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Graphic Aspects of Novelty Gimmick Stamps

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The application of ink, adhesive and perforations to paper, resulting in a design of some sort creates a postage stamp. This is how stamps were produced for over a century and, for the most part, this method will continue for the foreseeable future. However, there are variations on this theme, and that is what this article is about: Gimmick Stamps.

A gimmick stamp is any postage stamp that is unusual, not like the regular stamps issued by postal services. These stamps can differ in size, shape, printing technique, material or any other aspect that adds uniqueness to the stamp issue. The stamp is issued by a postal service hoping that people will buy it and save it, rather than use it as postage. This provides a financial gain to the postal service for sold but unused stamps.

Gimmick stamps have existed longer than the life of their name. The term “gimmick stamp” was coined by a philatelic writer in reviewing Bhutan’s playable phonograph record stamps of 1973 (fig 1), and the name



Fig.1. Bhutan 1973. Set of seven stamps. [Sc 152E]

has been used ever since. There are two categories of gimmick stamps: odd-shaped stamps (circles, diamonds, ovals, triangles, hexagons and other unusual shapes) and novelty stamps. The latter are produced in a way that involves application of a substance

other than regular ink to a paper stamp, the stamp is not made of paper at all, or there are other components that make the stamp unique. In the balance of this article I



Fig.2. Switzerland 1845. [Sc 3L1]

will present various examples of these novelty gimmick stamps.

Embossing of paper has occurred for centuries so it was to be expected that this technique would be used to produce postage stamps. The Swiss canton of Basel produced the first embossed stamp in 1845 (fig 2). Not only was the white dove embossed but this was the first multicolor

postage stamp, printed using the letterpress method. Embossing has been utilized in stamp production ever since and is sometimes combined with other gimmicks.

Canada issued an embossed stamp in 1998 (fig 3) to honor health care professionals. The stamp is lithographed with silver and copper-colored ink overlaying the embossing to highlight that portion of the design.



Fig.3. Canada 1998. [Sc 1735]

The island nation of Tonga began the gimmick stamp craze

cont. on p 15

THIS ISSUE

Graphic Aspects of Novelty Gimmick

Stamps	13 & 15–16
GPA News	14
The Farnese Book of Hours	17
‘Interactive’ Postage Stamps	18–20
Albrecht Dürer Study Unit	21
New Issues of Graphic Interest	21–24

cont. from pg 13

in the 1960s. In 1964 they issued a gilt foil set of airmail stamps using lithography to apply color to each island-shaped stamp (fig 4). The



Fig.4. Tonga 1964. [Sc C9]

set commemorates the Pan-Pacific and Southeast Asia Women’s Association Conference held there and is embossed using gold-colored metal foil. One example is shown above.

Novelty stamps include items with flocked paper, appliqués, metal foil stamping and foreign substances infused into the printing ink. Austria has a famous glass crystal industry and has used crystals on some of its stamps including Sc1966 from 2004, Sc2161 from 2008 and Sc2580 from 2015 shown at right (fig 5). The 2015 stamp is also embossed on leather. The stamp represents lederhosen, and the crystals represent the metal rivets used in making the shorts.



Fig.5. Austria 2015. [Sc 2580]

Flocked paper is a build-up of wood cellulose on the stamp surface, giving it a texture like wool or felt. Iceland issued a stamp in 2017 showing a national product, wool (fig 6), and Switzerland issued a cute pig in 2019 (fig 7). The USPS issued a sheet of sports ball stamps in 2018 (Sc5203-5210) that cover the cellulose with a glossy paper. Each ball has a three dimensional feel to it.



