

I'm still Dreaming of a Black Xmas stamp

In 1962, a columnist with the Melbourne *Herald* noted that a 16th century sculpture of Madonna and Child would be on that year's Christmas stamp. He went on to praise 'Our Lady of the Aborigines' as 'a real Australian Madonna and Child,' before asking, 'How about it for next year?'

The painting was by Karel Kupka, a Czech, who lived and worked with Aborigines in northern Australia on and off from the mid-1950s. Darwin's Bishop O'Loughlin commissioned him 'to bring religion to the people in terms of local understanding' by creating for Star of the Sea cathedral something similar to Chinese and Japanese Madonnas.

The Virgin's face is individual and the child a person, each expressive of 'nobility and natural dignity,' in the words of the Darwin missionary, Father Frank Flynn. Our eyes are drawn to the arrangement of the figures, like a Byzantine icon, and the flatness in indigenous imagery. The backdrop and the haloes are cross-hatched. Instead of being cradled, the Christ child is perched on his mother's shoulder, in the manner of Tiwi Islanders.

Colour reproductions sold throughout the world.

When Pope Paul VI visited Australia in December 1970, the Vatican issued a pair of commemoratives. One is of St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney. The other shows Kupka's 'Our Lady of the Aborigines.'

Indigenous designs on stamps began from 1930 as a framing device. Scores have depicted arts and crafts but no named individual appeared until Albert Namatjira in 1968 but only in a booklet along with the busts of three settlers; and Truganini for 1975 International Women's Year; before Gold Medalists starting with Kathy Freeman in 2000. At the moment you can buy one with Sir Doug Nichols.

Over sixty-six years of Christmas stamps, Australia has never issued a one with an Aboriginal art work let alone a Black Virgin and Christ child.

To ponder why not is to range through religion, politics and commerce.

As Kupka painted 'Our Lady of the Aborigines' in 1957, the Post-Master General worried about what to put on the first Christmas stamp. His government had endorsed the effort to 'Put Christ back into Christmas,' a counter to the 'X'mas of the market.

That campaign was one element in a decade of revivalism. Two months after the defeat of the referendum to ban the Communist Party in September 1951, Church leaders and the Chief Justices of every State signed 'The Call' to FEAR GOD, HONOR THE KING to conquer moral apathy. In 1953, Father Peyton brought 'The Family That Prayers Together, Stays Together' from the U.S. of A.; Sydney's Rev. Allan Walker initiated the

biennial National Christian Youth Convention in January 1955. Proselytizing culminated throughout 1959 with the Billy Graham Crusade for which Jimmy Little starred in a promotional doco-drama, *Shadow of the Boomerang*.

In those days, acceptance of Christianity as the national faith was as wide as its sectarianism ran deep. Some Protestants feared the Scarlet Woman of Rome as much as the Red Menace from Moscow. Anti-Papism was complicated by those Protestants who looked upon any religious image as idolatrous. How to put Christ back into Christmas while ignoring his mother was a puzzle for more than theologians.

Postal officials hoped that they had a solution by adapting a child at prayer from Joshua Reynolds. Since then, most of the religious images have been of European high art with only a couple by local un-settler painters, including one Old Master from a Melbourne art student in 1970.

While the threat on the world stage was Atheistic Communism, the challenge at home came from capitalism as affluence and advertising gained ground with Rock-'n-Roll, television, poker-machines and moves by trading banks into Hire Purchase. In 1957, fifty manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers set up the Father's Day Council to peddle aftershave and cufflinks.

Stamps also became merchandise; new issues going from four in 1957 to forty or so before 1980.

Suitable subjects shifted from the Windsors and local fauna to the Country Women and Young Farmers before honouring the Sydney Stock Exchange in 1971 in the backwash of the Poseidon scandals.

Given the original intent, the Santa on a surfboard for 1977 brought outrage but, during the 2000s, the standard became two Christian and four commercial.

The Catholic-Protestant divide has been displaced with fracture lines through a multi-cultural society by what the British Army once called 'fancy religions.' The numbers reporting no commitment also shot up. More than half of those who identify as Aboriginal describe themselves as Christians.

The booming market for indigenous art did nothing to prevent a vitriol bomb exploding over Vincent Namatjira when he took out the 2020 Archibald Prize for a portrait of himself with Adam Goodes.

Even with support from a choir of columnists at the Melbourne *Herald*, for Australia Post to seek permission from Julie Dowling to reproduce her 'Black Madonna: Omega' (2004) on next year's Christmas stamp – fifty-three years after the Vatican issue - might prove 'courageous.'

Humphrey McQueen contributed 'The Australian Stamp: Image, Design and Ideology,' to *Arena*, number 86 in 1988.

Accessible www.surplusvalue.org.au/mcqueen stamps