

FORGERY ISSUES IN PHILATELY

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Stamps must be recognised as works of art albeit in miniature. Many artists specialise in the design of stamps. However stamps have 2 extra properties - they are convertible currency and they are collected by very serious enthusiasts. They also exist in numbers greater than one.

If we look at a classic example, here the 4d. Western Australian stamp of 1854 exists as an error with the frame inverted: 64 sheets were printed in 4 panes so 256 copies of this error existed. We know of 12 copies that have survived and these, when rarely offered on the market, fetch in excess of \$100,000. For a piece of paper of 3 1/2 sq cms, it makes the average McCubbin or Tom Roberts worth \$250,000,000 and Blue Poles worth in excess of \$60 billion! Given that all items of currency are potentially the target for forgery, the extra aspect of a collector value beyond their primary function makes them an added target for forgery.

If therefore we look at stamps in danger of being forged - who are the victims? Here we have 2 potential victims; namely the Government who issues the originals to provide a service for which the charge is levied; but also the collector who may well be prepared to pay large sums of money in the pursuit of their hobby in the expectation that the items will retain, if not later enhance, the price paid for such rare items.

If we look first at the risk of forgery to the Government; there is currently less chance of worthwhile profit for the forger in this day and age. In the past there certainly was a risk and with this in mind all Governments took precautions with their products to try to eliminate this risk to their revenue.

Stamps - and we are primarily talking about postage stamps - are now over 150 years old dating from their inception in 1840. At first the methods used to obviate the loss of revenue by forgery consisted of trying to create stamps of great detail in the design coupled with using security papers such as watermarking or similar security devices. In spite of these precautions the early days of prepayment of mail by stamps did create opportunities for forgery - mainly due to the lack of understanding and observation by the junior staff who were processing the mail. Spain had to redesign their stamps each year in 1850's as forgers copied the issues as they appeared due to the rather simplistic artwork. However the greatest forgery whereby the Government was defrauded occurred in the U.K. in the 1870's when forgers copied the 1/- stamp and used them at the Stock Exchange Post Office for some 20 years. The stamps there were used on telegrams that were later destroyed. So the forgers made their own stamps and collected the revenue as no accounting for genuine issues was required. It is not difficult to imagine the loss of revenue by this forgery in the range of £75,000. This was a great deal of money in those days.

Australia also suffered a minor fraud against the Post Office in 1932. The new Sydney Harbour Bridge stamps were forged by a lottery ticket salesman who used them on his application forms. Unfortunately for him he sent a form to a philatelist in Adelaide who recognised the forged stamp and alerted the Post office. They, albeit belatedly since they did not immediately appreciate the seriousness of the offence, went to the forger's premises - conveniently given on the envelope - and were able to effect a successful prosecution.

However it is in the area of collector forgery that the bulk of stamps are falsified. Naturally this is due to the large sums of money that the collector will pay for items they desperately need to complete their collections. Here we have a double exposure since some collectors want to be defrauded and will buy dubious items to convince themselves that they now have a rare stamp for which they paid a bargain price. To this end there have been forgers who have

specialised in producing forgeries for philatelists for virtually as long as there have been stamp collectors. Here we differentiate between forgery intended to defraud and those created to satisfy the gap in the collector's album.

So firstly we have forgeries defined as those intended to defraud the Post Office, then fakes intended to defraud the collector and which are sold as genuine. Facsimiles are where the "artist" is creating an item for the collector to have in lieu of the real thing; and finally there are bogus stamps that are for the collector but which were never stamps issued by a postal authority at all.

The issue for the philatelic world is to eliminate as far as possible the presence of false items of any sort from collections. Because philately is a competitive hobby with exhibitions at which valuable prizes and medals are won as well as the underlying resale value to perhaps a less knowledgeable buyer, 2 procedures have been developed to combat these practises in the hobby.

The first is the authentication of any stamp by a panel set up in a reputable organisation such as a Philatelic Society who will examine any item be it stamp or cover. They will then issue a certificate giving their opinion on the genuineness or otherwise of the item submitted together with its photograph for future reference. Many such certificates for rare stamps are therefore in existence though modern techniques are tending to throw some doubt on old certificates. These are now being challenged even those issued many years ago by highly respected Societies such as even the Royal Philatelic Society of London whose expertise would go back over 100 years.

