IJAD INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ART AND DESIGN

CC BY NC ND

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/NKUM8171

International Journal of Art and Design (IJAD), 2025 2(2): 85-96

ijad.ibupress.com

Online ISSN: 2955-2400

Application: 10.10.2025

Revision: 25.11.2025

Acceptance: 20.12.2025

Publication: 30.12.2025

Gjorgjieski, V. (2025). Postage Stamps of the Republic of North Macedonia: Visual Semiotics and Cultural Representation. International Journal of Art and Design, 2(2), 85-96 https://doi.org//10.69648/NKUM8171

Vladimir Gjorgjieski

International Balkan University, Faculty of Art and Design, Skopje, N. Macedonia

https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7997-7833

Email:

v.gjorgjieski@ibu.edu.mk

BALKAN JOURNALS

Postage Stamps of the Republic of North Macedonia: Visual Semiotics and Cultural Representation

Vladimir Gjorgjieski

Abstract

Postage stamps represent a marginalized yet culturally significant medium in the history of visual communication in North Macedonia. This paper explores postage stamps issued in North Macedonia from independence (1991) to the present as visual artifacts that reproduce and transmit cultural identity. The analysis is based on a combined methodology that includes visual and semiotic analysis, as well as a contextual framework for interpreting symbols as "significant carriers of cultural memory" (Nora, 1989, p. 9). The research encompasses carefully selected postage stamps from different decades, which are analyzed according to their formal structure, use of color, typography, and symbolism. The study demonstrates that the design of these stamps is closely linked to processes of national identification, institutional stabilization, and cultural identity. As Stuart Hall emphasizes, "identity is not something already given, but a process of continuous production" (Hall, 1996, p. 4), and postage stamps function as micro-archives of this process. The aim of the paper is to show that although these visual objects function administratively, their visual structure and aesthetics contain profound cultural implications, making them a valuable subject for cultural-semiotic analysis.

Keywords: Cultural identity, graphic design, postage stamps, visual communication

Introduction

Postage stamps, although at first glance an administrative and technical element of the postal system, represent a unique visual document of a state's distinctiveness and cultural identity. They are produced by state institutions (most often the postal service) and circulate within the legal and economic system, yet their aesthetics, iconography, and typography consistently reflect and preserve a country's history, ideology, and culture through carefully selected visual elements. As Gillian Rose points out, "visual representations are always embedded within socio-cultural frameworks and convey the ways in which the world is organized and understood" (Rose, 2016, p. 19).

After the Republic of Macedonia gained independence in 1991, the state began a process of reinventing the visual codes of statehood. This involved creating a series of new symbols—coats of arms, banknotes, postage and revenue stamps. This redesign process represented not only an aesthetic operation but also a cultural articulation of the new political entity. In that context, postage stamps also became objects of cultural production, through which motifs related to the nation, cultural memory, and the values of the nation and the state are revealed and interconnected.

Although the function of postage stamps may appear naïve and decorative, it is of great importance for representing and promoting a country's cultural identity. Or, as Roland Barthes writes, "every visual sign, no matter how trivial it may seem, is a bearer of connotations and mythological meanings" (Barthes, 1972, p. 115). The postage stamp, with its small format, combines typography, color, symbols, and a linguistic marker, and as such, visualizes state structure, national legitimacy, and cultural identity.

The aim of this paper is to analyze several carefully selected postage stamps issued in North Macedonia from 1991 to the present, using a methodological framework grounded in visual analysis, semiotics, and cultural critique. Through this approach, the study seeks to understand not only the graphic solutions but also the broader cultural narratives and political contexts that shape these small yet significant documents.

This paper treats graphic design as a medium of cultural communication, and postage stamps as an expression of cultural semiosis (the process of creating, transmitting, and interpreting meaning through signs) in the service of state self-perception, cultural policy, and visual memory.

Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative research, employing visual, semiotic, contextual, and comparative analysis. Postage and revenue stamps are treated as coded visual artifacts, and their formal, cultural, and ideological aspects are examined. The selected methods align with the interdisciplinary nature of visual culture and graphic design.

Visual analysis serves as the primary method for examining the characteristics of postage stamps: composition, color, typography, symbolism, visual hierarchy, and material appearance. The approach of Gillian Rose is applied, who emphasizes that "visual analysis is concerned not only with what is shown, but also with how, where, and for whom" (Rose, 2016, p. 25). In this process, attention is given to:

- The balance and organization of visual space
- The use of typographic elements as carriers of institutional authority
- The symbolic meaning of colors and graphic details
- The relationship between text and image

The aim of the visual analysis is to determine the aesthetic structure and internal logic of the design, as well as its role in communication with the viewer.

