

# Inappropriate or bogus depictions of space events

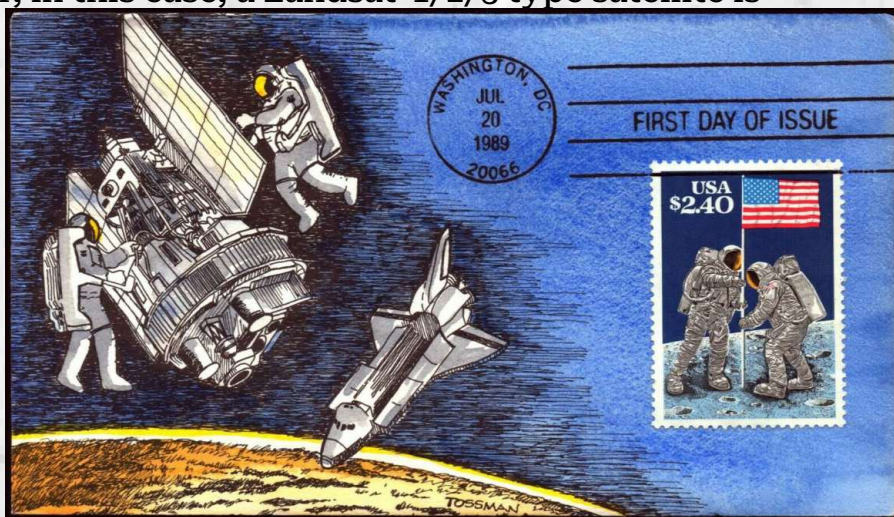
By Don Hillger and Garry Toth

The authors are passionate collectors of postal items relating to space events, particularly un-manned satellites, and related manned missions. In this pursuit, we often find some fascinating items that test our knowledge of satellites and space events. Some of their elements may be difficult to explain but are realistic, while some are impossible to justify as the events they represent never happened.

The items shown are in the minority of the tens of thousands of postal items collected by the authors, much of which is organised on our web pages on un-manned satellites (see the end of this article for details). Much of the material we find is realistic, although not always on legitimate mail. We also come across many mis-identifications of satellites, where the text description does not match the satellite depicted, but that is not the problem here. Rather, it is that some of the space-related depictions on postal items do not correspond to what actually happened. Some of this may be due to artistic license, where the artist or illustrator did not properly depict the event and the proofreaders allowed the wrong depiction to go into production. This can happen in any postal authority, but the authors have found that such cases seem to be more common in postal items from countries that have little or nothing to do with space exploration.

## Un-manned mission bogus examples

The first bogus item is an Alec Tossman hand-painted cachet on a USA FDC from 1989. Sometimes the Space Shuttle is shown along with other satellites as part of a montage of spacecraft on a postal item. However, in this case, a Landsat-1/2/3 type satellite is depicted as being “serviced” by two astronauts with the Shuttle in the background. The Shuttle and Landsat occupy quite different orbits, both in altitude and inclination, so such a servicing mission would be impossible for any of the known Shuttle missions. Although this is a very nice hand-painted cover, it gives the wrong impression about Landsat as well as the Shuttle’s capabilities. Shuttle astronauts have serviced several satellites in low altitude and low inclination orbits, but space collectors should be aware that this cachet is not based on reality.



United States - Scott 2419 Michel 2046 FDC (1989).