The second method of authentication is at the competitive level where exhibitions are being held around the world. Such exhibitions appoint a jury of up to 40 people - qualified by their national organisations for their expertise - who examine the collections on display and award medals and prizes according to the merit that each one shows. Part of that jury will be designated the Expert Team whose job is to scientifically examine any doubtful item on display as well as do a random check on some of the collections. It's a sort of "drug testing" scheme. Any forged items (unless they are identified as such in the display whereby points for knowledge are achieved) will result in the collection being downgraded or even disqualified.

For this work an increasing level of scientific equipment is being marshalled. Currently it is standard practice to have a dissecting style microscope with magnification up to 60 times, (more is liable to confuse rather than clarify), with additional overhead lighting for shadow illumination of any embossed marks. Then ultra violet and infra red cabinets are essential for detecting repaired damage or illegal cleaning (eg. removal of fiscal markings). A photocopier and a comparison microscope are also valuable to this team. The latter is important as we should have the genuine to compare with the questioned item. Finally computer facilities can be used for the sophisticated superimposition and comparison of doubtful markings such as postmarks, overprints or surcharges.

A level of really high powered science can be used by subjecting stamps to nuclear magnetic resonance where the constituent ink components can be quantified against the known genuine article. As in all these investigations the method must naturally be non destructive.

At such exhibitions it is necessary for the owner to submit their authentication certificates which have been referred to earlier. These are then available to be checked against the stamps displayed. However a new problem has recently been uncovered in that forged certificates have been found and this has created the need for non forgeable certificates!

One anomalous development has evolved for certain forgeries in that they have themselves become more valuable than the genuine article. As a result the forged 1/- Stock Exchange forgery of 1872 is worth 25 times more than the standard stamp of that period, whilst the forged Sydney Harbour Bridge is worth a thousand times the value of the common, genuine 2d. stamp.

Over the 150 years that stamp collecting has been a major hobby - the king of hobbies and the hobby of kings -- there has been a considerable literature developed on all aspects of the pastime, not least in the realm of forgeries. Hence all collectors have access to the accumulated knowledge of past generations of philatelists who have left their expertise to warn the unwary or the untutored.

Many factors are involved in the reasons for philatelic forgery. Not only the need for creating rare stamps influences production. Many common stamps were forged to satisfy simple collector demand. It is also the rate of postage or the route that a letter took that can greatly enhance the value of an item. A strike/postmark from a small post office which had little activity can enhance the value of a common stamp by as much as a 1000 fold. Similarly the existence of an error created during the printing process or the method of usage will lead to an exalted value for a stamp with the need for the collector to own an example.

I referred to the cleaning of fiscal markings as an unacceptable practice. This is because philately is essentially a postal use hobby. As many high value stamps had little postal use but, by virtue of their dual postage and revenue function, had greater fiscal usage, if the fiscal mark can be removed with or without an added faked postal marking, then the value/rarity is enhanced to make the item "acceptable".

As I stated many collectors almost ask to be defrauded. Hence many stamps have been created for their collections that are easily detected when placed side by side with the genuine. However the primitive method of production of many early stamps has often rendered their reproduction easier. Also the lack of information as to what had actually been issued by a distant postal administration meant that many stamps were created by forgers without knowledge being available to denounce such stamps as forgeries. Here we see the gullibility of collectors to accept patently spurious items.

At one stage this conference was to encompass the Heritage situation vis a vis Art. Certainly this Act has impinged on philately as many valuable collections are taken overseas for exhibition every year. Much of the material in these collections is unique Australian history in the form of letters and the products of printing processes (dies, trials, essays, proofs etc.). This is aside from the surviving examples of stamps which may exist only in single figures. Such material having a high monetary value has needed reassurance to be given to the Department that the material will return to Australia and not be disposed of whilst it is on display abroad. It is standard practice for these collections to be carried by a commissioner appointed by the Australian Philatelic Federation. It is that person's responsibility to complete all requirements of the Act and guarantee the safe return of the collections if they are designated by the Dept. as of heritage value.

In conclusion then you might say that collectors only have themselves to blame and I am sure that that is not just applicable to stamp collectors. However, as indicated, since there often so much money at stake as well as the prestige and glory in winning medals, there will always be a market for the forgery and people prepared to fill that need. Few philatelic forgers are caught largely because the courts see little or no crime in such activities unless the postal service has been the victim. Caveat emptor should be the golden rule for all collectors but few will abide by such a dictum at least until they get their fingers burnt at the time when they come to sell their beloved collections.