

# 'Fan Birds in Philately'

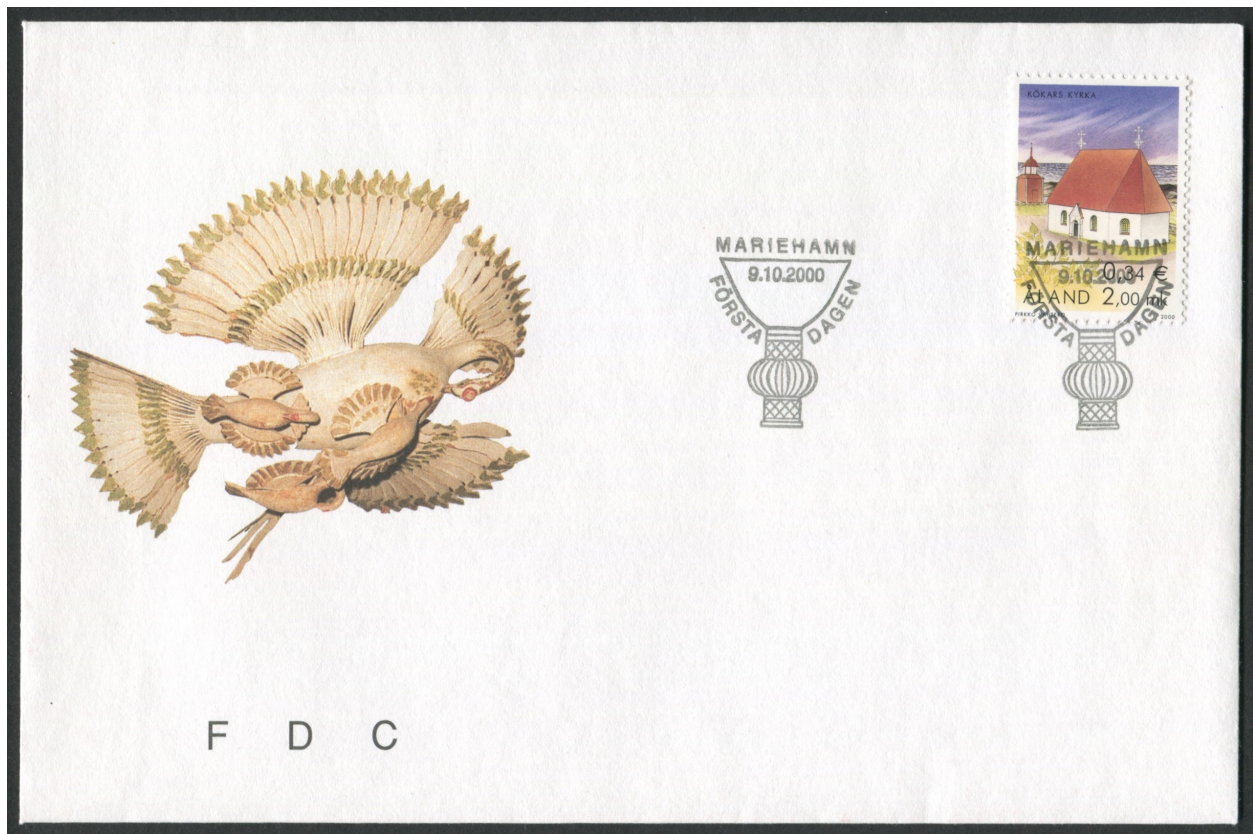
by Sally and David Nye



Finland Scott #730 (29 Nov 1985) Christmas issue showing the wooden fan-carved bird and Christmas red tulips.

For the people of Finland, Christmas has always been the most important time during the midwinter. One reason for this could be that it is celebrated at the time of the year when it is darkest and the light and the warmth connected with Christmas makes it especially festive.

From time past, it was traditional to hang the fan-carved bird at Christmas as a symbol for "good luck."



Aland Islands First Day Cover Scott #179 (issued in 2000) features the Käkars Kyrka (Käkar Church) in Käkar, Aland. Cover cachet showing wooden fan birds: pelican pecks its breast to feed its young.

A pelican feeding its young with blood from its own breast symbolizes the all-sacrificing love and the redemption. The pelican symbolizes Christ.

The Pelican Bird Legend: "The baby pelicans die and after three days of mourning, the parent pelican pecks its own breast until there is a stream of blood. The babies take the blood and are revived." In some legends the parent will die to save its young. Despite the variations of the legends, all symbolize Christ, who shed His blood for mankind, showing His self-sacrificing love.



Sweden Scott #1390 (24 Nov 1981) Wooden pelican bird: Christmas issue engraved by Czeslaw Slania. The pelican fan bird had religious significance ... it symbolized Christ.

In 1913, a Swedish pelican bird was purchased by the Nordiska Museet (museum) in Stockholm, Sweden. This bird was from the parish of Hycklinge in the province of Östergötland, Sweden. The wings of this pelican bird were in a vertical position, which made it look more like a peacock. The "pelican" stamp (above) was based on a replica made by Einar Mellgren.

