefaces such as Riband, Saxon, Roman and Arabesque were used in the Victorian period, then adapted with

the changing styles and trends far into the 20th century, and up to today.

The popularity of the rubber stamp has continued to endure. As one catalogue put it: "The simplicity of their construction, their noiselessness, ease with which they are used, clearness of the impression, their durability and cheapness, cannot be other than a good and sufficient reason why they are held in such favor." 

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