

Czechoslovakia

Some stamps, their background and related artwork.

Aim: To dig a little deeper into the inspiration for and creation of the stamps.

Plan: To deal with the stamps in chronological order by date of issue. In each case to provide further information about the background to the issue, display an example of preparatory or related artwork, show the stamp(s) involved and where space permits, say something about the designer or engraver.

Introduction: Whilst all philatelists are aware that much work is required to bring about the production of a stamp, many seldom see any evidence of this. The whole process from concept to stamp production is time consuming and entails many sketches and trial prints produced at various points along the way. These pages show how work by another artist can be studied and reproduced by a skilled engraver at a much smaller size. Czechoslovakia had and still has some really skilled and prolific designers and engravers and investigating their work enhances one's appreciation of the skills involved. In the case of Czechoslovakia, the tendency to produce sheetlets with motifs between the stamps also gives rise to some fine artistry.

1951. Czechoslovak – Soviet Friendship

Background

The stamp shows President Klement Gottwald of Czechoslovakia alongside Joseph Lenin of the Soviet Union in front of their respective flags. The issue marks 30 years of friendship between the two countries. Gottwald was the leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia from 1929 until his death in 1953 – titled as general secretary until 1945 and as chairman from 1945 to 1953. He was the first leader of Communist Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1953.

Preliminary artwork



Stamp Issue



The stamps show the two leaders in front of their nations flags. Issued on 2nd November 1951 as SG 644 and 646 to celebrate 30 years of friendship. Designed and engraved by J A Švengsbir. It is said that Gottwald used every opportunity to improve his standing with Stalin. The white of the Czechoslovak flag makes it look as if Stalin is giving a Nazi salute. That just might be a piece of subversive humour typical of the Czechs.

1965. Lady at her Toilet

Background

The original painting is by Titian and is dated to c. 1515. It is held in the Louvre in Paris and is titled "the lady with a mirror". There are in fact two mirrors, both being held by a servant. This can be seen in the stamp but not the etching. The painting was purchased by Charles I of England from Italy and later sold to King Louis XV of France for the Versailles Palace.

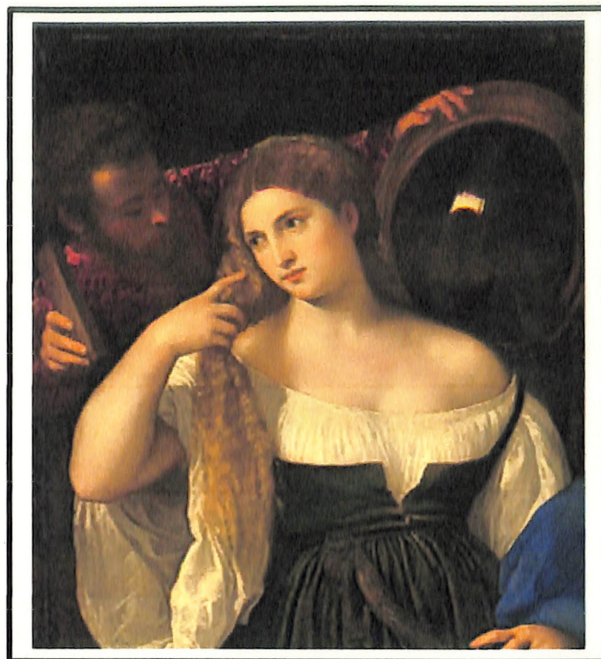
Reproduction of preliminary artwork



The Engraver

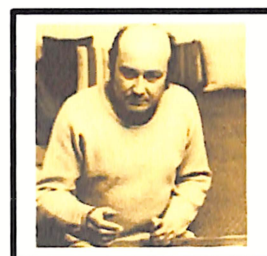
The Czechoslovakian engraver Jiri Švengsbir (1921-1983) loved two things passionately: the art of engraving and his hometown Prague. He was often able to combine the two and create some of the more stunning stamps issued in his home country. He was the first to recreate an art work on a stamp in multicolour and this is it. Švengsbir was also the first Czechoslovakian engraver to use the so-called stipple technique, whereby tonal shades are created by engraving dots rather than a pattern of cross-hatching. But rather than using the time-honoured way of creating them with a needle, Švengsbir used his burin to create the stippling effect. According to him, this technique is perfect for recreating skin colour.

