

pushing the envelope

by **r**osina lippi

In this age of electronic communication, a personal letter arriving in the mail is a rare and wonderful thing. Someone, somewhere, has filled an envelope with stories (long, short or tall), declarations of love or bankruptcy, photos of their dog or new baby or whatever else is in their hearts or on their minds, and sent it to you. An envelope is an envelope, but it can be so much more. The CrackerJack Kid – one of the most respected names in mail art – puts it simply like this: the envelope is the museum.

In the creation of mail art, there are only a few absolutes, and all of these are imposed by the post office. This is an art form that embraces everything from collage to watercolor to doodling with crayons; in fact, one of the most appealing things about mail art is the simplicity of it. Anyone with a scissors, a glue stick, and some imagination can get started.

The very first thing any aspiring mail artist needs to do is to start paying attention to the paper that passes through his or her hands every day. I keep a box of found paper treasures that will all, at some point, find their way onto envelopes. In this box are things as diverse as the paper wrap-



caption

ping from chopsticks (with a simple, very elegant how-to illustration), a fortune from the side of a tea box, print ads from newspapers and magazines, and a great variety of bright graphics from junk mail. Once you start paying attention, you'll actually be eager to open yet another sweepstakes offer, if

only to grab metallic stickers with a variety of oddly useful phrases on them.

Once drawn into the world of mail art you may find yourself satisfied with the simplest collage approach, or you could start to explore artistamps (also called faux postage), where artists cre-



Above:
Below:

Mail art has been defined as "art sent through the post rather than displayed or sold through conventional commercial channels, encompassing a variety of media including postcards, books, images made on photocopying machines, or with rubber stamps, postage stamps designed by artists, concrete poetry and other art forms generally considered marginal." (The Dictionary of Art, edited by Jane Turner, Macmillan: 1996)

ate tiny masterpieces to be used on envelopes or displayed for their own sake.

In each issue of Cloth Paper Scissors™ I'll be exploring a different aspect of mail art, some of which are demonstrated here.





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*There are people
all over the world
who make art out of
an innocent rectangle,
and then commit it
to the fates by
dropping it into
a mailbox.*

- **Artistamps** may be a one-of-a-kind miniature painting, one of a computer-designed series, or created with rubber stamps.
- **Advertising or revenue stamps**, often called cinderellas by collectors, are another art form within an art form. In the first part of the last century, advertising stamps were widely used to promote museum exhibits, laundry soap, chocolate, vacation destinations, and political candidates.
- **Postage stamps** that are 50 years old are still valid, if they haven't been used previously. Commemorative stamps, old and new, are another source of varied imagery.

mail art web sites

The Envelope is the Museum
www.actlab.utexas.edu/emma/
Mail Art links at
www.mailartist.com

www.mailartist.com/kiyotei/links.html

Mail Art Pathfinder

www.infomuse.net/kristina/courses/605pathfinder/index.shtml

All of these web sites contain links to lists

- **Postal cancellations** can be invented. Some of the cancellations here are my own design; others are commercial rubber stamp designs.
- **Ticket stubs** and other paper ephemera that are used in collage also work well with postal art.
- **Rubber-stamped images**, whether commercial or self-carved, are particularly useful on the small canvas provided by an envelope and on artistamps.
- **Photographs** and other personal items are often used in mail art collage.
- **Personal artwork** If the envelope is the museum, there's room on it for drawing and painting.
- **Envelopes** themselves may be nothing unusual, or they may be folded out of hand-made paper to a specific template. The examples here are (1) a standard business envelope; (2) an envelope made out of newsprint; and (3) an envelope from wallpaper (out of a sample book).
- **Addresses** While the post office requires a clearly presented mailing address, there is still room for play, from carefully crafted calligraphy to collage. ●