

RANK VELVET CACHETS ON UNMANNED SATELLITE COVERS

by Don Hillger (SU-5200) and Garry Toth

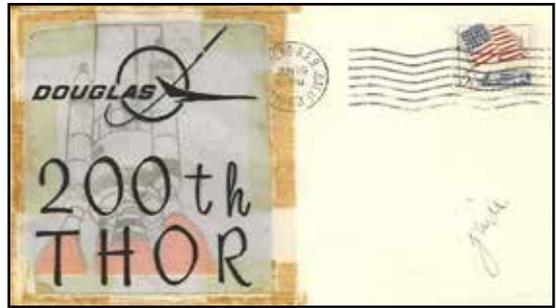
The late Robert G. Rank of Union City NJ was a prolific manufacturer of philatelic cachets, the majority of which were for space-related events. Among the several types of cachets he produced, his colorful and unique velvet/flocked cachets were particularly appealing to space cover collectors.

The term “flocking” refers to the application of short chopped lengths of fiber (known as “flock”) to an adhesive-coated surface. The cachets of a few philatelic covers have been created through the flocking process. They are known as flocked cachets, but are also often called velvet cachets, possibly because of the definition of velvet: a soft fabric that has short raised fibers on one side and is plain on the other. That definition is reminiscent of the two sides of a flocked surface. The terms “velvet” and “flocked” will be used interchangeably in this article, though “velvet” appears to be the more common of the two in general.

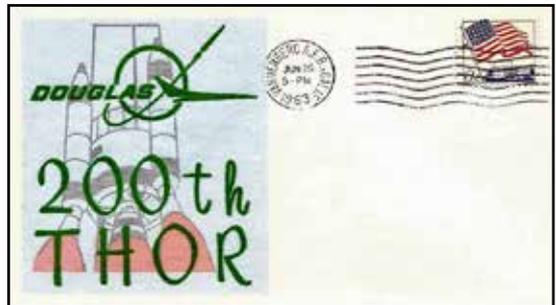
Prior to Rank, two different manufacturers produced flocked cachets. The Genoa Flocking Company of A. W. Dargis (based in Levittown NY) produced **Velvaton** cachets from the late 1940s until 1968. A second brand of flocked cachets, known simply as **Flock**

Cachet, was started in 1954 by H. R. Wilk of Philadelphia PA. Those manufacturers’ names supposedly appear on the backs of most of those covers, but the authors have not been able to confirm that. Also, we have not found any space-related covers with either a Velvaton or a Flock cachet.

Rank started making flocked/velvet cachets in 1955 at the age of 18,



Caption for images above and below: Above is an incomplete Rank cachet on a military satellite launch cover, with the silkscreen mask or stencil on top, which was used to selectively add the green velvet flocking (seen in the cover image below) onto the already-finished blue and pink silkscreened background layers. This creates the multi-color design that is typical of many Rank velvet cachets. (The brown stains around the edges of the mask are likely the deteriorated adhesive tape that was used to hold the mask in place.)



following the process used by the Genoa Flocking Company. However, he had the original idea of using photographic silkscreens from black and white art copy and lettering as the basis of his cachet designs. This made his cachets unique. They were marketed as **TEXTURE-CRAFT** (all caps) cachets, supposedly identified on the back of many (but not all) covers, unlike the no-logo follow-on velvet cachets of primary interest in this article.

Some Rank covers are silkscreened only, in that no velvet flocking is applied. The silkscreen cachets may have one or more colors (usually at most three). A separate silkscreen step is needed for each color. The ink for each step or color is pressed through a screen (or stencil) that is designed to mask the area not to be printed or flocked. The following example shows a cover that has a stencil or mask still taped to it, to show how a new color or velvet layer can be added over previously-applied layers.

To produce flocked cachets the velvet particles are applied to a wet printing layer, on a vibrating surface, causing the particles to stand on end and thus creating a velvet effect. Improvements over time took advantage of electric motors and enclosed chambers to contain the flocking material. Rank's multi-color designs increased the complexity of the procedure so that the quality of his velvet cachets was highly variable. A large percentage of them were not of sufficient quality to be sold.

In addition to the velvet cachets featured in this

article, Rank produced a second series of velvet cachets for FDCs that are termed **Rank II**. These cachets differ in that they have smaller areas of background silkscreen printing, unlike Rank velvet cachets, many of which have large areas of solid color in the background. There are also a few FDC/launch cover combinations in which a FDC and a space event cancel were both placed on the same cover.

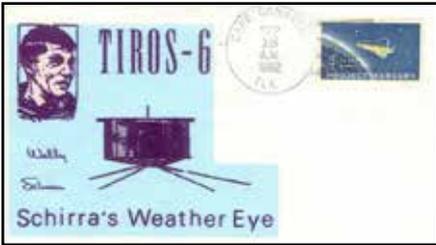
Examples of Rank velvet cachets for un-manned space satellites

Because of the large number of Rank velvet cachets in this group, only selected covers that represent a cross-section of the entire collection will be shown below. The authors' interest is in un-manned space events (mostly satellites, but also research rockets and balloons), so those subjects are the focus of the covers presented as examples, and of the checklist whose URL is found at the end of the article.

The Rank velvet cachets, which date from 1962 to 1970, were issued mostly for the launches of un-manned satellites, but a few are for sub-orbital rocket and stratospheric balloon launches. A number of the covers also relate to historical-first relays of TV signals across the Atlantic via various communications satellites.



The first un-manned space cover produced with a Rank velvet cachet, for the launch of Ranger-4 on 23 April 1962, with a Port Canaveral FL hand cancel.



