

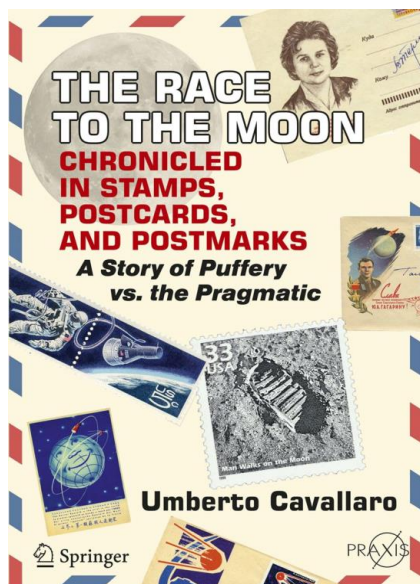


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“The Race to The Moon Chronicled in Stamps, Postcards, and Postmarks” *Book Review*

by Davide Sivoletta



In a few months, we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the first Moon landing, and momentum is already growing as we near this milestone. Awe and admiration for one of the greatest achievements of humankind have never faded as shown by countless articles, magazines and books printed through the years to celebrate such a unique historic event. Having read a good number of such productions, I have become quickly bored with anything new being proposed about the space race and Apollo programme. Most such works look like just a revisit of previous publications and thus add little, if anything, of significant value.

“The Race to The Moon Chronicled in Stamps, Postcards, and Postmarks: A Story of Puffery vs the Pragmatic” by Umberto Cavallaro is a pleasant and welcomed exception to this trend. With a fast-paced, engaging narrative, Umberto Cavallaro guides us through the most significant milestones, both technical and political, that led to Neil Armstrong leaving bootprints on the Moon. But the strong point, the uniqueness of Cavallaro’s work, is

that the story is richly interspersed with philatelic details, shining a light on a description layer never provided before concerning the race to the Moon. Generally speaking, despite their restricted surface, stamps, postcards and postmarks can be conveyors of highly technical content. This is clearly evident in *“The Race to The Moon”* where hundreds of stamps, postcards and postmark reproductions are scattered through the text offering a compelling and graphically engaging addendum to the surrounding text. For instance, throughout chapter four, you can linger on a number of covers issued to celebrate the individual missions of the Gemini programme each accurately reproducing the main technical objectives of such flights and the hardware being used. You even have two covers saluting the US Air Force MOL project!

The author has also invested a considerable effort to show the behind-the-scenes of some of the most iconic stamps issued at that time. Notable examples are the development of the Project Mercury Stamp, the Gemini Twin Space stamp that celebrated Ed White’s spacewalk, and the First Man on the Moon stamp, which are all chronicled through the concept sketches that led to their final iconic version. What about fakes? They too are included, with the remarkable story Charles R. Riser’s fraudulent covers and with the comparison of the more minute particulars between the original and the fake of Baikonur’s first special cancellation.

The Race to Moon was also a story between pragmatism and puffery. There is nothing better than stamps and covers to convey such a contrast. As you go through the book, you can easily discern how the American-issued stamps and covers acknowledge NASA’s achievements under a technical key recognising the human ingenuity that made each of those efforts possible. By contrast, the graphics style and content of the Soviets’ productions are an extension of the regime propaganda. The cosmonauts are painted as pure heroes and missions as grandiose achievements that would lead to the Soviet conquest of space but offering little in terms of technical details.

In summary, *“The Race to the Moon”* is a unique work, a feast for the eyes as well as for the mind. As the 50th anniversary of the first Moon landing is fast approaching, I urge to get hold of this book and relive those frantic years under a new light.