

Tlingit artist creates stamp for U.S. Postal Service

Written by Sealaska Heritage Institute
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Stamp unveiled as part of Forever Stamps series

The U.S. Postal Service has tapped Rico Lanáat' Worl, a Tlingit/Athabascan artist based in Juneau, Alaska to create a Northwest Coast art stamp for distribution in 2021.

The design of the stamp, titled "Raven Story" by Rico Lanáat' Worl, was unveiled the week of Nov. 16 by the U. S. Postal Service as part of its Forever Stamps series.

The Postal Service had planned to unveil the stamp with Sealaska Heritage Institute at Celebration 2020, but the event was canceled because of the pandemic. SHI is working with the agency to hold a release ceremony next year.

The Postal Service has featured Northwest Coast art stamps in the past. In 1996, it released a stamp featuring Worl's clan uncle, Nathan Jackson, performing a Raven dance.

However, this is thought to be the first time such a design has been illustrated by a Tlingit artist.

Antonio Alcalá, who served as art director on the project, reached out to Worl about creating the stamp after seeing his work for sale at the National Museum of the American Indian gift store in Washington, D.C.

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“It was a huge honor to be invited to participate. I also felt the weight of needing to represent well, since I was showcasing as a Tlingit artist on a national platform,” Worl said. “I hope that as a designer I can represent on a national scale the modernity of Native people — that we’re engaged in modern culture while still carrying forward our traditional heritage.”

Merging traditional artwork with modern design touches, this stamp depicts one of many stories about Raven, a figure of great significance to the Indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast. Among the cultures of the region, Raven plays an essential role in many traditional tales, including stories about the creation of the world. Inspired by the traditional story of Raven setting free the sun, the moon and the stars, Worl depicted Raven just as he escapes from his human family and begins to transform back into his bird form.

“Many depictions of this story show Raven with the Sun in his mouth representing the stealing of the Sun. I was trying to showcase a bit of drama,” Worl said. “The climax of the story is after Raven has released the sun and the moon and has opened his grandfather’s final precious box, which contained the stars.

“In this design I am imagining Raven in a panicked state of escape — transforming from human form to raven form and holding on to as many stars as he can while trying to escape the clan house,” Worl said.

He called the depiction an exciting moment of humanity for Raven, who is a powerful being much of the time.

“I think it’s a moment we all feel at times. A moment before we accomplish a goal when we may feel frazzled and have trouble holding everything together in our hands, while trying to accomplish multiple goals at the same time. Even the greatest among us experience the moment that is on the cusp between accomplishment and failure.”

Worl’s work began with the development of the arts department at Sealaska Heritage Institute, implementing programs to empower the Indigenous artists of Southeast Alaska.

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The programs focused on developing fundamental skills and access to resources.

Through his current ongoing project, Trickster Company, Worl carries forward the goals of empowering indigenous artists. Through this brand he works to celebrate indigenous resilience and cross-cultural connection, break into a tourist market which profits millions of dollars from knock-off “Native” artwork, and represent the story of how Indigenous people are not only here today but engaged in modern lifestyles.

These goals are also foundational in his work outside of the brand. His crafts range from product design, digital design, jewelry making, printmaking, public art and most recently he has been working to develop his skills in sculpture and computer-aided 3D design.

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