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Little-Known ASTP Flown Space Covers

Treasures from the Golden Age of Space

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After fifteen years of the 'Space Race', the political environment between the two Super Powers had changed and a new scenario, the "Apollo-Soyuz Test Program" (ASTP) – the first American- Soviet joint mission, was planned as part of a historic agreement signed on May 24, 1972 by U.S. President Nixon and USSR Premier Kosygin – formally ratifying the new spirit of cooperation in Space.

Among all of the very few covers flown in space during the Golden Age, the ASTP flown covers are definitely the least known items to the astrophilatelist.

How many ASTP covers were flown?

During the preparation for the joint ASTP flight, the Soviets suggested to set-up the first international cosmic post office. According to the suggested plan, the covers were to be postmarked at the Baikonur Cosmodrome before launch (therefore a post office was officially opened in Baikonur on April 27, 1975), then in space after the docking of Apollo and Soyuz, and finally on the U.S. primary recovery ship after the Apollo splashdown.

NASA, with the infamous Apollo 15 cover incident still fresh in its memory, declined to participate.

Nonetheless, Kubasov, "a good-natured and rebellious sort, couldn't resist the temptation and brought aboard some covers which were signed by the crew on orbit". According to Valeri Kuba-

sov, who took them into space, a total of twenty-five covers were flown aboard Soyuz 19, from July 15 to July 21, 1975. The twenty-five covers included:

- Five covers with cachets depicting the Soyuz 19 launch, reproducing the same art as depicted on the 16 kopek stamp (s. 4341 affixed to them (Cover type #1);
- Five covers with cachets showing the two spaceships after docking, reproducing the same drawing as shown on the 12 kopek stamp (s. 4339); the stamp was designed by the Soviet artist Anatoly M. Aksamit and was part of a se-tenant pair issued on July 15, 1975, both in USSR and the USA, with the stamp designed by Robert McCall (Cover type #2). This series had a souvenir sheet inside, cancelled with the same postmark. No sig-



A special cover was prepared by Kniga International Books, the Soviet foreign trade organization, using a standard air mail cover in carmine-orange color overprinted with the ASTP emblem and the text (in Cyrillic) "Apollo-Soyuz Test Program". When the proposal was declined the covers were destroyed. A few, however, survived. (Illustration is from the book "Outer Space Mail of the USSR and Russia" by Vyacheslav Klochko)

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natures or handwritten remarks about it being flown were applied in space on the souvenir sheet, however – since the astronauts and cosmonauts signed with ballpoint pens – the signatures were “engraved” on it through the envelope.

- Five covers with a cachet of the ASTP crew similar to the scene on the selvage of the 50 Kopek souvenir sheet, but having the 10 kopek stamp (s.4338) affixed on them (Cover type #3).

- Seven First Day Covers with the 20 kopek Soviet ASTP stamp designed by R. Strelnikov (s. 4324) bearing artwork by Leonov (the commander of the Soyuz 19 Mission, who also is an accomplished artist), cancelled with a Moscow First Day of Issue postmark dated May 8, 1975, (Cover type #4).

- One cover, similar to the seven bearing the 20 kopek stamp issued on May 8, 1975, backdated after the flight with the Soyuz-Apollo pictorial postmark for July

18, 1975 (the date on which the covers were signed) and also cancelled with a duplicate of the Baikonur Cosmodrome postmark which was used in Moscow for collectors’ covers issued by Kniga, the trading company for export of philatelic items (Cover type #5).

- Two different covers with no stamps or cancellation, which still were in Kubasov’s personal collection twenty years ago (not shown).

Almost all of the twenty-five covers were signed by the two Soviet cosmonauts Alexei Leonov and Valeri Kubasov as well as by the three American astronauts Thomas P. Stafford, Vance Brand and Donald K. Slayton in space. At least one of the covers has only four signatures. Kubasov signed with a 7-AG Fisher space pen, Stafford, Brand and sometimes Leonov used a pen with a different blue tone, and Slayton signed with his own black ballpoint pen.