Semiotic analysis is applied based on the classical triad of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Peirce, and Roland Barthes. According to Saussure, the visual sign consists of a signifier (the visual element) and a signified (the concept it represents), and their relationship is arbitrary and culturally conditioned (Saussure, 1983, p. 67).

Charles Peirce develops a triadic model—representamen, object, and interpretant—and classifies signs as icons, indices, and symbols (Peirce, CP 2.228). This model is particularly applicable to postage stamps, which function simultaneously as administrative and visual signs.

According to Barthes, through second-order signification the visual sign acquires an ideological dimension: thus, the coat of arms or ornament on a stamp is not merely a sign of state affiliation, but a myth that constructs history, legitimacy, and national identity (Barthes, 1972, p. 113).

Contextual analysis examines the historical, political, and cultural context in which postage stamps are created and put into circulation. This includes:

- The relationship between visual design and the state narrative
- Policies of cultural selection and representation in public documents
- The position of stamps within the broader cultural space

Comparative analysis is used to compare stamps from different periods, styles, and political epochs (for example, the early 1990s, the 2001 conflict, Skopje 2014, and the period of European integration). This approach helps identify transformations in the visual language, persistent (constant) symbols, and the disappearance of certain motifs.

The analysis is based on selected postage stamps issued in North Macedonia from independence to the present day. The selection is made according to the following criteria:

- Chronological (each decade is covered)
- Visual diversity (different types of symbols, graphic styles, and formats)
- Contextual significance (stamps related to key events or policies)

This approach enables a representative analysis of the visual evolution of state discourse as presented through the postage stamp as a representative of cultural identity.

Analysis of Visual Artifacts

The Postage Stamp "Sovereign Macedonia" (1991)

The postage stamp "Sovereign Macedonia" (1991), issued immediately after the referendum, articulates the idea of the new statehood through a clear semiotic structure. The figures playing zurli function as iconic signs, indexing the event of the proclamation of independence and symbolically representing the "voice of the people." The vertical inscription "SOVEREIGN" acts as a visual rhetoric of power, while the calligraphic typography of "Macedonia" carries sacred and historical weight (Saussure: signifier–signified). The limited color palette (orange, brown, white) creates a myth of organicity and stability. Visual analysis reveals a vertical composition with a clear hierarchy (year – figures – title), contrasting typography, and symmetry that reinforces the impression of national maturity.

Figure 1.

The Postage Stamp "Sovereign Macedonia" (1991)

The Postage Stamp "St. John Bigorski" (1992)

This visual artifact, "St. John Bigorski" (1992), presents Orthodox heritage as a foundation of national identity. The two frontal figures function as iconic signs that, on a connotative level, act as guardians of the faith (they represent two master woodcarvers of the period, Petar and Makarije). The text "St. John Bigorski" links the iconography to cultural memory. The typography combines Cyrillic and Latin scripts, suggesting both national and international significance. The red frame and rich color tones create a symbolism of passion and continuity, constructing a myth of the "eternal nation." Visual analysis reveals a symmetrical composition with a strong frame, vertical–horizontal textual axes, and a palette that introduces historical depth.

Figure 2.

The Postage Stamp "St. John Bigorski" (1992)

The Postage Stamp "Brooch from Bitola" (2000)

The stamp "Brooch from Bitola" (2000) represents cultural refinement through an artifact of decorative art. The butterfly functions as an iconic sign of transformation and beauty, an index of artisanal tradition, and a symbol of cultural elegance. In semiotic terms, it operates as a myth of national refinement. Photographic realism and the cool blue background create a balance between the organic and the technocratic. Visual analysis reveals a centered composition, the metallic sheen of the jewelry contrasting with an ethereal background, and sans-serif typography that places tradition within a contemporary visual context.

Figure 3.

The Postage Stamp "Brooch from Bitola" (2000)

The Postage Stamp "Festive Albanian Costume – Skopje Region" (2001)

In the context of the ethnic conflict, "Festive Albanian Costume – Skopje Region" (2001) represents a visual gesture of inclusion. The figures in traditional dress function as icons and indices of a real custom, but also as symbols of a multicultural Macedonia. The white background suggests equality, while the warm color palette creates a sense of corporeality and closeness. According to Barthes, a myth of a "nation of differences" is constructed here, while from Hall's perspective, identity is articulated as a process in which diversity becomes a state value. Visual analysis shows a symmetrical composition of male and female figures, a rich color palette that highlights the costume, and minimalist typography that strengthens the focus on cultural symbolism.

Figure 4.

The Postage Stamp "Festive Albanian Costume – Skopje Region" (2001)

The Postage Stamp "Veles" (2010)

Figure 5.