Photo



Stamp Issue: Miniature Sheet

Issued on 12th August 1965 and printed in recess as SG MS 1511. Designed and engraved by J Švengsbir.



1966. The Crown of St Wenceslas

Background

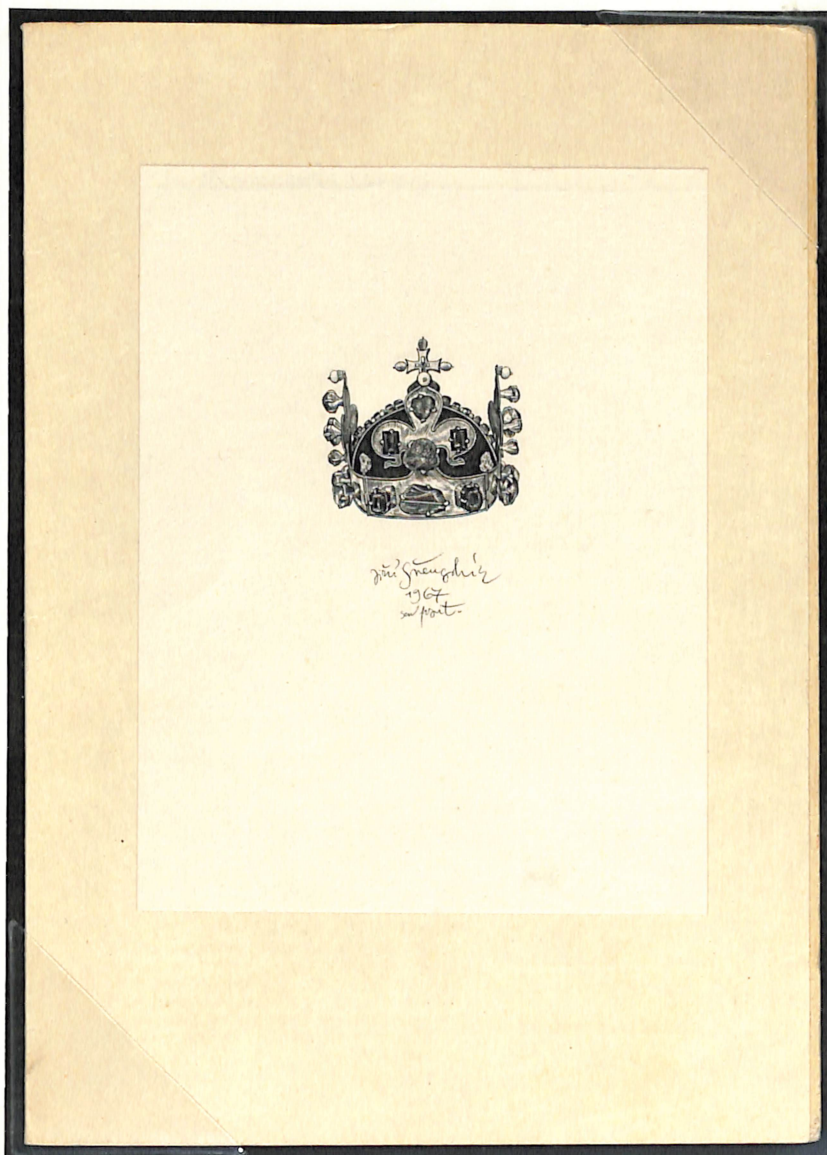
Made in 1346 for the coronation of Charles IV, King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor. Last used in 1836 for the coronation of King Ferdinand V. It is currently kept in a room off St Wenceslas Chapel in St Vitus Cathedral and only a replica is on show. The picture on the right gives a better impression of the real object.

The actual stamp was issued as a miniature sheet (SG 1755) in 1976, recess printed.. It was designed and engraved by J Švengsbir. There are 91 precious stones and twenty pearls on the crown. A Replica is on display in the Old Royal Palace within the Castle complex.

Photo



Reproduction of preliminary artwork



Stamp Issue: Miniature Sheet



The item to the left is inside a presentation folder produced by "Mladá Fronta" of Prague (a daily newspaper) in connection with their sponsorship of "Praga 1967" and is their choice of the best issue in 1966. The engraver's signature has been added.