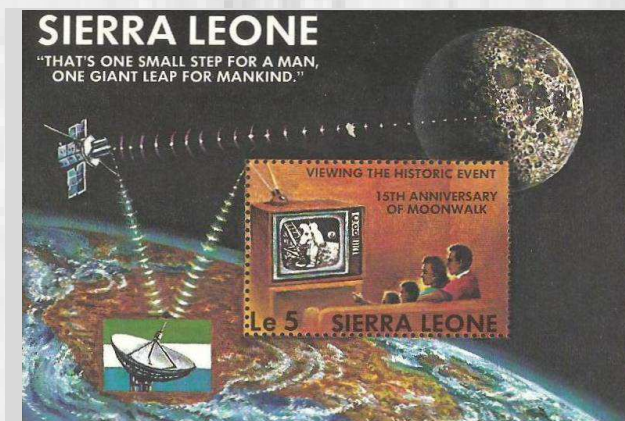


The next bogus item is a postage stamp from Turkmenistan, but with red text applied to the image to define it as an illegal issue. The satellite in this case is a Nimbus weather satellite, which is a similar design to Landsat, but an earlier and simpler rendition. While all the Nimbus series predate the Shuttle, two astronauts are depicted as “servicing” a Nimbus-type spacecraft.



*Turkmenistan stamp ‘g’ from a sheet of 9 stamps, no catalog numbers (2001).*

No Shuttle is shown, and the large feature in the upper left of this stamp appears to be an antenna with a feed horn. Quite a strange combination of elements! In fact, the entire sheet of 9 stamps is weirdly themed. This stamp in particular shows poor attention to detail, which is something that will irritate a true space collector. Not only is the stamp an illegal issue, but also it is a bogus one!



Sierra Leone - Scott 622 Michel BL21 souvenir sheet of one stamp (1984).

The next bogus item is a souvenir sheet of one stamp for the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Moonwalk in 1969. The sheet shows an Orbiting Astronomical Observatory (OAO) spacecraft as a signal relay platform, allowing the Moonwalk to be viewed live on television. OAO did not have this capability. In fact, NASA’s Deep Space Network, with antennas in the US and Australia, received and relayed to the world the first TV images of Astronaut Neil Armstrong setting foot on the surface of the moon in 1969 (they were captured by a camera mounted on the side of the LEM).

Intelsat communications satellites were also used to further relay the signal to Houston for distribution to TV viewers. OAO was not involved, so the sheet

misrepresents the facts. Space collectors should be aware of such cases.

The next bogus item is a cover for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an event for the Magellan spacecraft, supposedly from 1990. Magellan was the first deep space probe launched by a Space Shuttle, and the first spacecraft to image the entire surface of Venus.



*(Coverscape) cachet on USA-canceled Magellan event cover (2010).*

While the “mission to Venus” text is correct, the “landed on planet Venus” text is entirely bogus. August 10 was the date of the initial orbit of Venus by Magellan, but there was no probe or part of the spacecraft that made a landing on Venus! While Coverscape covers often contain correct and detailed information, this is an egregious error.



While the next stamp does not depict an incorrect mission for a Mariner-series spacecraft, the statement “Mariner-1 passing Venus” in its text is not true. The Mariner-1 launch was a failure: it never left Earth. Rather, Mariner-2 was the first in the Mariner series to reach Venus! A seemingly minor stamp detail, but nonetheless an incorrect statement about the Mariner program.

Antigua and Barbuda - Scott 1313j Michel 1377 (1990).



The next bogus item is a postage stamp that shows the InSight lander on the surface of Mars, but it also shows the Stardust spacecraft whose primary mission was to collect dust samples from the tail of Comet Wild 2 and return them to Earth for analysis. Stardust appears almost to be overprinted in the lower-right of this stamp, to fill some dead space. The stamp would have been far better without that addition. The Mars exploration theme of the sheet of 6 stamps that contains this stamp was not enhanced by the addition of Stardust, an unrelated cometary-exploration satellite!



Somalia stamp 'f' from a sheet of 6 stamps, no catalog numbers (2004).

The next bogus item might be excused based on artistic license. In it, a Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (PUOS) stamp from Surinam shows three satellites apparently orbiting and scanning Earth. Two of the satellites are Mariner-3/4 type (lower left) and Lunar Orbiter (right). The first had a mission to Mars, not Earth, and the second had a mission to map the Moon for future manned Moon landings. The apparent orbiting of, and scanning of, Earth is what should be disturbing to the knowledgeable space enthusiast. The depiction puts those two satellites in an unreal situation, which is quite a contrast with other stamps that include more realistic depictions.



