

Subplot Design

ROY WHITE AND MATTHEW CLARK PUT THEIR STAMP ON DESIGN IN CANADA

SUBPLOT

STORY BY ADRIENNE BREAU



The cats, dogs and bird featured in Canada Post's Adopt a Pet stamp series, issued in 2013, were not just colourful visuals of animals available for adoption. While the stamps remained on their sheet, the poor pets were stuck in their (illustrated) cages. But the stamps' users—you and me—had the power to release them from their caged paper confines and metaphorically send them to better homes.

It is a perfect example of the big idea concepts that are packed into the work of Vancouver-based brand design firm Subplot Design, founded by designers Roy White and Matthew Clark in 2004.

"It's the idea of that little thing that makes people connect with it, just a little bit more than they ordinarily would," says Roy. "That connection with somebody, whether it's on a piece of packaging or whether it's on a logo or in a stamp design. Good design is about connecting with people and that's what we try to do. And if you can make people smile and connect with them, that's where brands are remembered. That's how brands resonate with people."

Subplot Design excels at making brands resonate. According to Roy, they have won over two hundred awards (local, national and international) and have been featured in publications that celebrate great design, like *Applied Arts*, *Graphis*, *Communication Arts*, *Design Edge Canada*, *How Magazine* and the *Financial Post*, to name a few. They have worked with companies like Old Yale Brewing Company, Level Ground Trading and Petcurean Pet Nutrition.

And they have worked with Canada Post—a client Roy says any Canadian designer would be honoured to design for—on four issued stamp subjects: British Columbia's 150th Anniversary (2008), International Year of Forests (2011), Adopt a Pet (2013) and Canadian Country Artists (the k.d. lang and Tommy Hunter stamps, 2014).

A compact operation, Subplot Design is able to work closely and intensely with its clients. Not only do they hit the creative sweet spot that makes them extremely attractive to clients, they also know what kinds of clients they work best with.

Roy explains that other design companies often fall into two camps: strategy-heavy companies who pack in plenty of pie charts but whose creative output is lacking, and firms with designs that are gorgeous, but not much else. Roy says that Subplot Design stands out by falling right in the middle—they create good-looking logos, packaging, branding and more, but they have the research, concepts, strategic planning and problem solving to back it all up. They aim to provide something solid in an industry where the question is always: this is pretty but will it deliver?

"Branding is not about fitting in and conforming. It's about having a voice and being unique and standing out in people's minds. That's a belief that we've had and felt from early on when we talked about forming and setting up Subplot, and it's one that we continue to believe."

ROY WHITE





FROM DESIGN TO STAMP

Design managers like Susan Gilson do more than just guide the stamp's design process; they make sure they get printed to look their best as well. So what is the printing process for stamps? It is actually a highly guarded secret!

Like paper currency and other official documents, such as passports, stamps are printed at highly secure facilities specializing in security-printed products. The printing methods are secret and guarded to ensure that Canada Post's stamps not only look good, but cannot be counterfeited.

Susan does say that the printing process is as involved as the design process. She visits the printers throughout the process to view and approve proofs before the final print, and the stamp designers are included on at least one of those trips to ensure that their vision has been captured.



"To be responsible to [the client], we need to understand their business and then deliver really great, relevant, unique, creative work that helps them stand out in the marketplace. And creativity that we can define and rationalize," says Roy. "My partner's come up with this term that I think is really relevant. We give our clients a degree of 'creative certainty.' In a category where branding is still a word that is thrown around and is still fairly new, there can be a lot of uncertainty around it. A lot of ambiguity as to what will work and won't work. As much as possible, we try and bring certainty to that process."

They also know what kinds of clients they work best with. Both Roy and Matthew have backgrounds in big design agencies, an experience that Roy says left him feeling unfulfilled with a certain kind of client.

"Matthew and I work incredibly well together, very intuitively," he says. "We know who we can work well with, and we don't work well with everybody. We shy away from big corporations. We work best with entrepreneurs and visionaries. People who have built business. We've found that big organizations are not prepared to take risks, and there's too much at stake. They're less prepared to challenge category norms. They're less inclined to stand out and to want to be different. They're less inclined to take chances. And we find that all the clients we work with are prepared to do those things. And when we work with those people and they're in that mind space, we find that we can create some amazing products and brands for them."

"Our sweet spot is those mid-cap companies that have grown organically," Roy says. "Where they've come to a point where they need help understanding themselves—who they are and what voice they want to present in the marketplace. And that's really our sweet spot. That's where we excel."

