

## **New Year: New stamps**

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Recently, in the United States and many other countries throughout the world, much attention is paid to the first stamp issued by a country in a new year.

The issuance of special stamps to commemorate the New Year has a relatively long and glorious history. The first stamp of this kind was issued by Germany in 1887 when the official postal printer of the time inscribed envelopes and greeting cards bearing impressed stamps of the 5pf denomination, between 1887 and 1888, and 10pf values from 1889 afterwards. This practice was stopped in 1895.

At the turn of the century, various local company stamps in Germany were overprinted “Prosit Neujahr” (New Year Greetings) with the date below the overprint.

Collectors would have to wait until 1932, however, for the first government issued New Year stamps. These stamps were issued by Paraguay. The stamps took the form of two diamond shaped stamps, originally commemorating Archbishop Bogarin, which were overprinted “Feliz Ano Nuevo 1932” (Happy New Year, 1932). The following year two Zeppelin stamps were overprinted for the 1933 New Year.

In 1935 Japan issued two New Year stamps and the following year issued another New Year stamp. After this 1936 issue, these special stamps were discontinued by Japan until 1948. No special stamps were issued by Japan between 1948 and 1950, however, since 1951 Japan has issued a New Year stamps regularly. Since 1951, most Japanese New Year stamps have featured the animal for a particular year from the Chinese Lunar Year.

In some senses this began a trend, namely the issuance of New Year stamps with the central theme being the various animal characters of the Chinese Lunar Year. Since 1951, many countries seem to have adopted this theme as the topic for the first stamp issued by a country in the New Year.

The twelve animal signs used to designate the Lunar Year first

appeared in China. However, they are widely thought to have originated from outside China proper. By about A.D. 600 this animal Zodiac became widespread in China.

These signs are not derived from the twelve months of the year. Rather, these signs are used to reference the twelve years it takes Jupiter to cycle around the Sun. The twelve animal signs are: the Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit (or Cat), Dragon, Snake (Serpent), Horse, Sheep (Goat), Monkey, Cock, Dog, and Pig (Boar).

According to a popular children's book entitled The Animals of the Chinese Zodiac by Susan Whitfield and Philippa-Alys Brown, the source of these animal representations has some origin in myth. The myth unfolds that Buddha decided to give each year a name so that one year could be differentiated from one another. To aid in this task he asked all of the animals of China to visit him. To deliver this message three messengers were sent with this invitation.

The first messenger went to a farm and invited the farm animals, including: the rat known to be a clever creature, preserving and quick witted; the cat thought to be lazy and inclined to spend its days by a warm stove; the dog thought to show defense, protection and devotion to the family; the pig thought to show concern for welfare, children and comfort; the Cock thought to venture near and far and at times express aggressive competition; and the Ox (Water Buffalo) thought to be solid, dependable, methodical and used to routine to visit Buddha. But as the animals were preparing to leave with the messenger the cat decided to take a nap. The rat promised to wake the cat before leaving, however, promptly forgot this task as all but the cat left with the messenger. When all had left the cat was still asleep in his favorite place by the stove.

The second messenger visited the jungle covered mountains and there found: the tiger thought to be rash and brash, fiercely competitive but magnetic; the hare (rabbit) benevolent and caring, snake thought to be quietly methodical, with a reputation for wisdom; and the dragon thought to be exotic, willful, elegant with a leaning toward the occult. These animals were invited to visit Buddha.

The final messenger visited the high plains of northern China and there found: the horse, thought to be sociable among their own kind; the

sheep thought to be retiring, peaceful and contemplative; and the monkey thought to have skills and dexterity. All of these animals were invited to see Buddha.

The animals arrived one by one with the rat arriving first. Buddha decided to name the years after the animals. To the rat, out of recognition for his promptness, the first year was named by Buddha the Year of the Rat. The Cat, it is said, never forgave the rat for not awakening him, thus forever making the cat the enemy of the rat. Thus goes the myth.

These twelve signs are combined with an existing Chinese system of the five elements, namely: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. Therefore, in 1984 the Year of the Wood Rat started the present cycle. 1996 was the year of the Fire Rat, 2008 the Earth Rat, 2020 the Metal Rat and 2032 the Water Rat. The cycle will end in 2043 with the Year of the Water Pig.

Each of these animal signs is associated with a series of years in a cyclic fashion as follows:

**Rat:** 1900, 1912, 1924, 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984, and 1996.

**Ox:** 1901, 1913, 1925, 1937, 1949, 1961, 1973, 1985, and 1997.

**Tiger:** 1902, 1914, 1926, 1938, 1950, 1962, 1974, 1986, and 1998.

**Rabbit:** 1903, 1915, 1927, 1939, 1951, 1963, 1975, 1987, and 1999.

**Dragon:** 1904, 1916, 1928, 1940, 1952, 1964, 1976, 1988, and 2000.

**Snake:** 1905, 1917, 1929, 1941, 1953, 1965, 1977, 1989, and 2001.

**Horse:** 1906, 1918, 1930, 1942, 1954, 1966, 1978, 1990, and 2002.

**Sheep:** 1907, 1919, 1931, 1943, 1955, 1967, 1979, 1991, and 2003.

**Monkey:** 1908, 1920, 1932, 1944, 1956, 1968, 1980, 1992, and 2004.

**Cock:** 1909, 1921, 1933, 1945, 1957, 1969, 1981, 1993, and 2005.

**Dog:** 1910, 1922, 1934, 1946, 1958, 1970, 1982, 1994 and 2006.

**Pig:** 1911, 1923, 1935, 1947, 1959, 1971, 1983, 1995, and 2007.

According to Chinese Astrology, there is personality traits associated with individuals born within each of the above signs. For example, the rat is said to be clever at making money, and the Ox is thought to be dependable. Children are expected to have the traits of the animal representing the year they were born.

The traditional Chinese year follows the lunar calendar, so New Year falls in late January or early February. New Year's Day is widely celebrated.

Again, many countries have adopted the animals of the Chinese Zodiac as themes for their stamps. The United States is one of the countries of the world that has decided to include these themes in their stamps.



Year of the OX-1997



Year of the TIGER-1998



Year of the Hare-1999

On February 16, 1999 the Year of the Hare will formally begin. To commemorate this event; the US Postal Service will issue a stamp on Tuesday January 5, 1999 in the Chinatown section of Los Angeles, California. This stamp will join six previous stamps issued by the US Post Office to commemorate the Years of the Tiger, Ox, Rat, Boar, Dog and Rooster (Cock), respectively. Clarence Lee the designer of all of the

previous US Lunar Year stamps has also designed the stamp for 1999 and has been commissioned to design the remaining five stamps in the series. All of these stamps are styled after a paper cut design.

So there you have it! There is quite a tradition, not to mention an opportunity for starting a topical collection, related to the first stamps issued by a given country each year. By all counts the Year of the Hare symbolizes one of generosity, kindness, a quick wit and the ability to make peace. May your 1999 be filled with these traits!

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