

THE POWER OF FLIGHT AND PEACE SYMBOLS

by Albert Pelsser

Myths were the heart of the lives of ancient cultures. Usually, they were more than mere stories, but also history, telling of real people in the real past. The mythology of many cultures abounds with gods and kings borne through the air by winged and other fantastic creatures, showing that mankind's intense dream and obsession of flight is age old. As it was impossible to realize this dream, human beings created heroes, allegorical and human figures equipped with wings; it was thought that the ability to fly set such creatures apart from mere mortal beings, and thus making them superior.

The aim of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), established in Montreal since 1945, is to develop international civil aviation in a safe and orderly manner.

This article traces the development of powerful symbols and images, found in the ICAO thematic collection, which are profound expressions of human nature related to peace and flight, that is, birds, olive tree, Icarus and Pegasus. The latter two come from Greek mythology, which was told and retold by the Greek poets, specially from the sixth century BC.

DOVE AND OLIVE TREE

Flight has always represented freedom from physical restrictions of earth-bound life. Because birds come from the skies, they can also assume roles of messengers from higher power; they are usually linked with tree symbolism. Among the birds, the dove is particularly present in the Greek tradition and the Bible. Since the dove brought an olive branch to Noah at the end of the great flood, the dove suggests a retreat of water and new vegetation. Oil extracted from the olive is well known for its smoothing properties. By extension, the dove became the classic representation of peace, quietness and understanding.

The symbol of peace carried by the olive tree goes back to the Greek mythology. Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, created the olive tree which remained sacred to her. In a contest for patronship of Athens with Poseidon, the god of sea, she gave the olive as the most profitable gift to the inhabitants of the city, while Poseidon gave the horse. The gods decreed unanimously that peace was more profitable than war, and awarded Athena the prize; hence, the olive tree became Athena's tree for the Greeks. As a symbol of peace, a wreath of crossed olive branches is part of ICAO emblem.

Through the symbolic representation of the dove, the pictures on the first day cover at Figure 1 (Canada Scott #354) echo explicitly the close relationship between flight and peace for promoting the understanding among nations of the world.

ICARUS

For countless centuries, humans desired to fly like birds. In the Greek mythology, the fable about Daedalus, who made wings for himself and his son Icarus to escape imprisonment on Crete, is thousands of years old. The wings were made of feathers set in wax. As Icarus flew too near the sun, his wings melted and he fell to his death. Flying was for gods; Icarus, a mortal, should not have tried and was punished for his arrogance. He represents the lapse from grace of those driven too hard by ambition. The extensive list of stamps bearing Icarus was provided in a prior article of *The Canadian Connection*, issued in Volume 14, Number 2 (June 2000).

PEGASUS

Pegasus is a winged horse who played part in several legends of the Greek mythology. A version of the legend reports that this magical winged horse was born on earth. One day, as he was drinking from the spring of Pirene in Corinth, he was broken in by Bellerophon. Mounted on the miraculous steed, the latter accomplished great exploits, showing that with the help of gods mankind can tame the elements. Bellerophon wanted eventually to ascend into the heavens. Zeus, the king of the gods in Greek mythology, unseated him and the winged horse was changed into a constellation. Pegasus can be compared to today's finest race horses and represents a kind of immortality, i.e. the rider of Pegasus could fly through the air to



Figure 1



Figure 2

reach the heavens. Therefore, it symbolizes mankind's desire to take the air, as well as the capricious nature of the element. Figure 2 shows a souvenir sheet, Somalia Scott #546, with Pegasus.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the centuries, symbols have conveyed

a universal language; their meaning is often largely derived from myths and legends. They still speak powerfully to us, some relating directly to peace and flight.

Friendship and understanding for the benefit of all mankind through the safe and peaceful development of civil aviation were the founding principles of ICAO set forth in the Preamble of the Convention on International Civil Aviation.

CHECKLIST

Canada	354	1955 Jun 1	Dove, 10th anniversary of ICAO
Somalia	544-545,546s/s	1984 Nov 20	Pegasus, 40th anniversary of ICAO

REFERENCES

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