1968. "Praga 1968"

Background

The image is a compilation of various important buildings in Prague rather than an actual view from any one point. On the left side, at top is the castle district. Throughout the stamp are various bridges over the river Vltava which flows through the centre of Prague. To the right on the skyline are the towers of the Old Town Hall

Engraver

Joseph Herčík first made his fame as a book illustrator. This led to a fruitful cooperation with graphic designer Vaclav Sivko, who introduced him to the world of postage stamp engraving. Herčík had already been very impressed by the work of Jiri Švengsbir, and had hoped to work as a stamp engraver one day. His first stamp engravings were for the 1962 set depicting beetles, for which he engraved two values. His first stamps to be issued however were the four values of the Praga 1962 airmail set designed by Sivko. More than 400 stamp engravings were to follow, right up until 1999.

Print



* 17564

Stamp Issue

Issued on 5th April 1981 as SG MS 2570 to commemorate Praga 68. The Designer is J Lukavský and the engraver J Herčík. This was a set of 7 stamps intended for use on Airmail and each showed different aircraft.



The print is on an entrance ticket to the stamp exhibition and is numbered 17564

1968. Feast of the Rosary

Background

The painting to the right is entitled "The Feast of the Rosary" and was painted in 1506 by Albrecht Durer. It is held in the National Gallery in Prague. The margins of the painting are excluded from the stamp and the colours are less intense. The work was acquired by emperor Rudolf II in 1606. He moved it to the Strahov Monastery and over the centuries it was restored several times. Later it was moved to the Rudolfinum and then to the National Gallery in Prague.

Photo



Reproduction of preliminary artwork



Stamp Issue

Issued on 6th July in 1968 as SG 1756 to commemorate "Praga 1968". Designed and engraved by J Švengsbir.



The item to the left is a numbered ticket for entrance to the 1968 International Stamp Exhibition on the day of the Federation International de Philatelie. It uses a print of the stamp image in black and white.

* 01168

SVĚTOVÁ VÝSTAVA POŠTOVNÍCH ZNÁMEK PRAGA 1968
EXPOSITION MONDIALE DE TIMBRES-POSTE PRAGA 1968
DEN FIP — JOURNÉE DE LA FIP 6. 7. 1968

1971. UNESCO World Anniversaries: The Paris Commune

Background

The French revolution of 1848 sowed the seeds for the creation of a working class movement which took control of parts of Paris on 18th March 1871. It governed those areas for two months and promoted policies that sought a separation of Church and State, the abolition of child labour and the rights of employees to take over abandoned enterprises. The national French Army suppressed the Commune during "bloody week" beginning on 21 May 1871.

The Engraver

Jindra Schmidt was born on 24 July 1897 in Račice, Bohemia. He was orphaned at the age of three, and he and his elder brother were raised by his uncle. In 1918 he created woodcut stamp designs for the newly founded country of Czechoslovakia, surprisingly similar in design to those produced by Alfons Mucha. He became the favoured engraver for Max Svabinsky, the well-known Czech artist, and professor at the Academy of Arts in Prague, who was a prolific stamp designer. One of the last issues the two men worked on together was the ambitious Butterflies & Moths set of 1961. It was one of the first to be produced as a multicoloured printing, which required the creation of separate plates for each ink colour.

Example from the butterfly set



Stamp Issue

Issued on 18th March 1971 as SG 1949. The Designer is J Liesler and the engraver is L Jirka but neither of these names appear to fit the signed artwork.



Signed print

This is a detail from the left side of the stamp only. The signatures on the art work are those of J Schmidt and J Liesler. Gibbons gives the designer as J Liesler and the engraver as L Jirka. However, the stamp incorporates much more than this detailed section of art work.



1972. Lady with a fur cap.

Background

The original painting is by Václav Hollar and is entitled "Lady with a fur cap." Some sources attribute the etching to 1645. The image at right is from the University of Toronto digital collection. The stamp engraver is Bedrich Housa and this stamp won him the *Mlada Fronta's* category "Best Stamp of the Year", which meant that Housa engraved the annual *Mlada Fronta* souvenir sheet as well. For this, he engraved a similar image of the lady, but as a progressive die proof.

Reproduction of preliminary artwork



The Engraver

In 1972, Housa (1926 – 2020) won the award 'Engraver's Interpretation of a Work of Art', one of the categories of the stamp polls held annually by the Czechoslovakian daily *Mlada Fronta*. He won it for his stamp shown above.

