

Letters to the Stars—Synopsis

ROPEX 2015

Introduction

This 6 frame, display class exhibit traces the social, philatelic, and entertainment history illustrated by “Letters to the Stars”. Fan mail was important to fans, the studios, and to the stars. Fans connected with the stars by writing letters, often requesting autographs or photos. This was a worldwide phenomenon; fan letters are shown from many corners of the globe, literally from “A” (Azores) to “Z” (Zanzibar).

Updates

Since last shown, two new private auxiliary markings were added to the exhibit. In addition, unusual uses of fan mail from a member of the Belgian Congo forces attached to the British Middle East forces, from the Malaya Emergency and an illustrated cover from Finland promoting the soon-to-be-cancelled 1940 Summer Olympics were incorporated into the exhibit.

Treatment and Philatelic Importance

Fan mail was important to the movie-viewing public, as fans believed they could communicate with their favorite stars. The studios actively cultivated the illusion that the stars read their fan mail; however, the sheer volume of fan mail made this impossible.

Studios valued fan mail – the content of fan mail was monitored by the studios to assess a star’s popularity and perhaps even re-brand the star. Hollywood studios kept accurate records of fan mail received by each star.

Fan mail was important to the stars, as stars that received large quantities of fan mail could negotiate for better roles and greater salary.

Philatelic and Related Knowledge, Personal Study and Research

This exhibit is based on the study of over 30,000 fan mail covers. From this, important items that explain or highlight the development of fan mail were selected for the exhibit.

All references to “Earliest Known Use”, “Discovery Copy” etc. are documented in:

[1] “Development of the Hollywood Fan Mail System”, Regis Hoffman and Thomas J. Richards, *The Congress Book 2002*. P21-41.

[2] “Stars and Strife: Mail to Hollywood Movie Stars During Periods of War”, Dr. Thomas Richards and Regis Hoffman. The Winton M. Blount Postal History Symposium “When the Mail Goes to War”, September 26-27, 2008. Smithsonian National Postal Museum. Available on-line:

http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/symposium2008/Richards-Hoffman-Stars_and_Strife-paper.pdf

[3] *Private Auxiliary Markings on Hollywood Fan Mail*. Regis Hoffman and Thomas Richards. Auxiliary Markings Club monograph. 2010.

Many of the military-related covers are described in the “Stars & Strife” column that appears quarterly in the *Military Postal History Society Bulletin*.

Frames 1-2: Significance and History of Fan Mail

This section illustrates how fan mail was important to fans, the studios and the stars.

A key item is an inter-office memo from the Paramount Pictures Fan Mail Department to actress Betty Hutton, listing the amount of fan mail received during the week of February 17, 1945.

Subsequent pages trace the development of fan mail starting with the silent film era. **A highlight is an early fan mail cover from 1918, addressed to Douglas Fairbanks at Lasky Studios.** Many of the studios from the silent era no longer exist – examples are a cover **addressed to Charlie Chaplin at Chaplain Studios**, and covers sent to Sunset and Bunton Studios.

Getting a letter to a star was not always easy, but resourceful fans found a way. Shown are fan letters addressed to cinema trade publications and casting companies – these were forwarded to the stars.

During the early 1920’s studio corporate offices were located in New York City, and many fans addressed letters there. Covers are shown with forwarding handstamps to the Hollywood studios that processed fan mail.

Fan mail peaked during Hollywood’s “Golden Years” (1930-1955) - during this time the studios created an extensive fan mail logistic system, with each studio having a dedicated fan mail department. After this, fan mail began to be processed by private firms and celebrity fan clubs.

Frames 3-5: Fan Mail Private Auxiliary Markings

Fans addressed their letters to a star at a particular studio, often guessing at the studio. If the guess was incorrect, the letter was forwarded, sometimes with a studio marking (reading “Not At ...”, or “Uncalled for At ...”). Examples of such markings are:

UNCALLED FOR AT METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER **NOT AT UNIVERSAL STUDIO**

Examples of auxiliary markings used by the Hollywood studios

Only about 1-2% of fan mail bears these markings. **Shown are the earliest recorded Fox studio marking** (“Not At Fox” applied in 1920), and 50+ markings—**many the**

only recorded or discovery copies from firms such as Pathe Studios, Metropolitan Studios, M.G.M., Warner Brothers and United Artists. Research on these markings is documented in Reference [3]. **A spectacular piece is a postal stationery card from Yugoslavia to actor Farley Granger with three studio markings.**

Auxiliary markings also forwarded the letters to private fan mail firms, agencies that represented the stars, or more rarely to a hotel or club frequented by Hollywood stars. Examples shown from each of these categories include re-direction handstamps for “United Fan Mail”, “General Artists Corporation”, and the “Los Angeles Athletic Club” (a temporary and inexpensive home to movie stars). These types of auxiliary markings are very scarce.

**UNITED FAN MAIL
8966 SUNSET BLVD.
HOLLYWOOD 46, CALIF.**

**LOS ANGELES ATHLETIC CLUB
LOS ANGELES, CALIF.**

**THE STANDARD CASTING DIRECTORY, INC.
616 TAFT BUILDING, HOLLYWOOD, CALIF.**

Examples of auxiliary markings used to forward Hollywood fan mail

Frame 6: Unusual Uses

Most fan mail originated from humble circumstances, but fan mail is also known from extreme locations. This frame illustrates fan mail showing unusual usages from:

- Inter-war use from the British Naval Mission in Brazil to actor John Barrymore, and a fan letter to actress Shirley Temple censored during political turmoil in Brazil in 1938.
- Members of the armed forces during WWII, with an intriguing cover from a member of the Chinese Air Force training in Pueblo, Colorado, to actress Ginger Rogers.
- Allied POWs in German camps to movie stars with an example of a letter held by the British censors until the conclusion of the war.
- **A fan postcard from a Japanese-American interned at the Topaz, Utah Relocation Center to the Andrews Sisters at Universal Studios stating “I am 100% American.”**
- A fan letter from an Italian internee at Fort Missoula, Montana to actress Deanna Durbin.
- A Japanese-American worker on a Dole pineapple plantation camp during WWII.