



UPU specimen stamps and the world's postal museums: an accidental history

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Founded in 1874, the UPU International Bureau's mission was to collect and share official statistics and regulatory documents received from member countries, and to assist host countries in organizing the periodic UPU Congresses. Following the 1878 Congress in Paris, the Bureau began circulating copies of member countries' postage stamps.¹ These exchanges were meant to ensure that mail bearing legitimate stamps was handled according to UPU conventions, and to facilitate identification of postal forgeries in the global mail stream.

There is little evidence that postal administrations used these reference collections as intended, however. Some British colonies and Latin American countries seem to have destroyed them.² Particularly in remote places, they seem to have "leaked" out of official archives into the collector market, and examples have been known to be in private hands since at least the 1930s. This dispersal accelerated somewhat following World War II, as many former colonies achieved independence. The sudden appearance in the 1950s of a large number of these stamps in the collector market was noted in philatelic periodicals, and by the 1980s the first collector monographs and catalogues were compiled.³ Since then, thousands of Bureau-distributed specimen stamps have been sold at public auction, many still pasted to original ledger pages that indicate their provenance from official archives.

In other cases, however, postal operators transferred their UPU collections to museums. The General Post Office in London began donating its specimens to the British Museum in 1914.⁴ Similar transfers formed the basis of renowned postal and philatelic museums including: the Musée de la Poste, Paris; the Museumsstiftung Post und Telekommunikation, Archiv für Philatelie, Bonn; The Postal Museum, London; the Postmuseum, Stockholm; the Museo Postal y Telegráfico, Madrid; and similar museums in Singapore, Portugal, Serbia, the Russian Federation, and other countries.

Acquisition of these UPU collections brought new, transnational perspectives to museums that were previously nationally focused. Exhibitions helped raise public awareness of the world as "a single postal territory" based on cooperation. The fact that museums began collecting stamps from across the world through these transfers helped to legitimize philately as a field of study, a status already enjoyed by numismatics.

These and other themes are evident in a case study of the UPU reference collection at the Smithsonian Institution's National Postal Museum in Washington, D.C., which was acquired from 1911 onwards.⁵ Unlike many of the other postal museums I have mentioned, the Smithsonian Institution did not maintain its UPU reference collection as a discrete entity. Today, it is scattered throughout several different places in the collection, including a mounted international collection, an "international master collection", and 500+ general world-wide stockbooks.

¹ These are generally referred to as "specimen" stamps by Anglophone philatelists, owing to Great Britain's practice of overprinting or perforating them with this word as a security measure before forwarding them to the International Bureau. Other nations used equivalent words such as *muestra*, *saggio* and *ultramar*, or cancelled their specimens with a postmark. Most countries, including the United States, supplied ordinary, unused stamps.

² van den Berg, George. "Philatelic Notes". *Stamps: A Weekly Magazine of Philately* 45:12:588 (18 December 1943), p. 413.

³ See for example Marcus Samuel, *Specimen Stamps of the Crown Colonies, 1857–1948* (London: Royal Philatelic Society London, 1976) and James Bendon, *UPU Specimen Stamps: The Distribution of Specimen Stamps by the International Bureau of the Universal Postal Union* (Limassol, Cyprus: by the author, 1988).

⁴ Memorandum of R.W. Hatswell, April 1908, quoted in Mackay (1966), page 7, footnote 9. The philatelic collections moved to the British Library in 1973.

⁵ Smithsonian Institution. *Report of the [US] National Museum*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912. p. 27. The UPU collection, which began arriving from the Post Office Department in 1911, was described by the Smithsonian as a "practically unrivaled series of postage stamps, stamped envelopes, and post cards, representing essentially every issue of the United States and foreign countries since the commencement of the present postal system".



As a result, many of the stamps received from the UPU can no longer be identified, because most UPU members did not security protect their stamps in any way. Only Great Britain and Spain and their colonies and protectorates regularly overprinted or perfined their stamps, allowing them to be traced back to International Bureau stamp distributions. Some additional UPU specimens from other countries can be identified because they are in fact special printings, created specifically for the International Bureau and distinguishable in some way from regularly issued stamps. In other cases, a country included a stamp or series in its UPU distribution, then cancelled the issue entirely. Often the UPU specimens of these stamps are the only copies known to exist. In such cases these “prepared but not issued” stamps are considered true rarities by collectors.

The Smithsonian’s archive of stamps from the International Bureau distributions has never been reported on before, and this work in progress is the first historical study of the UPU exchanges and the unintended role they have played in the development of the world’s earliest postal museums.

Selected sources

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