The wooden bird on the stamp symbolizes the pelican bird.\* It was typical to find the pelican as part of the christening font in the churches. A pelican feeding its young with blood from its own breast symbolizes the all-sacrificing love and the redemption. The pelican symbolizes Christ, whereas, the pulpit dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit.

\*Pelicans as christian symbols were written about as early as the 2nd century. Reference to them can be found in the *Physiologus*, an early christian work of Alexandria, Egypt. Since that time, there are variations of the legend but they are similar: *The baby pelicans die and after three days of mourning, the parent pelican pecks its own breast until there is a stream of blood. The babies take the blood and are revived.* In some legends the parent will die to save its young. However, even though there are variations, *all* of the legends symbolize the redemption and the all-sacrificing love.





Finland Christmas seal issued in 1968 showing the Christmas Fan Bird in blocks of four: top in issued color with trial color proofs following. This fan bird design on these seals was that of Risto Nokelainen.

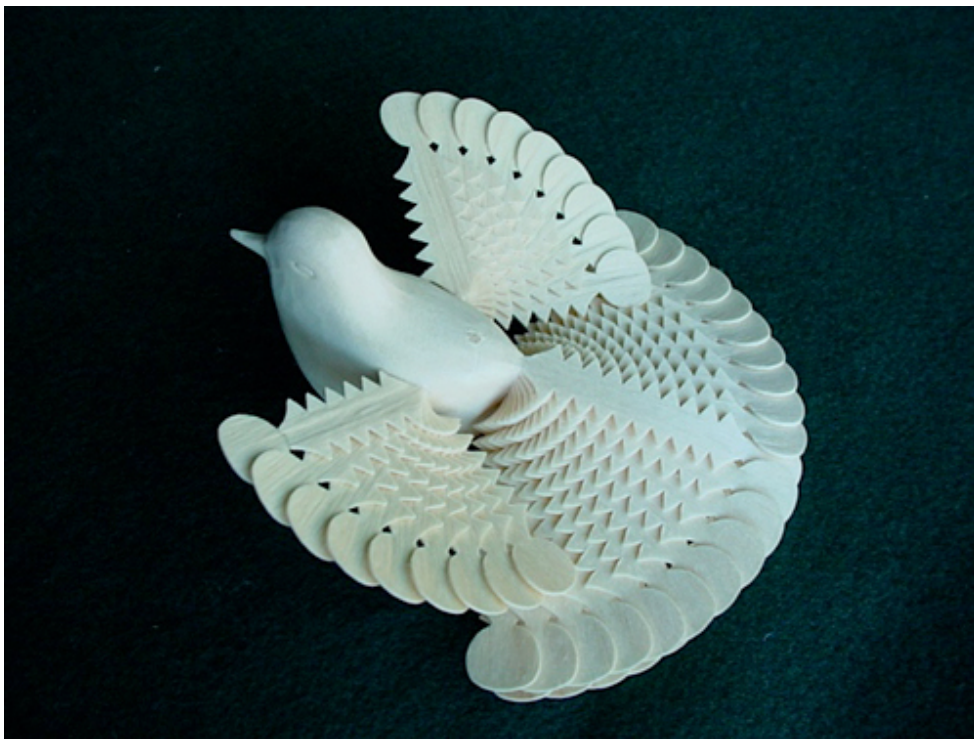
It is wonderful to see Finland's heritage portrayed on their stamps and seals!

It is a wooden fan bird made from one piece of wood. In many European countries the Christmas Bird had more religious symbolism (holy spirit bird) in the past than at the present time. In Finland today, the bird symbolizes "Good Luck."



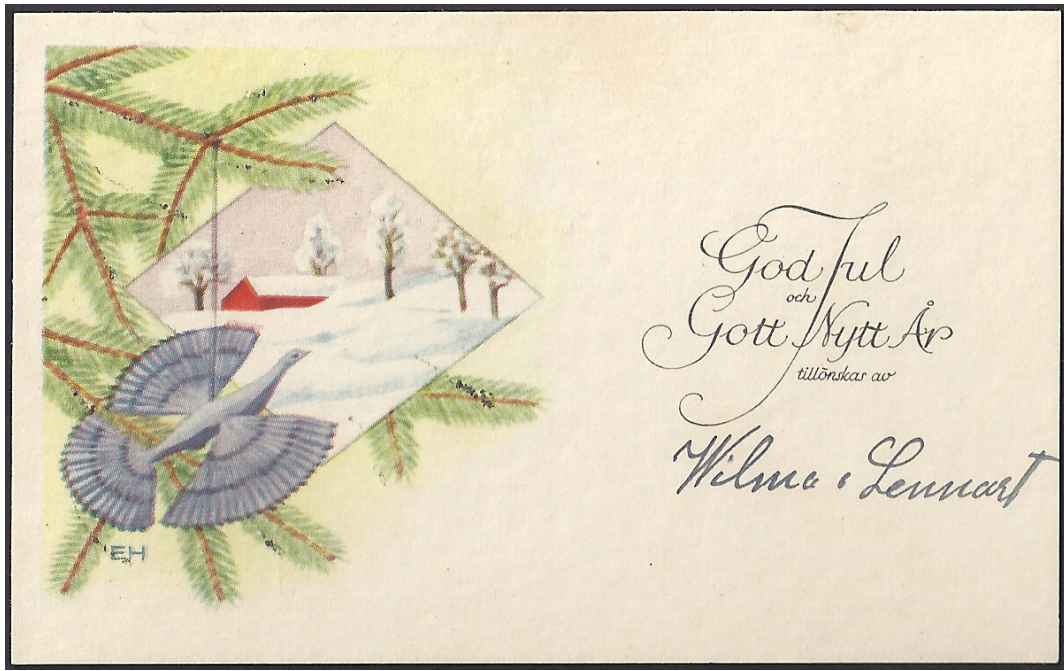
Slovenia Scott #841 (28 May 2010)  
Carved Wooden Fan Bird...a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Starting in the second half of the 18th century, it slowly became a common practice in the alpine part of Slovenia to hang a carved wooden bird symbolizing the Holy Spirit.