The Postage Stamp "Veles" (2010)

The postage stamp "Veles" (2010) presents the clock tower as a symbol of urban memory and local identity. As an icon, it reproduces real architecture; as an index, it points to history; and as a symbol, it represents cultural pride. The signifier (the illustration) activates the signified (urban memory) through a cultural code. The golden gradient of the background carries connotations of sunset and remembrance, creating a mythologization of space. Visual analysis highlights an asymmetrical composition with a dominant vertical axis, a contrast between the hand-illustrated architecture and modernist typography, and a muted palette that introduces an intimate atmosphere.

The Postage Stamp “75 Years of NATO” (2024)

Figure 6.

The Postage Stamp “75 Years of NATO” (2024)

Finally, “75 Years of NATO” (2024) positions Macedonia within the Euro-Atlantic context. The NATO logo is a symbol whose meaning derives from institutional convention. The national flags function as indices of collectivity, while the blue color palette signifies stability and security. The trilingual text reflects multiculturalism and openness. According to Barthes, the myth of a “small country in a great alliance” is present here. Visual analysis reveals a strictly symmetrical composition, horizontal dynamism of the flags, a central focus on the logo, and geometric sans-serif typography that introduces rationality and formality.

Conclusions

The study of postage stamps of the Republic of North Macedonia reveals that these seemingly trivial documents are, in fact, deeply meaningful visual artifacts through which cultural and state identity are articulated, reproduced, and problematized. Throughout the analysis of six selected examples (ranging from the religious carved iconostasis of Bigorski to the diplomatic NATO logo), it becomes clear that stamps function as miniature media of cultural memory, political affiliation, and graphic rhetoric.

As Barthes emphasizes, "the visual sign is simultaneously a signifier of reality and a product of ideological construction" (Barthes, 1972, p. 113). In all the analyzed cases, the visual element—whether a carving, piece of jewelry, ethnographic costume, architectural object, or logo—serves not merely for representation, but for the institutionalization of meaning. Through visual and semiotic analysis, it has been shown that postage stamps are not simply printed visual material, but contain symbolic values, historical narratives, and an aesthetic politics.

Tracing different decades reveals a gradual transition—from traditionalist, essentialist symbols (1992), to plural and multicultural representations (2001), and finally to modernist, geopolitically oriented designs (2024). This trajectory mirrors the path of the Macedonian state: from reaffirmation of an internal cultural foundation, through inclusion of minorities, to positioning and integration within global alliances.

The applied methodology, based on visual, semiotic, and contextual analysis, proved productive for the deconstruction of these artifacts. The models of Saussure, Peirce, and Barthes enabled a reading of stamps as polyforms of signs—icons, indices, and symbols—that simultaneously speak of aesthetics, politics, and culture.

Nevertheless, the research has its limitations. It worked with a limited corpus (six stamps), and although the selection was based on chronological, thematic, and symbolic representativeness, it does not encompass all possible variations or trends in the state's visual policy.

This opens possibilities for further research. First, a comparative analysis with postage stamps from other countries (especially from the former Yugoslav space) could reveal similarities and differences in state visual rhetoric. Second, expanding the corpus would allow for a more robust identification of cultural codes and graphic regimes. Third, interviews with designers and institutions responsible for production would provide insight into the decision-making process—namely, who

decides what is "worthy" of representation, and under which aesthetic and political conditions.

In conclusion, postage stamps are not merely administrative printed material, but visual actors within a state's cultural discourse. They visualize the legal order, represent history, articulate aesthetics, and above all, produce identity. For this reason, their analysis deserves inclusion in the broader discourse of cultural theory and the history of graphic design.

References

Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). Hill and Wang.

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.

Brubaker, R., & Cooper, F. (2000). Beyond "identity". *Theory and Society, 29*(1), 1–47. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007068714468

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and difference* (A. Bass, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1967)

Erikson, E. H. (1997). *The life cycle completed* (Extended version). W. W. Norton & Company.

Fraser, N. (2000). Rethinking recognition. *New Left Review, 3*, 107–120.

Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs 'identity'? In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1–17). SAGE Publications.

Hall, S., & Du Gay, P. (Eds.). (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. SAGE Publications.

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. University of Chicago Press.

Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations, 26*, 7–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520

Peirce, C. S. (1931–1958). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Vols. 1–8). C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, & A. W. Burks (Eds.). Harvard University Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as another* (K. Blamey, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.

Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Saussure, F. de. (1983). *Course in general linguistics* (C. Bally & A. Sechehaye, Eds.; R. Harris, Trans.). Duckworth.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.

Taylor, C. (1994). The politics of recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition* (pp. 25–73). Princeton University Press.