This passion for standing out has no doubt led to Subplot Design's success with Canada Post. Subplot Design started their relationship with Canada Post like everyone does: they let Canada Post know they were interested in designing by submitting a portfolio of work. Submitting work doesn't mean you will be contacted, but if you are, you are ushered into Canada Post's stamp design process—a brilliant way to make sure every stamp project delivers the very best design.

According to the Canada Post website, any Canadian citizen can suggest a stamp subject idea, and each year around 20 to 25 (sometimes more) themes are chosen, guided by the Stamp Advisory Committee, a diverse group of folks with all kinds of backgrounds, from artists to stamp collectors and others. People can suggest anything, but ideas that celebrate Canadian history, traditions, achievements and notable citizens are a good bet.

Once they decide on a stamp subject, managers of design and production for Stamp Services come in. The design manager selects the designers or companies—usually two to three per stamp subject—who are invited to submit stamp concepts. Roy says design companies are given a title, a design brief and a research document, and have two to three months to come up with stamp concepts. Once the concepts are submitted, the design managers present the concepts anonymously to the Stamp Advisory Committee (so that ideas are evaluated solely on



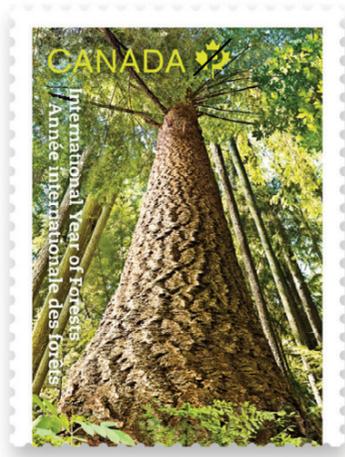
ABOVE
Design concepts and ideation for Canada Post's Adopt a Pet stamp.

BELOW AND ABOVE FAR LEFT
Subplot Design's completed work for the stamp series.



“Be unique. Be different. There’s a world of sameness out there; a world of people trying to compete. The only way to do that is to be unique.”

ROY WHITE



their strength, not the designers’ portfolio), which chooses the most appropriate design concept and recommends it to Canada Post. The managers then work closely with the commissioned designer or company, managing the development of the final artwork, and overseeing the print production of the stamps and related products.

One of these design managers is Susan Gilson, who has plenty of compliments for Subplot, and all of the creative people who design for Canada Post. “In all honesty, I am spoiled for choice, as I get to work with such a range of amazing, creative people,” she says. “I really enjoyed the process of working with Subplot. I like the way that they work. They are conceptually strong, creative and innovative, and they enjoy pushing boundaries. Their approach is always very considered and well thought out. The lines of communication are always open with them.”

Along with designing the actual stamps, designers are also responsible for designing companion components, which can vary with each subject, like a souvenir sheet, stamp booklet and Official First Day Cover. Each stamp takes a different amount of time from development to design to printing, but the process of getting from an idea to a small, printed stamp is always very involved. Susan says many stamps take up to two years from developing the stamp subject idea to printing; she is already working on some projects for 2017.

Subplot Design’s concepts for the stamp commissions they have won so far have been innovative, modern and fresh. British Columbia’s 150th anniversary stamp did not feature historical images, as you might expect, but instead featured a bold shot of a gold panner’s hand, shown from above, celebrating British Columbia’s rich gold rush history. Their International Year of Forests stamps defied expectations as well. Instead of a horizontal panorama of a forest, their image of a forest floor, understory and canopy came alive with a dynamic ground-up view.

Though Roy cannot reveal much about the five stamp projects they are currently working on—three project concepts they will be submitting, a five-stamp set concept already approved and set to launch in 2017, and a three-stamp set they just finished designing that is set to print this summer—they are sure to continue Subplot Design’s tradition of defying tradition.

Roy practises what he preaches to the young designers he dispenses advice to: “Be unique. Be different. There’s a world of sameness out there; a world of people trying to compete. The only way to do that is to be unique. Just think about people in the way they dress or the music they listen to. What stands out to you? It’s something that’s different, that’s unique, that resonates with you. Design’s like that. Don’t come to me and show me sameness and vanilla. Show me something that’s different and that piques my attention and makes me sit up. That’s what we say to designers. Bring me your notebook. Bring me your sketchbook. Show me your thought process. Don’t show me pretty layouts—I can see those anywhere. And they all look the same.”

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ABOVE
Design concepts and ideation for Canada Post’s International Year of Forests stamp.

BELOW AND ABOVE FAR LEFT
Subplot Design’s completed work for the stamp series.