Such a bird, together with a cross and other holy icons, completed the so-called home altar or prayer corner "bogkov kot" in the central living space. The "Holy Spirit" bird shown on the stamp was made by Robert Perko.



This "Holy Spirit" fan bird is constructed with three pieces of wood. Artist: Robert Perko of Breznica, Žirovnica, Slovenia. The bird's body and tail is one-piece, then each of the wings are fitted into the body. It is said the Holy Spirit bird brings blessings and well-being to the home. Robert explains that many years ago, beggars would carve these birds for homeowners as an offer of thankfulness for food, drink and a night's shelter.





Postcard showing the fan bird.

The "fan bird" is truly an Old World folk art that encompassed vast regions of Scandinavia and Europe (including parts of Russia).

The fan bird was a religious symbol as well as a decorative item in many cultures.

By 1900, the fan bird was so common that two well-known ethnographers, Hammarstadt (Sweden) and Andree (Germany), called it a "cultural phenomenon."

These wooden birds were found in the churches, government buildings ...homes of the peasant as well as the elite. This phenomenon extended from the villages of the fertile farmlands to the tiny huts in the mountain ranges.

However, because of the devastation of World War II, fan-carving along with its rich and meaningful symbolism almost became lost.

Now ...due to the fan-carvers of today, it is enjoying a renaissance.

The bird, but the dove in particular, has been a symbol for most religions and other belief systems since the beginning of time. As Christendom came into being, they too used the dove as a symbol in their religion.

As time went on, Christian leaders became concerned about the use of the dove as a Christian symbol because other religions or pagan beliefs had used it as well. Because of this, the Christian leaders gathered to discuss this crucial matter. The meeting took place in Constantinople in the year 536 A.D. It was here that the Council of Constantinople decreed that henceforth the dove can truly be used as a Christian symbol.

Thus, in 536, the dove officially became the symbol of the Holy Spirit. Since that time, as we all know, the dove has appeared as a Christian symbol in religious artwork.



Sweden Scott #1391 (24 Nov 1981)  
Wooden bird: Christmas issue  
engraved by Czeslaw Slania.

The wooden dove shown on the Swedish postage stamp represents the Holy Spirit, a Christian symbol in Sweden. In the 17th century the dove fan bird was found in most churches. It hung directly over the minister's head. It was hung with a string from the pulpit, hence the name "pulpit bird."

The original bird that was the inspiration for this stamp was found in Hogsters Parish Farm, Dalsland, Sweden. The Nordiska Museet (museum) in Stockholm, Sweden, purchased it and then commissioned fan carver Einar Mellgren of Fagerlid, Sweden to make a replica. This replica was used for the motif for this stamp.

Today in the Swedish churches, the fan bird dove no longer hangs under the pulpit canopy. In its place, as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, is a solid wooden dove.



It is a widespread custom in Sweden to hang a bird from the ceiling at Christmas. Originally it was a religious act. The custom comes from the church where a carved wooden dove hangs under the pulpit canopy over the minister's head. It symbolizes the Holy Ghost.

For religious people in Sweden, the fan bird was the "dove" of peace and it was hung up during Christmastide so the Holy Spirit would reign in the home.

In the home, it was customary to hang these wooden birds over the table near lighted candles or a stove where the heat would cause the bird to slowly turn ..as if alive.



"Reading the Gospel at Christmas" by Anders Montan, 1878, Nordiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden (Exhibit Nm 118008).





Upon the European continent, the fan bird dove is known by many names: Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost, bird of inspiration, dove-of-peace, ceiling bird, Christmas bird, chip dove, cuckoo, Easter bird, spirit bird, Christmas dove, dove of baptism, ceiling dove, whittled bird, wooden dove, ceiling cuckoo, cuckoo of Karelia, Karelian cuckoo, chip cuckoo, Christmas cockbird, Christmas pigeon, splint bird, etc.

Traditionally, the fan bird is hung in the home by a string so that it may move freely with air currents. It seems to come alive and symbolizes the Holy Spirit, protection, health, and happiness for the family. Customs about the bird may vary in different parts of Europe and Scandinavia. Some are more of a religious symbol than others, but all are about happiness, protection and good health.