

ICAO TIE-INS

By Albert Pelsser

A Hans Erni at Home

This story of the series titled “**ICAO TIE-INS**” focuses on the prominent Swiss Artist Hans Erni and his close connection to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). The ICAO’s Headquarters in Montréal is a striking architectural creation which has been adorned over the years with works of art given by the Members States or Organizations having a relation with aviation.

Hans Erni (1909-2015) enjoyed an international reputation as one of the most brilliant and versatile artists of the 20th century. In his native Switzerland, Erni is the nation's most popular artist. His works have been exhibited throughout Europe, Asia, Australia and North America, and are included in major museum collections and public buildings around the world. The most extensive collection of his works is housed in the Hans Erni Museum (inaugurated in 1979), part of Lucerne's vast Swiss Transport Museum. This collection spans more than a half century of Erni's works and includes more than 400 of his oil, tempera and acrylic paintings; sculptures; lithographs; drawings; engravings; mosaics; etchings and ceramics.

To the public, Hans Erni is best known for his numerous wall-decorations and sculptures, displayed practically everywhere in Switzerland; little is known, however, about his talented stamp designs. He designed over 90 postage stamps for Liechtenstein, Switzerland and the United Nations (UN), many of which contained peace dove motifs. His very first stamp designs for Switzerland were issued on 28 April 1949 (Pro Aero set) showing the dynamics of flight.

Erni also produced art that is found into UN collections. Among those, he created a mural titled *Man in flight* which the Swiss Government gave to ICAO. It is an aesthetically impressive and symbolically appropriate piece of art. This mural in anodized aluminum was originally planned for the entrance lobby to ICAO’s prior headquarters on 1000 Sherbrooke West and was installed there in 1975. It covered three sides of the main elevator core of the building (see at Figure 1); its main side shows Daedalus on the left and Pegasus, the winged horse, on the right. In early 1997, the mural was relocated in the lobby of ICAO’s current headquarters on 999 Boulevard Robert-Bourassa.

Within the framework of ICAO’s 40th anniversary celebrations, the main figure of Erni’s mural was adapted to become *Icarus* flying towards the sun. The picture of Icarus was then recommended to ICAO Contracting States as design for stamps commemorating this anniversary; several countries took the opportunity to celebrate this anniversary with the suggested design (see sample at Figure 2).

Icarus’ picture was also the subject of ICAO’s 40th anniversary poster (see at Figure 3), and later was regularly used by ICAO on covers for its documents and CDs (see sample at Figure 4).

Daedalus built a labyrinth for king Minos to trap the Minotaur. However, he built it so cunningly that he could not escape after he built it; thus he made wings so that he and his son Icarus could fly away. One can see this image of the winged man in two ways. On the positive side, it represents man's triumph over his natural limits through science. The image of Daedalus and Icarus soaring through the sky is a source of inspiration for inventors and explorers who look to the duo as pioneers, with a general sense of freedom that comes with this image and hope to anyone who dreams of escaping their current circumstances and achieving something grander.

But then there is the negative side: nature triumphs over man. Portrayals of Icarus' descent also emphasize the cautionary part of the myth, which is basically this: if you try to achieve too much too soon, you might end up

failing miserably; better to accept average success than to risk everything by trying to attain glory.

It is interesting to note that Switzerland had issued on 9 March 1981 a stamp for the 50th anniversary of Swissair Company with the representation of Icarus and flow lines, a design derived from Erni's mural (see maximum card at figure 5). The surtax of 1 franc was for the Pro Aero Foundation; Pro Aero is a Swiss national foundation, the goal of which is to promote aeronautics.

As we advance into the space age, Icarus is well alive in everyone's lives. The miracle of flight like the creative mind is boundless; Icarus has been an undeniable success with generation of artists. The figure of Icarus flying towards the sun was also a favorite theme of Hans Erni. By collecting stamps, Erni's works have been brought into the heart of our homes!

