

Background Information for the Teacher: Lunar New Year Stamps (2008-2010) by Kam Mak

Observed throughout the world by people of Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Tibetan, and Mongolian heritage, the Lunar New Year is a time of modern festivity and ancient tradition. As the celebration became widespread in America, the U.S. Postal Service responded with stamps that illustrate some of its most notable symbols and sights. The Celebrating Lunar New Year series (inaugurated in 2008 and scheduled to run through 2019) features oil paintings by artist Kam Mak that commemorate this festival of optimism and fortunate beginnings.

At first glance, the Lunar New Year is a time of wild spectacle. Fireworks pop and crackle, while performers dressed like dragons and lions dance to the relentless pulsing of drums. However, the firecrackers that explode along city streets are more than mere noisemakers; tradition holds that they send unlucky spirits fleeing in fear. These and other Lunar New Year beliefs stretch back centuries: Chinese couplets on red paper hanging in windows and on doors hark back a thousand years, when similar good-luck messages were written on peach wood. Mindful that these beloved traditions are meant to foster optimism, people clean their homes, exchange gifts, and enjoy special meals amid a feeling of reconciliation and neighborly peace.

Each stamp in the Celebrating Lunar New Year series features an oil painting by artist Kam Mak, who was born in Hong Kong and grew up in New York City's Chinatown. Mak's work has appeared on the covers of numerous magazines and books, including *My Chinatown: One Year in Poems*, a children's book recalling Mak's own first impressions of the United States through a series of fifteen poems arranged in five consecutive seasons.

Kam Mak's keen understanding of the value of tradition is evident in the final design for each stamp. The previous Lunar New Year series, issued between 1992 and 2004, featured intricate paper-cut animals by designer Clarence Lee and Chinese grass-style calligraphy by Lau Bun. When Mak and art director Ethel Kessler designed this new series, they incorporated both the calligraphy and the paper-cut animals, acknowledging the popularity of the original series while celebrating the holiday with a fresh, contemporary look.



The 2008 Year of the Rat stamp features festive red lanterns, common decorations at New Year celebrations.



The 2009 Year of the Ox stamp features a lion head of a type worn at parades and other festivities connected with the New Year.



The 2010 Year of the Tiger stamp features narcissus flowers, considered auspicious at any time of year, but especially appropriate at the New Year, a time of renewed hope for the future.