Surinam Scott 588 Michel 967 (1982).

The third satellite (at the upper left) is an unknown or un-identified design. This is another common problem with some satellite depictions - not knowing what spacecraft was intended. Such cases are too numerous to even begin to include here. The authors have collected many such items into a section of their web pages that is reserved for such unknown or fantasy depictions of spacecraft.



Comoro Islands Scott 787 Michel 993 (1992).

The next bogus item is a postage stamp that shows a Phobos-1/2 satellite dropping three small mobile "hoppers" and three other small platforms (that would have been stationary) onto the moon Phobos. Both Phobos-1 and 2 were designed to drop one (not three) of each, but both missions failed when contact with the spacecraft was lost.

It is not known if a hopper and a stationary platform were dropped by either Phobos. Even if one or the other did drop them, it could never be known because of the communications failures. The stamp is particularly misleading because it shows that three of each probe were dropped.

Some space events are also commemorated on coins and banknotes. Stamps are not the only collectibles that can have problems with correctly depicting space events. This coin from Ukraine shows a Russian Sich (translation "sickle") spacecraft, an atmosphere and ocean remote sensing (environmental-observing) satellite. While one side of the coin shows a tiny Sich tracing an orbit across the surface of a cloudy Earth, the other side shows Sich above the crater-pocked surface of the Moon! Sich stayed in Earth's orbit and never approached the Moon! The coin engraver appears to only have been concerned about creating an interesting scene rather than one that is realistic as well as interesting.



Ukraine KM204 5-hryvnia copper-nickel coin (2004).



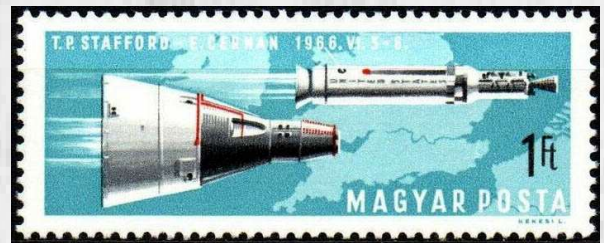
# Manned-mission bogus examples

While the authors are mainly interested in un-manned spacecraft, we cross over into the manned space realm when it overlaps with un-manned missions. Such is the case with the Gemini series, where some of the launches at the time were un-manned spacecraft used for training Gemini astronauts in docking maneuvers. Several of these un-manned spacecraft were GATV (Gemini Agena Target Vehicle) missions, in which the upper stage of the launch vehicle was equipped with a docking mechanism to allow Gemini to dock with it in space.

A small set of items supposedly shows the docking of Gemini-9 with the un-manned GATV-9 as had been planned. The original Gemini-9 mission was scrubbed due to a failure on 17 May 1966 of the Atlas booster carrying the GATV that would have been its docking target. An alternate target vehicle, the Automated Target Docking Adaptor (ATDA), was available and was launched on 1 June 1966.

Two days later, the updated mission known as Gemini-9A was launched. One of its goals was to rendezvous and dock with the ATDA. Three different types of approaches to rendezvous were successful, but docking was impossible because the ATDA fairing (a protective cover) was stuck on it in a partially-open position. Those open "jaws" brought a reptilian analogy to Astronaut Thomas Stafford's mind; he said that "It looks like an angry alligator".

A stamp from Hungary issued in 1966 for the Gemini-9A mission depicts both the Gemini and GATV spacecraft. Even though docking between the two is not depicted, the two should not be shown in orbit together. Rather, it was the ATDA that should have been depicted in place of GATV-9, but as described above, even for the ATDA docking turned out to be impossible.



Hungary Scott 1806 Michel 2302 (1966).



