

## OFF THE BEAT: POSTAL SERVICE

By Garance Burke

### Stamp-Designing Colony of Artist in Bethesda Has to Think Small

In one of the latest homages to contemporary sculptor Louise Nevelson, she strikes a fierce pose in a seductive black robe. Her gaze pulls the viewer in to explore her abstract work. Only in this representation of her boxy sculptures, they're just one inch tall and lined with perforations.

"How could you not make a stamp about this woman? She wore mink eyelashes. Fabulous," said Ethel Kessler of Bethesda, who designed a panel of stamps to honor Nevelson.

Being a stamp enthusiast never used to carry much cachet. But a dashing new look for U.S. postal stamps has emerged in recent years, thanks in part to an enclave of stamp designers, illustrators and researchers based in downtown Bethesda.

Kessler, one of six art directors for the U.S. Postal Service, talks quickly, her lively hands beset with flashy jewelry. Her unusual stamp designs include the retrospective of Nevelson's work and the landmark breast cancer research stamp, which will mark its five-year anniversary in two weeks. Kessler's most recent stamp, a nuanced painting of the treeless Arctic tundra, will be issued this month.

Only a decade ago, such themes would have been unthinkable for the Postal Service, whose conservative designs focused mainly on eagles and dead presidents.

"The big change started with Elvis Presley," said Terry McCaffrey, manager of stamp development at the Postal Service's headquarters in L'Enfant Plaza. "When Elvis came along, the Postal Service began to recognize pop culture. It's been revolutionary."

The King made graphic designers such as Kessler feel that anything could be on a stamp. It also netted a cool \$36 million in revenue for the Postal Service. Most stamps barely break \$1 million.



BY TOM ALLEN — THE WASHINGTON POST

#### Ethel Kessler, a Postal art director, with a mock-up of a stamp honoring Fredrick Law Olmsted.

After Elvis's success, the Postal Service went out on a limb and commissioned Kessler to design her first stamp, which would tackle the difficult subject of breast cancer. The stamp would inaugurate the "semi-postal" program, in which stamps are sold for a few cents more than the cost of postage to raise money for a cause — in this case, breast cancer research.

For art director Kessler, the project also represented a major personal hurdle: In 1994, she was found to have breast cancer. After a round of radiation therapy, she reorganized her business to dedicate herself to what moved her most.

"I thought I could share with people my experience, and that was that you can survive and you can go on and there is hope and there is possibility," said Kessler, 53.

In the five years since it was issued, the stamp has raised more than \$31.5 million for breast cancer

research that has been distributed to the National Institutes of Health and the Medical Research Program of the Department of Defense.

Since 1998, when the breast cancer stamp was released, hundreds of social and environmental groups have campaigned for a semi-postal stamp. That's in addition to the 50,000 suggestions the Postal Service receives from individuals each year.

McCaffrey said there is no question that selecting stamp-worthy subjects can get political, whether it's a portrait of former Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall or a photograph of a water lily. The selection process falls to the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee, whose 15 members include a former Notre Dame basketball coach and Jean Picker Firstenberg, director of the American Film Institute.

Once the advisory committee approves the topic, Kessler begins conceptualizing how to convey the subject visually, working with a team of graphic designers and illustrators. Some topics are more challenging than others: For the Great Plains prairie stamp, a 10-stamp panel issued in 2001, she had to call in the world's expert on prairie dogs to make sure the dog wasn't painted in attack mode.

"To get a handle on any topic and not write a 400-page book is really hard," Kessler said. "It takes years to develop the intuition to work at that size, but it's your life experience that goes into what you think about for designing a stamp."