

HISTORY OF OPHTHALMOLOGY TOLD BY POSTAGE STAMPS

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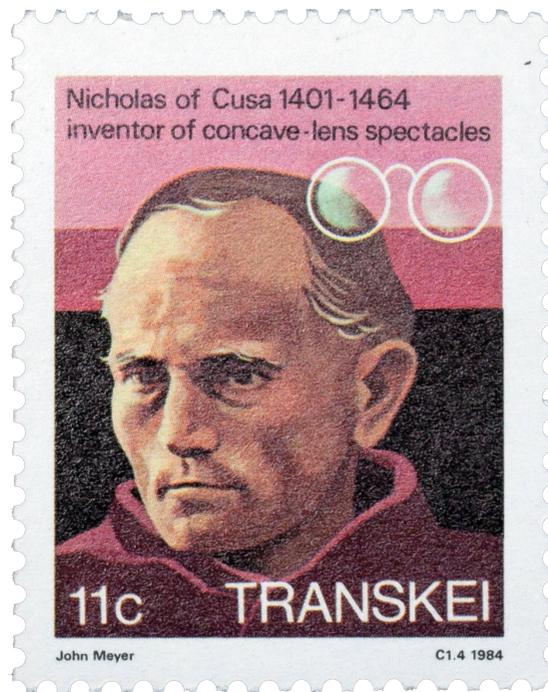
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FORERUNNERS



Nicholas of Cusa

(1401-1464)

The invention of concave lenses to correct myopia is often credited to Nicholas of Cusa, a Cardinal and diplomat of the Roman Catholic Church. This is based on his monograph "De beryllo" (On Eyeglasses), published in Latin in 1458, where he described "transparent beryl stones to which concave and convex forms were given; by looking through them you could perceive what was previously invisible". Up to then spectacles were only equipped with convex lenses to correct for presbyopia.



Horus is a falcon-headed solar god. The symbol was pictured in Egyptian iconography as the letter “R” with the eye inside the top circle and it became a symbol of “healing”. It is also believed to be the origin of “Rx” in our prescriptions.

The falcon headed god is shown on a stamp issued for the 15th International Congress of Ophthalmology held in Egypt in 1937 and another one issued for the Congress of International Geography in 1925 also in Egypt. Note that in that time French was also an official language in Egypt!



The Ebers Papyrus of about 1550 B.C. is among the most important medical papyri of ancient Egypt. It is one the oldest preserved medical documents anywhere. The Ebers Papyrus was discovered in Luxor in 1873-74 by Georg Ebers, German Egyptologist, and is now stored in the library of the University of Leipzig, Germany.

The scroll is 20 m long and contains 900 recipes in hieroglyphs among them more than 20 related to eye diseases: strabismus, blepharitis, chalazion, ectropion, pterygium, conjunctivitis, trachoma with trichiasis, leukoma, iritis, cataract, night blindness, carcinoma and others.

Note that UAR stands for United Arab Republic: the former union between Egypt and Syria. The union began in 1958 and existed until 1961 when Syria seceded from the union. Egypt (which stayed alone in the union) continued to be known as the "United Arab Republic" until 1971.



Pope John XXI

(1215-1277)

Also called Pedro Hispano although he was from Portugal. He was Pope from 1276 until his death about 8 months later. He was the only Portuguese Pope and the only ophthalmologist who made it as a pope. Note how he is practicing couching of the lens with a needle as a surgical cure for cataract.



Johann Eisenbarth

(1663-1727)

Was a German surgeon specialized in cataract surgery. Although, he was referred to as "Dr. Eisenbarth", he had no medical degree, but he was considered a skilled surgeon and was bestowed with privileges by German royalty.

Eisenbarth was a "travelling surgeon" (like Dr. John Taylor who operated Bach and Händel). He usually travelled with a large entourage of up to 120 persons. This group included entertainers, harlequins and musicians who performed in a carnival-like atmosphere while Eisenbarth was operating. This spectacle attracted large crowds, and the loud music helped drown out the cries of pain from his patients.



Benjamin Franklin

(1706-1790)

One of the founding fathers of USA, is usually credited with the creation of the first pair of bifocals in the early 1760s. In a political cartoon "Ben and Me", pictured by Walt Disney in 1953, the mouse Amos helps Ben (Benjamin Franklin) to invent bifocals by breaking the glasses into two horizontal pieces.

Norman Rockwell was a 20th century American painter and illustrator. He used "vertical bifocals" instead of horizontal bifocals so he could look from side to side - from his canvas to a distant model, rather than up and down.