Photo

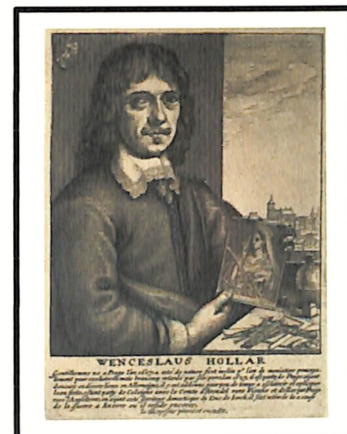


Stamp Issue

Stamp issued as SG 2069 on 27th November 1972 as part of the 7th Art Series, and printed in recess.



The Artist



1973. Stamp Day

Background

Stamp Day was frequently celebrated with a special stamp issue in December of any year. The stamps were used to celebrate postal milestones (like 50 years of stamps in 1968) or honoured significant figures, as seen with designer Jakub Obrovský. Another common theme was the reproduction of older significant stamps. The last stamp issued by Czechoslovakia, dated December 18, 1992, was a Stamp Day issue, a poignant end to the series before the country split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia on January 1, 1993.

Stamp Issue with labels



The stamp

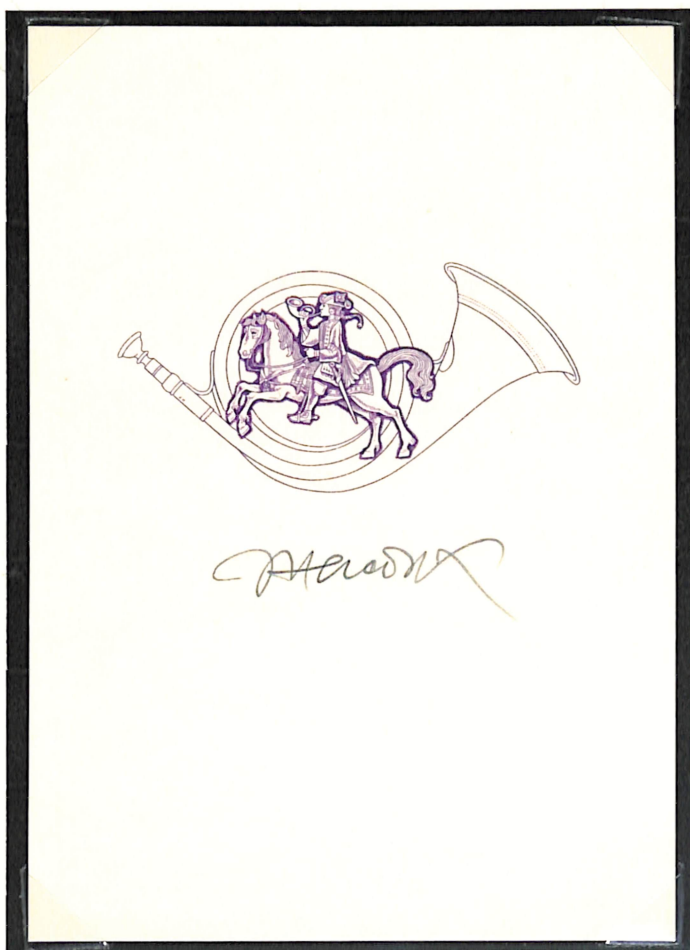
Issued on 18th December 1973 as SG 2134. The designer is J Leisler and the engraver is J Herčík as printed on the stamp. These are not the names given in the SG catalogue.

Reproduction of preliminary artwork

Stamp with similar motif



The stamp above is SG 2317 issued for Stamp Day in 1976 and is engraved by Herčík.



This piece of artwork depicting a mounted postman is signed by the artist. The post horn motif is not used in the stamp but the horse and rider part is identical. Many Czechoslovak stamps bear a similar post horn which is curved, as opposed the straight version used in the UK. The signature has proved difficult to match with any sources of information about the stamp set.