Since the idea of the international cosmic post office was discarded, no on-board cancellation was used during this mission, unlike the protocol for most Salyut, Mir and ISS Space Station missions. On many of the covers Kubasov added a hand-written notation: “On board of «Soyuz-Apollo» 18.07.75, MB (Moscow time) 01h 30m”. Kubasov confirmed during a phone conversation that each of the three US astronauts were immediately given a series of those three different covers (#1-3) while



Top: Cover type #1 with cachet showing the launch of the Soyuz 19 with a matching 16 kopek stamp.

Bottom: Cover type #2 with cachet of the two nation’s spaceships after docking, similar to the affixed stamp’s artwork, but the Earth is in a different position (not just flipped).

in space – those nine covers splashed down with Apollo. The remaining covers were kept by Kubasov.

Where are the ASTP flown covers now?

As reported from different sources, Valeri Kubasov was offering his covers (including the ones without stamps and cancellations) for \$5,000 each at the end of the 1980s.

As late as 2001 the well-known philatelist Les Winick was said to own possibly the only privately held example of one of these flown Apollo-Soyuz covers. That cover, coming from the Kubasov collection, was passed from Les Winick to Dr. Ramkisson, who recently offered it through the Regency Superior Auction in January 2010.

In the description of that item, the Regency's catalog reported: "Rare (#1 of 18) cacheted cover that was flown aboard the joint American Soviet mission". This incorrectly suggests that they were numbered and that only eighteen covers were flown. Regency Superior, like many auction houses, usually does not do extensive research on items it offers.

In the last few years, at least two ASTP flown covers "type #4" originating from Kubasov's collection were offered on auctions in the States through the Regency Superior (with Kubasov's Certificate of Authenticity) and one appeared in Wien through Viennafil.

Also during the last few years, Tom Stafford sold two of his covers through United States auctions.

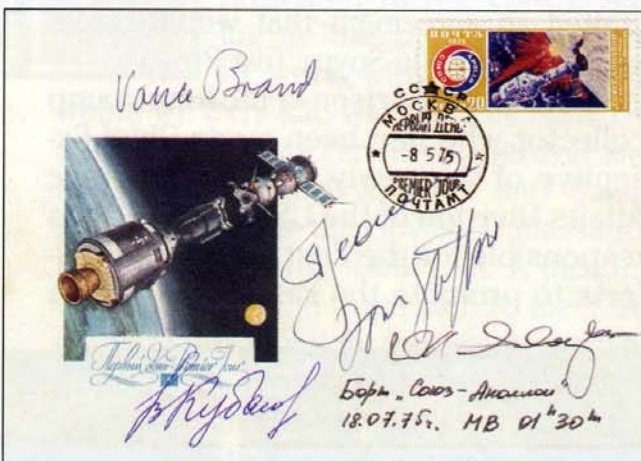
Deke Slayton had always refused to sell the ASTP flown covers he had. In a letter he addressed to Walter Hopferwieser in May 1989, he confirmed that he had signed in space such covers and certified the authenticity of samples submitted to him, but added: "I have no interest in commercializing on the ones that I do have. They will be put on display in a museum at the appropriate time".



Top: Cover type #3 has the ASTP Crew in front of the emblem, mirroring the 10 kopek stamp, in which the crew has been lined up to the same height. Note that only four signatures appear on this cover – Tom Stafford missed this one.

Middle: First Day Cover type #4 with cachet of the two spacecraft approaching for docking and bearing the stamp with Leonov's artwork. Valeri Kubasov gave one of this type of cover to Alexander Khrypov, who was one of the personnel who prepared that flight (optical technique). (From Walter Hopferwieser's collection.)

Bottom: Very similar to the cover above, Cover type #5 was backdated after flight and has two different cancellations. (From Umberto Cavallaro's collection)



Aleksei Leonov probably gave away his covers after his Soyuz 19 flight. One of them he presented to late Josip Kotnik former president of the Astronautic Rocket Association of Croatia. 