

This Day in History... June 21, 1903

Birth of Al Hirschfeld



1991 Comedians stamps

Legendary illustrator Albert Hirschfeld was born on June 21, 1903, in St. Louis, Missouri. Hirschfeld's work was so iconic, the USPS broke their own rules to feature his illustrations on two sets of stamps...

Hirschfeld spent the first 12 years of his life in St. Louis before his family moved to New York City in 1915. There, he attended the National Academy of Design. When he was just 17 years old, he was made art director at Selznick Pictures. He remained there for four years before going to Paris and London to study painting, drawing, and sculpture.

Upon Hirschfeld's return to the US, his friend, Broadway press agent Richard Maney, showed some of the artist's drawings to an editor from the *New York Herald Tribune*. The editor was impressed with Hirschfeld's work and began offering him commissions for illustrations. Soon, his illustrations were being featured in the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*, and became a weekly staple for decades.

In 1945, Hirschfeld and his wife, Dolly, had a daughter named Nina. After her birth, the artist hid her name in the hair, clothes, or background of his drawings. Often "Nina" would be hidden in several spots and Hirschfeld would write a number next to his signature to let people know how many to look for.

Hirschfeld became known for his signature style – black and white caricatures with exaggerated features. While he was best known for his black and white drawings, he also produced many full-color paintings for magazine covers such as *TV Guide*, *Life*, *American Mercury*, *Look*, *The New York Times*, *The New Masses*, and *Seventeen*. Hirschfeld also provided color illustrations for several books, including *Harlem As Seen By Hirschfeld*, which included text written by William Saroyan.

Hirschfeld specialized in illustrations of Broadway actors, singers, and dancers that were featured in the newspaper shortly before opening night. But he illustrated famous people from all walks of life – politicians, TV stars, movie stars, jazz musicians, rock stars, and more. Hirschfeld illustrated several movie posters for Charlie Chaplin films and *The Wizard of Oz*. He also provided the artwork for the 1977 Aerosmith album *Draw the Line*. His work was a major inspiration for the "Rhapsody in Blue" segment of Disney's

This Day in History... June 21, 1903 continued



The 1994 Silent Screen Stars stamps

Fantasia 2000, and he was a consultant on that project. His work was also reportedly influential on the design of the genie in Disney's 1992 film, *Aladdin*.

In 1987, the USPS reached out to Hirschfeld to ask if he'd be interested in illustrating Broadway, Hollywood, vaudeville, radio, and television stars for future stamps. Hirschfeld was excited by the idea and accepted the commission. The Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee sent him several names and they loved all of his illustrations, telling him to "keep them coming." The USPS was so excited to work with Hirschfeld, they broke some of their own rules. They normally didn't allow hidden messages on US stamps. But postal officials wanted Hirschfeld to include as many hidden "Nina's" as he could, because otherwise they wouldn't be real Hirschfeld caricatures. And while he wasn't allowed to sign his name on each stamp, they did include his name on the booklet cover, calling the set "Comedians by Hirschfeld."

Hirschfeld had created dozens of illustrations for the USPS. In 1994, they issued a second set of stamps featuring his work honoring Silent Screen Stars. Once again, he was permitted to include "Nina" in as many areas as he could. On both sets of stamps, there are some easily identifiable "Ninas" and some that are more ambiguous, which Hirschfeld called "near-Ninas." The USPS marketing for Hirschfeld's stamps encouraged people to count how many Ninas they could find.

During his lifetime, Hirschfeld received two Tony lifetime achievement awards and a National Medal of the Arts. He died on January 20, 2003, and later that year, a Broadway theater was renamed in his honor.

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