1974. Little Queens

Background

One of the most beloved traditions is the raising of a maypole ("máj"), a tall tree (usually fir, spruce, or birch) stripped of its branches except at the top and beautifully decorated with ribbons and a wreath. Traditionally, this custom symbolised youth, love, and the arrival of spring. On the night before May 1st, young men would secretly place a maypole in front of the home of a girl they admired. A beautifully decorated maypole often meant serious romantic interest—and in some villages, rival suitors would even compete by removing or replacing each other's maypoles! Under communism May 1st became Labour Day- adopted by many non- communist countries so the festivities continued

Photo



Unsigned preliminary artwork



Card with sketch of figure wearing a floral bonnet and a ruff (unsigned). It most closely resembles the leading figure in the parade on the stamps

Stamp Issue with labels

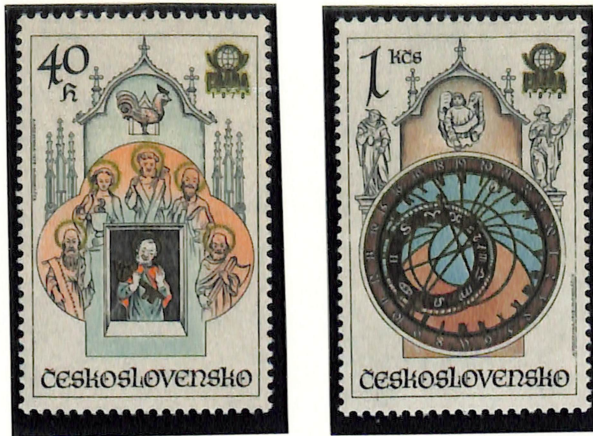
Two examples of the 60 h design with different coloured design in the sheet margins. Issued as SG 2210 on 26th March 1974. Printed in recess. Designed by Z Sklenar and engraved by J Mráček.



1978. "Praga 1978". Manes' Calendar.

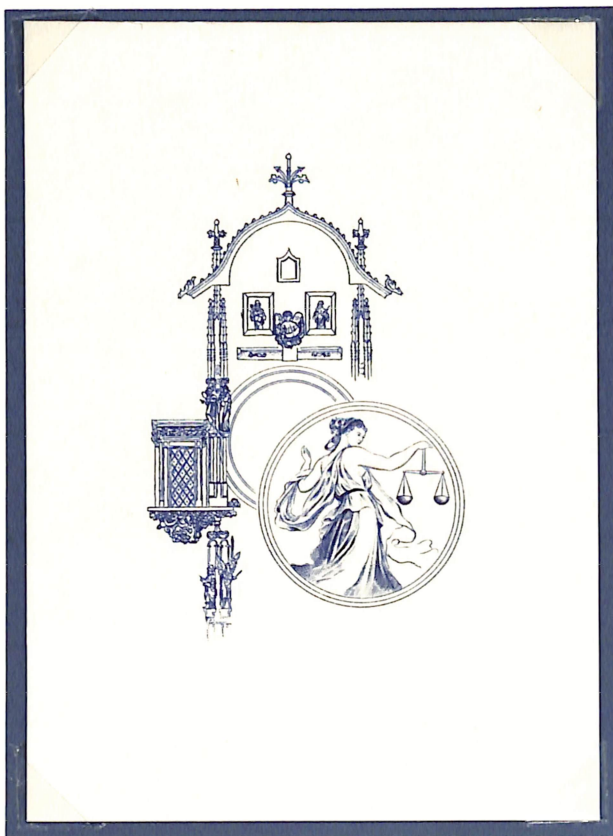
Background

The building is that of the Old Town Hall which is situated in the centre of Prague. The clock dates from 1410 and has an arrangement whereby a series of figures process from one opening and disappear through another every hour. The circle below the clock is the image used on the stamp and is the months of the year as illustrated by Josef Manes (1820 – 1871). The same image and the same background appear in a set of 5 stamps issued in connection with Praga 1978.



Unsigned Print

This is the basic artwork for the background to all of the stamps in the series but the details on each vary. The medallion with the figure of Justice is on the 3.60 K value. The figures in the windows do not appear on any of the stamps but are on the MS..



Miniature Sheet



Stamp Issue

Issued on 20th June 1978 to commemorate "Praga 1978". The designer is Anna Podzemna and the engraver J Svengsbir. Produced by Recess.



1978. The Flaying of Marsyas

Background

The goddess Athene invented a double reed pipe but found that playing it distorted her face and reddened her cheeks so she threw it away. Marsyas, a satyr, found it, taught himself to play and became so skilful on it that he challenged the god Apollo to a musical contest. Naturally the God won and he then had Marsyas flayed alive for his arrogance. The muses were so sad that their tears formed the river Marsyas in Turkey.