For comparison, a stamp from Paraguay issued in 1966 for the Gemini-9 mission shows a spacewalk scene with the open-jawed ATDA in the background. This is a more realistic depiction of the Gemini-9A mission, although mis-labeled Gemini-9 (a minor mis-numbering offense). ATDA is rightly depicted instead of GATV and there is rightly no indication of docking having taken place.

Paraguay Scott 979 Michel 1619 (1966).

Next, the black-with-red-printing cachet on a Togo FDC from 1966 shows the docking of Gemini-9 with the GATV-9 that never made it to space due to its launch failure. This was therefore an anticipatory cachet image that never became reality.



(Black and red printed) cachet on Togo Scott 564a 2<sup>nd</sup>-printing Michel 513Bb FDC (1965)





Ascension Island Scott 183 Michel 183 (1975).

Finally, here is an example of a stamp with bogus text issued by Ascension Island in 1975. This is one of a set of 2 stamps, both of which have an incorrect description of the high-resolution images of Ascension Island on them. Only the first stamp will be shown and described. The text on the stamp reads, "From photograph of island taken from Skylab-3, 11-1-1973 from a height of 240 miles". The date may mean 11 Jan 1973 or 1 Nov 1973, depending on how the all-numeric date format is interpreted. In either case, it is impossible that an image from that date be from the Skylab-3 crew, who were aboard the station from 28 July to 25 September 1973. The station was unoccupied on 1 Nov 1973 (a date between the second (SL-3) and third (SL-4) astronaut

crews). Such high-resolution imagery of Earth would have been taken on cameras manually loaded with film by the Skylab astronauts. Therefore, the source and/or the date of this false-color depiction of Ascension Island is unknown, and the depiction is bogus in the context of the Skylab information in the stamp. The altitude of 240 miles (386 km) in the text is also problematic. When Skylab was launched on 14 May 1973, it went into an almost perfectly circular orbit with altitudes from 434 to 442 km. The orbit slowly degraded thereafter. On leaving Skylab on 8 February 1974, the third and last crew boosted its altitude slightly (by about 11 km) and left it in a parking orbit of 433 km by 455 km. To the authors' knowledge, Skylab was never as low as 386 km in the period from 14 May 1973 to 8 February 1974. It would pass that threshold much later, as it slowly spiraled toward its fiery re-entry on 11 July 1979.

There must exist many more examples of inappropriate or bogus philatelic representations of manned missions. Other space collectors have surely encountered some of them. While manned space is not the authors' main interest, we would be interested in hearing from other collectors about such misrepresentations that they have found on postal items.

## Authors' website and contact information

If you are interested in the authors' website material on un-manned satellites, see <https://rammb.cira.colostate.edu/dev/hillger/satellites.htm>. If you know of any other particularly inappropriate or bogus space events depicted on postage stamps or covers, please email the authors. We would gladly add such items to the website. Don Hillger can be reached at [don.hillger@colostate.edu](mailto:don.hillger@colostate.edu) and Garry Toth at [gmt.varia@gmail.com](mailto:gmt.varia@gmail.com).

## Poland and The Vatican issue joint issue

The Vatican celebrates theologian, mathematician and astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus in a joint issue with his native Poland. Born in Toruń in 1473, he is credited with the great merit of having advocated, defended and definitively proved through mathematical calculations the absolute scientific validity of the heliocentric theory over the geocentric one that had been supported in Europe until then. The year 2023 also marks the 480th anniversary of his death in Frombork and the publication of his work *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*. Over and above the celebration of the undisputed genius and broad experience of Copernicus, who was also a jurist, governor, physician and Church canon, the postage stamp issue offers an occasion to reflect on the deep connection between science and faith that he personally experienced, symbolized among other things by the religious habit he wore. The postage stamp reproduces the painting 'Astronomer Copernicus, or Conversations with God,' a work by Polish painter Jan Matejko (1838-1893) between 1871 and 1873 on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the birth of Nicolaus Copernicus.