Fig.6. Iceland 2017. [Sc 1433]



Fig.7. Switzerland 2019. [Sc 1709]

A number of postal services have issued cloth stamps. Canada issued the largest cloth stamp on the 50th anniversary of their maple leaf flag in 2015



Fig.8. Canada 2015. [Sc 2808]

(fig 8). That stamp is printed on rayon. Hong Kong has issued silk stamps, including one commemorating the 2012 lunar new year printed on imported Italian silk (fig 9), and in 2017 a satin stamp commemorating its signature woman’s dress which is also perforated in an odd shape (fig 10)—another gimmick. In each of these



Fig.9. Hong Kong 2012. [Sc1487]



Fig.10. Hong Kong 2017. [Sc 1890]



Fig.11. Austria 2005. [Sc 2019]

examples the cloth is attached to a paper layer, and the adhesive is then applied to the paper.

Another version of a cloth stamp is a woven or embroidered stamp. Austria, Liechtenstein and Switzerland have produced several such stamps: a 2005 Austrian stamp is shown at left (fig 11).

Another technique for producing a stamp is to use two printing methods and mix some unusual substance with the ink used for the printing. Austria issued “mail from a different world” in 2006—a mini-sheet showing a round stamp and a meteor (fig 12). This photogravure-printed stamp includes a silk-screened meteor containing pulverized

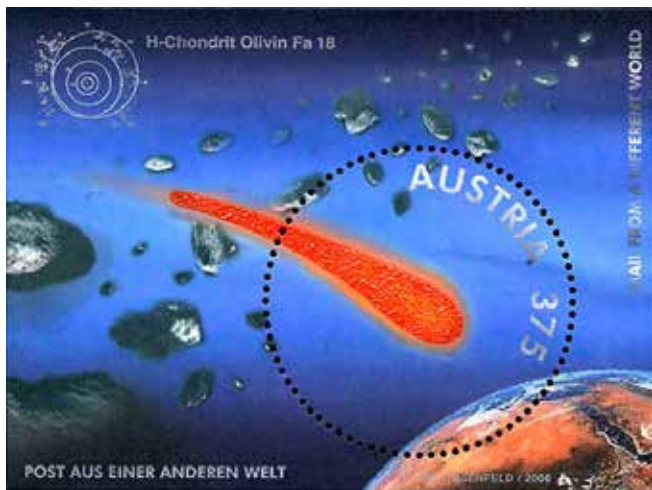


Fig.12. Austria 2006. [Sc 2042]

meteor dust. A few years later Iceland issued three stamps in 2010 to commemorate the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano (fig 13). (I’d wager there are people in Iceland that cannot pronounce that name). The lithographed stamps include silk-screen printing that contains ash from the volcano.



Fig.13. Iceland 2010. [Sc 1206-1208]

Another printing technique is to use chemicals in the ink to produce glow-in-the-dark stamps. Hong Kong produced a 2008 set of jellyfish on granite paper (fig14). After exposure to light, the stamps will glow in the dark.

Plastic stamps include lenticular items with a three dimensional appearance or, when viewed from a different angle, a moving image.

There are many such stamps. In addition, in 2008 Austria produced a soccer ball stamp silk-screened on polyurethane foam, the material that soccer balls are made from (fig 15). The stamp is also round like a soccer ball, another gimmick, and is thick and spongy in texture.

The use of wood, instead of paper derived from it, has been utilized by a few postal services for their stamps. Austria, Djibouti, Spain and Switzerland have used wood to produce stamps. Switzerland issued the silk-screened stamp in 2004 (Sc1188), shown below, to promote its timber industry.

Novelty gimmick stamps is a lengthy subject, and I could go on but I will close now. I recommend interested readers scan through their stamp catalogs of countries

you collect to determine if those countries have issued any gimmick stamps: odd shaped or novelty or both. You can also find gimmick stamps in the “New Issues” section of this journal. It can be a fun endeavor. You may discover a new collecting interest. Or maybe you already have some of the items I have shown in your collection—Enjoy!



Fig.14. Hong Kong 2008. [Sc 1324]



Fig.15. Austria 2008. [Sc 2146]



Fig.16. Switzerland 2004. [Sc 1188]