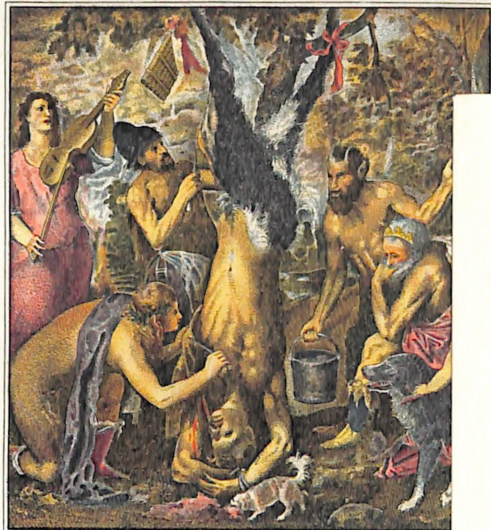
Engraver

Josef Herčík (1922-1999) was born in Uherský Brod. He started by engraving gun stocks. In 1960, he became interested in stamp engraving and has now engraved over 400 stamps for his country.

Stamp Issue

Issued on 12th September to commemorate Praga 1978. Printed by recess as MS 2425. The design was then used for the Praga Exhibition. Designed and engraved by J Herčík.

Miniature Sheet



APOLLÓN TRESTÁ MARSYA (PO 1570)
TIZIANO VECELLI MEZI 1488/90-1576
ZÁMECKÁ OBRAŽARNA V KROMĚŘÍŽI



Numbered piece of Artwork
Possibly a souvenir entry ticket for
Praga 1978



* 002558

1980. 35th Anniversary of the United Nations

Background

The United Nations is a global intergovernmental organization established by the signing of the UN Charter on 26 June 1945 with the articulated mission of maintaining international peace and security. It currently consists of 193 Member States. The UN and its work are guided by the purposes and principles contained in its founding Charter. Its symbol includes the doves of peace and a stylised laurel wreath to show that all are winners. The intention is to provide aspiration for these things

Signed Preliminary Artwork

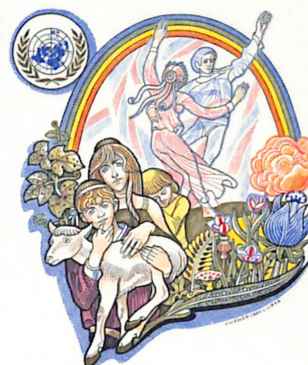
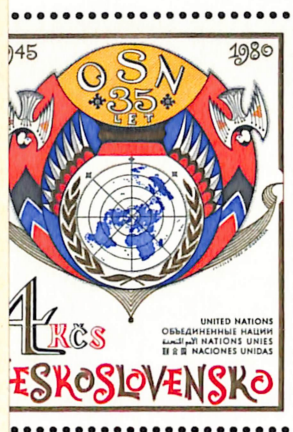
A detail from the MS signed by Leisler



Stamp Issue

SG MS 2532 was issued on 3rd June and printed by Recess. The design and engraving of the 4 K stamp is by J Lieisler and M Ondráček. The illustration in the top right corner of the sheet is presumably meant to indicate peace in contrast to the other which represents war.

In 1939, along with other artists, Josef Liesler organised an art exhibition. His paintings brim with rich shapes and full colours. Liesler won a number of awards, such as the UNESCO World's Most Beautiful Stamp Award (1975). Despite the initial lack of trust by philatelists, Liesler designed more than a hundred stamps.



1945 – 1980
35. VÝROČÍ ZALOŽENÍ
ORGANIZACE SPOJENÝCH NÁRODŮ



1981. 20th Anniversary of Manned Space Flight

Background

The first manned space flight was on April 12, 1961, when Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to journey into outer space aboard the Vostok 1 spacecraft, completing one orbit around Earth in a historic 108-minute mission that marked a major milestone in the Space Race. Gagarin's flight demonstrated the capabilities of the Soviet space program and opened the era of human space exploration, inspiring further advances in space travel for humanity. In contrast, the first American in space was Alan Shepard was the first American in space and he piloted the *Freedom 7* capsule on May 5, 1961. This was a 15-minute suborbital flight.

The Engraver

Josef Herčík (b.1922, Uherský Brod, d. 1999, Prague) was one of the leading Czech engravers in the post-World War II era, mainly due to the large number of awards he received for his contribution to the art of engraving in stamp design. As the author of more than 400 stamp engravings, Josef Herčík managed to overcome even Jindra Schmidt and became the most prolific Czechoslovak engraver.