Another of the many un-manned satellite launches with a Rank velvet cachet. This cover is for the launch of the weather satellite TIROS-6 on 18 September 1962. The cachet also implies the use of TIROS imagery to aid Wally Schirra's Mercury MA-8 mission (which was launched 3 October 1962).



Dual-event Rank velvet cachet for Alouette-1 and Alouette-2 launches (in 1962 and 1965 respectively). They were Canadian satellites launched from Vandenberg AFB in California. The second cancel is inverted on the cover, and the cachet appears to be

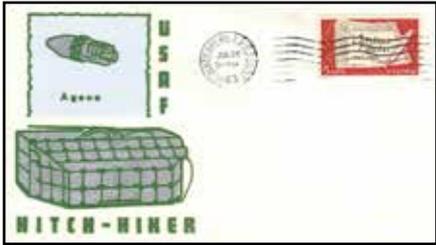


designed around the arrangement of the cancels.

Dual-cancel Rank velvet cachet with both a stratospheric balloon launch (in 1963 from a balloon-launch facility in Palestine TX) and the Mariner-4 launch (in 1964, hand cancelled at Satellite Beach FL). The goal of the balloon launch was to obtain information on water vapor and CO₂ in the Martian atmosphere through IR spectroscopic measurements made from an altitude of 80,000 feet (~24 km) to prepare for later Mariner-4 observations from orbit around Mars.



With communications satellites becoming increasingly popular and useful, this Rank Velvet cachet notes President Kennedy's visit to West Germany, for which TV signals were sent (on 25 June 1963) back to the US via the Relay-1 satellite.

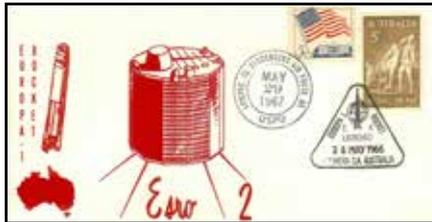


A Rank velvet cachet on a Hitchhiker satellite launch cover from 26 June 1963. On this mission, a Keyhole (KH4-22) reconnaissance satellite was also launched. The Keyhole satellites were classified at the time, so there is

no mention of that spacecraft on this cover.



One of the small number of un-manned launch cover and FDC combinations with a Rank velvet cachet; this one is for the first day of issue of a UN test ban treaty stamp (Scott 133, 1964) and the launch of the third pair of nuclear detection satellites, Vela-5 and 6, launched on 20 July 1965.



Rank silkscreened cachet (no flocking/velvet) on a dual-cancel cover for the Europa-1 sub-orbital rocket launch (on 24 May 1966 from Woomera SA, Australia) and the launch of the ESRO-2 satellite (on 29 May 1967 from Vandenberg AFB). The connection between these two events is unclear, other than the European Space Research Organization (ESRO), for which the satellite is named, is the parent organization for the Europa rocket.

Rank velvet cachet on a Lunar Orbiter-3 event cover (canceled on 15 February 1967), for the taking of the first photos of possible Apollo landing sites.



Rank velvet cachet with a bright red accent for the retro-rocket flame of Surveyor-3 for its landing on the Moon on 20 April 1967. The “Moon photos” were important for determining landing sites for the several Moon-bound Apollo missions to follow.



The last un-manned space cover produced with a Rank velvet cachet, for the successful launch of the Japanese Ohsumi satellite on 22 February 1970, with both scenic and regular cancels from Uchinoura, Japan. This is one of the few Rank covers with a Rank velvet cachet that was canceled outside the USA.

Rank's other space-related cachets

Although not the focus of this article, Rank later produced many **Space Voyage** and **InterSpace Cover** cachets,



Logos used by Rank for First Rank, Space Voyage, InterSpace Cover, and Lunar Voyage Cachets.

and a smaller number of **Lunar Voyage Cachets** (which were mainly for manned space missions to the Moon). All of these are easily identified by logos or names on the covers. There were also a limited number of **First Rank** cachets on FDCs and un-manned space events, with the First Rank logo usually accompanied by the Space Voyage logo. The authors have created a short list of these covers as well, as noted in the links section at the end of this article.

Acknowledgements

The background information on Robert Rank and most of the covers for this article were supplied by a group of fellow space collectors who are particularly interested in Rank's cachets. Among those enthusiasts are Ron Allen, Steve Durst, Woody Witt, Mark Goodson, Chris Calle, and Dennis Dillman. Their collections also include Rank cachets on manned space covers, which, as already mentioned, do not fall in the authors' area of expertise.

Additional online information

A checklist of (about 150) **Rank velvet** and **Rank II** (and related) cachets on un-manned satellite covers, dating from 1962 to 1970, is available at http://rammb.cira.colostate.edu/dev/hillger/Rank_velvet.htm, and

a much-shorter list of (about 10) **First Rank** cachets on FDCs and un-manned satellites covers, dating from 1979 to 2000, is available at http://rammb.cira.colostate.edu/dev/hillger/First_Rank.htm. The authors would like to hear from anyone who knows of additional postal items that may have been missed. E-mail correspondence with the authors is welcomed, using the addresses below.

Biographical notes

The authors have researched and written extensively on the subjects of weather, climate, and un-manned satellites on stamps and covers, as well as other topics. For a complete list and electronic reproductions of those publications, see <http://rammb.cira.colostate.edu/dev/hillger/stamp-articles.htm>.

Don Hillger, PhD, is a research meteorologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and holds a cooperative position at Colorado State University. Send correspondence to don.hillger@colostate.edu

Garry Toth, MSc, now retired, worked many years at the Meteorological Service of Canada. Send correspondence to gmt.varia@gmail.com 