

HOME

Stories

- Purple Heart Medal
- O. Henry
- Flags of Our Nation: Set 6
- Edgar Rice Burroughs
- Innovative Choreographers
- Major League Baseball All-Stars
- View Full Index

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O. Henry: A Stamp With a Twist



Pannell first produces a monotype in black and white, and then adds color and details digitally.

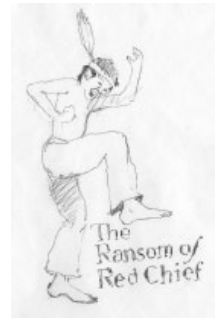
Some writers use a pen name to keep their identity a secret from the public, but William S. Porter actually used a pen name to hide his identity — and a criminal record — from his publishers, as well. In fact, he first signed his works “O. Henry” when writing short stories from Ohio State Penitentiary where he was sent after being found guilty of embezzlement despite his innocent plea.

At a time when some of New York’s elite said there were only four hundred people worth knowing, Porter wrote about and for everyone — defiantly addressing the entire city’s population with the stories of the “Four Million.” Funny, heartwarming, and usually optimistic, his stories are famous for their unexpected “O. Henry twist” at the end.

Calling Porter a “quirky” member of the American literary canon, art director Ethel Kessler felt that his stamp should present its own twist on the familiar pattern of the [Literary Arts series](#). She found what she was looking for in the distinctive portrait style of illustrator Cap Pannell. Instead of producing photorealistic paintings, Pannell employs a method of printmaking called monoprinting, in which he draws on paper placed over an inked plate to create

an offset image. A unique characteristic of this method is that no two prints are ever exactly alike. “There’s always a big surprise,” Pannell explains. “I don’t have complete control over the image until I scan it into the computer where I clean it up and apply color.”

At first, Pannell and Kessler considered depicting specific O. Henry stories in the background of the stamp. One of the most famous, “The Gift of the Magi,” describes a young couple who both make sacrifices to give each other Christmas gifts. But the only obvious images of the story were the gifts themselves — combs and a watch chain. Another favorite story, “The Ransom of Red Chief,” was easier to illustrate. In the story, kidnappers capture a small redheaded boy who likes to pretend to be a Native American chief. The child is so difficult, however, that instead of demanding a ransom, the kidnappers pay his father to take him back.



Pannell’s early sketch illustrates “The Ransom of Red Chief.”



William Sydney Porter in his twenties.



POSTCARD IMAGE COURTESY NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
A turn-of-the-century New York postcard depicting the elevated train.

But ultimately, Kessler decided that illustrating just one O. Henry story would not communicate the range of his work. Instead, she decided to combine a portrait of Porter with a view of New York — the city where most of his stories were written and published, and where the “Four Million” made their home. For inspiration, Kessler and Pannell looked at a variety of photographs of Porter and postcards of New York from the early 1900s, when he was writing. The final stamp image is based on a photograph of Porter as a young man, set against a background of New York’s elevated train snaking through the cityscape.



O. Henry is Pannell's first stamp design, and though he completed the artwork several years ago, the release was not scheduled until 2012 to coincide with the 150-year anniversary of Porter's birth. When the stamp was announced on Beyond the Perf, Pannell was thrilled. "That's the first time I saw it," he recalls, "I was very, very happy." The 28th release in the *Literary Arts* series is sure to make many happy — as it honors the master of surprise endings with its own distinct twist.

In another early sketch, Pannell explores combining a portrait of Porter with a background of New York City.



O. Henry (2012)

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