Signed print



Herčík

Stamp Issue

Issued on 5th April 1981 as SG MS 2570. The Designer is J Balaz and the engraver J Herčík. The signature on the MS in blue is that of Yuri Gagarin himself. The space helmet has been added later.



Gagarin
J. A. GAGARIN

PRVÝ ČLOVEK VO VESMÍRE
1961 - 1981

MEDZINÁRODNÉ LETY DO VESMÍRU - INTERKOZMOS



1982. 2nd UN Conference on the Peaceful use of Space

Background

The UN has held three major global conferences under the title of "Unispace": This commemorates the 2nd Conference held in Vienna in 1982. The conferences have focused on the peaceful exploration and use of outer space, fostering international cooperation, and ensuring space benefits for all nations. The conferences established frameworks for sharing space technology, promoting sustainable space activities, and preventing space militarization.



Stamp Issue

Issued on 9th August 1982 as SG MS 2631. The designer is J Liesler and the engraver is L Jirka'.

Signed print

This is the signature of Liesler, the designer. This fits with the artwork being part of the sheet decoration rather than being part of the actual stamps. As well as designing and engraving stamps, Liesler was a prolific artist and has several paintings held in the National Gallery in Prague,

1983. Nature Protection

Background

The willow gentian (*G. Asclepioides*) is a plant of montane woodlands in central Europe. In Czechoslovakia it is associated with the Giant Mountains (Krkonoše) in the west and Beskydy in the Carpathians in the east. Although a woodland plant it also occurs in montane meadows. In the last decade there has been a decline in abundance due to both climate change and habitat loss.

Engraver

Ladislav Jirka was born in Tremosna in what is now the Czech Republic in 1914. From a young age he was encouraged by his elder brother who was an engraver. In 1928, he entered into an apprenticeship in Pilsen. He first engraved banknotes and started work on stamps in 1948. He died in 1986. The stamp above was chosen as the most beautiful of the year in 1983.

Print

This is a print of a preparatory drawing of the gentian seen at the left side of the stamp above.

Stamp Issue

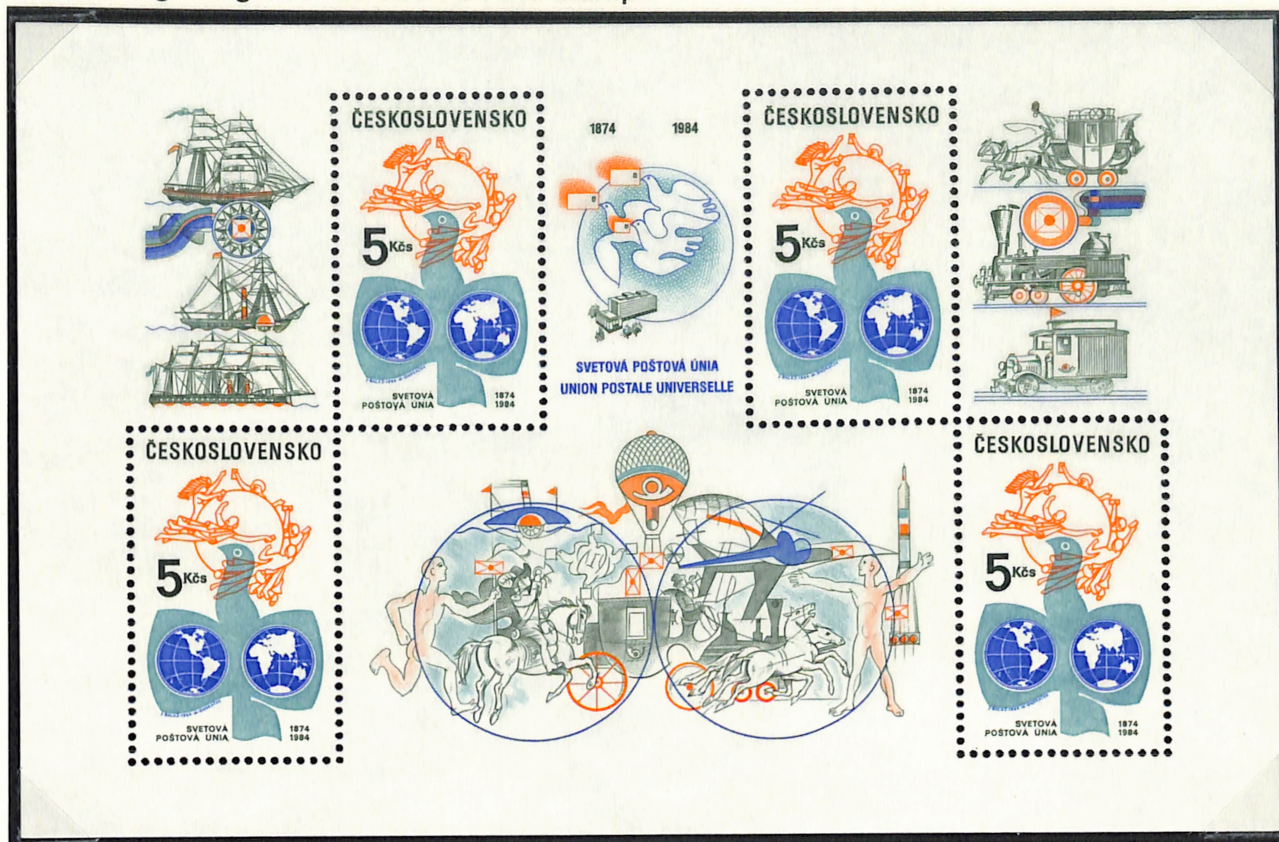
Issued on 28th April in a set of six stamps under the title of nature protection as SG 2678 The designer was D Kallay and the engraver L Jirka.