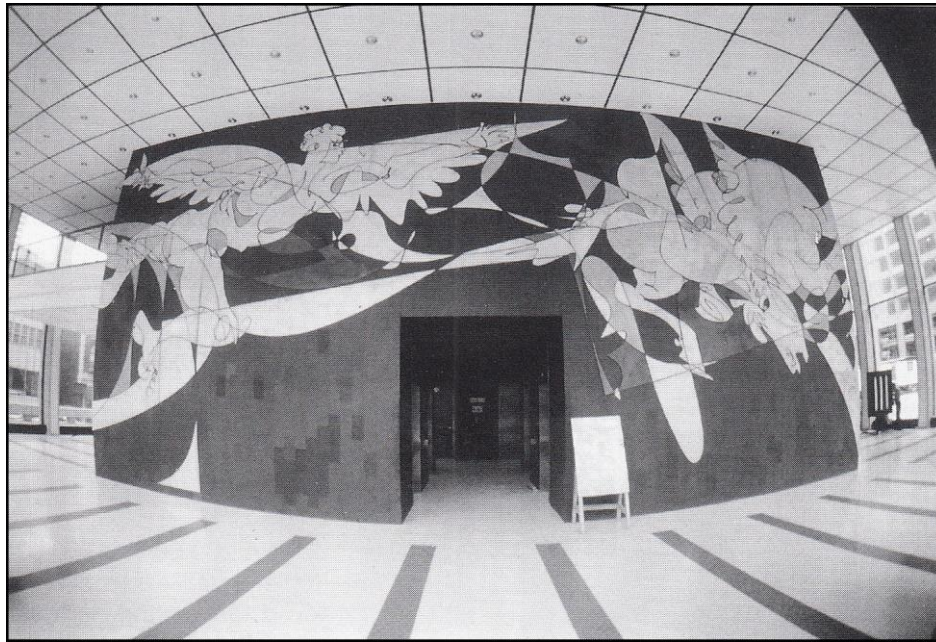


Figure 1: Mural titled *Man in flight* in ICAO's prior headquarters.

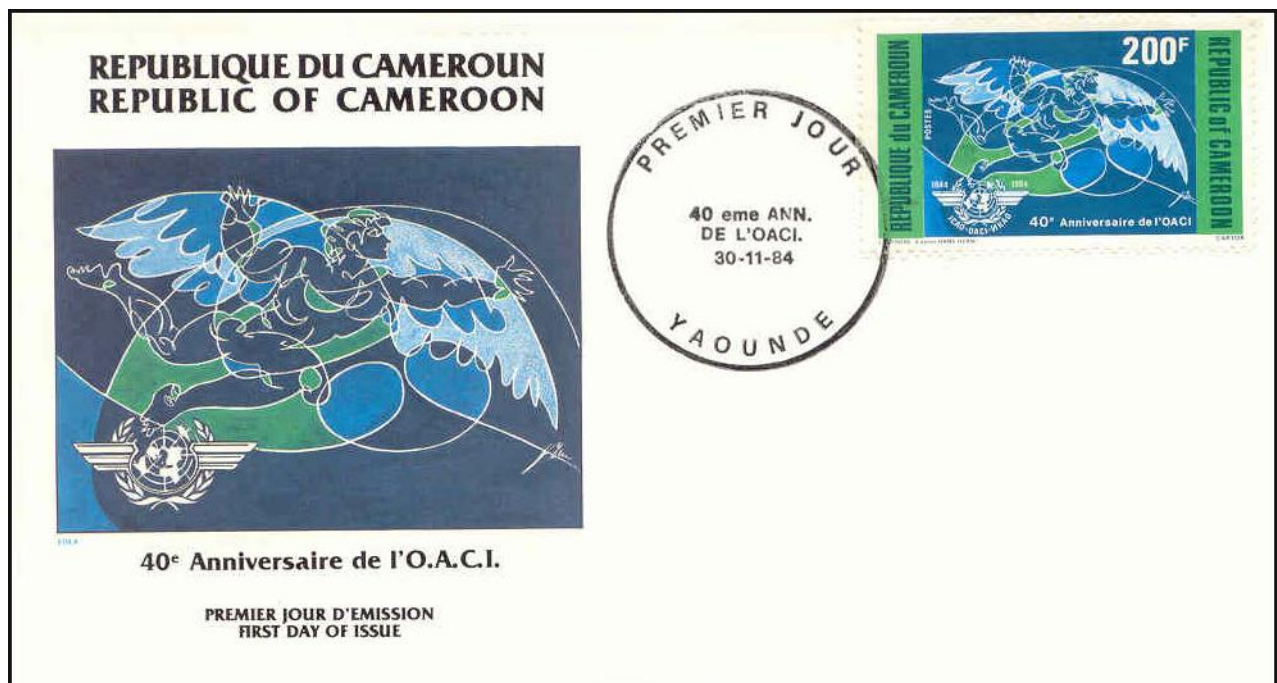


Figure 2: Cameroon – First Day Cover commemorating the 40th anniversary of ICAO.



Figure 3: Poster prepared for the 40th anniversary of ICAO.



Figure 4: Front cover of a CD showing Icarus flying towards the sun.



Figure 5: Maximum card issued by Switzerland for the 50th anniversary of Swissair.

- END -