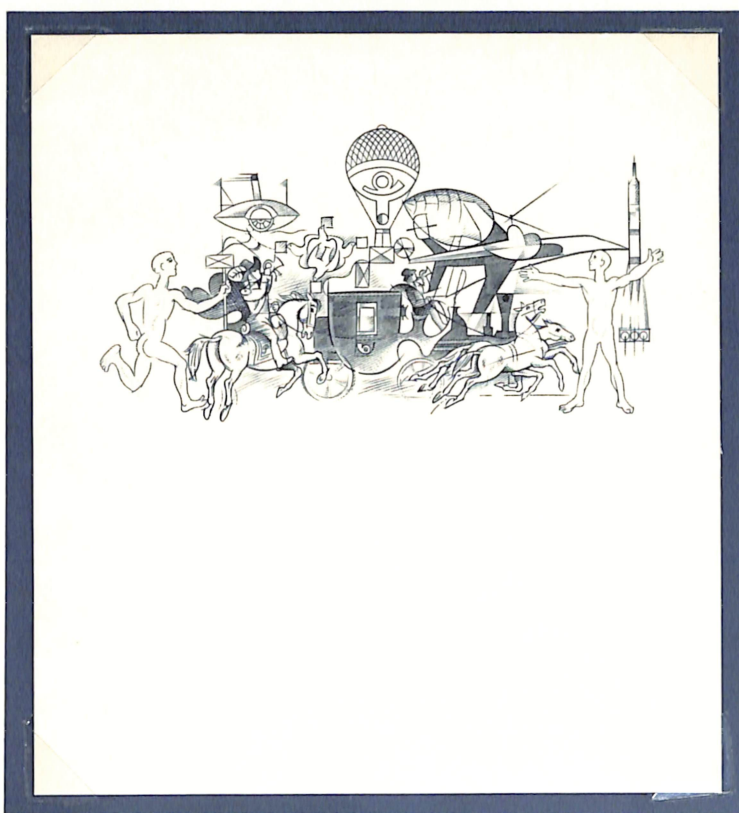
1984. 110th Anniversary of the Universal Postal Union

Background

The Universal Postal Union is a United Nations specialized agency and the postal sector's primary forum for international cooperation. It was formed a meeting held in Lucerne Switzerland in 1874. There are currently 192 member countries. Its main aims include providing an advisory, mediating and liaison role as well as technical assistance where needed. It sets the rules for international mail exchanges and makes recommendations to stimulate growth in mail, parcel and financial services volumes and improve quality of service for customers. The logo consists of a circle of people circling the globe- as seen on the stamp.



Unsigned print



Stamp Issue

Issued on 12th June as SG MS 2738. The designer is J Balaz and the engraver is M Ondraček.

Print

This is the artwork for the left hand roundel in the central section of the bottom of the sheet. Given that, you can imagine just how much preparatory work is involved in sketching, designing engraving and then printing a single stamp or miniature sheet.