

Pretty Stamps, Ugly Stamps

Introduction

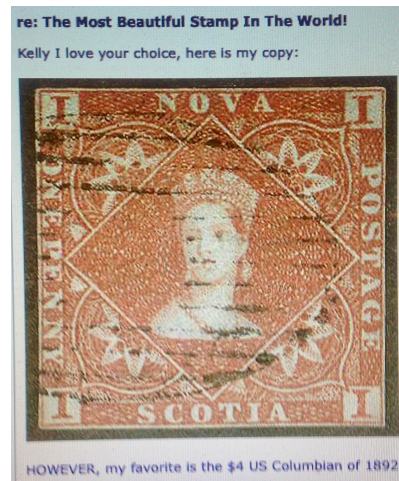
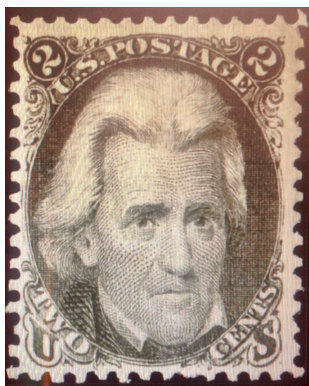
FOREWORD, APOLOGIA AND EXPLANATION — What happened to the series of essays about the postal history of southern, central and eastern British Africa? The thing is, we're about halfway through, and I thought it would be relaxing to take a break from linear/chronological thinking, not to mention the rampant imperialism. We were up to the end of Boer sovereignty in south Africa. As the Brits and Boers collaborated on the consolidation of what would become the Union of South Africa, the Colonial Office in London proceeded apace on building its empire. Stamps trace the history of these colonial projects in Bechuanaland (1886), Zululand (1888), Swaziland (1899) and Zanzibar (1890). Before nation-states formed came the British South Africa Company (1890), also the stamp-issuing entities of British East Africa (1890) and British Central Africa (1890). There were more stamp-issuing countries as borders were settled in ensuing decades. We'll get back to that exciting, story-rich subject, with plentiful illustrations of often splendid stamps. But first ...

The Search Begins

What is the world's most beautiful stamp? It's an easy question to ask, and it's interesting to hear people's answers. Go online and search "the world's most

beautiful stamp" and you'll be off to the stamp show. One favorite is the \$1 of the Trans-Mississippi issue of 1898 (left), a black engraving of a strong bull leading the herd through a storm. Based on the painting 'The Vanguard,' it was picked one of the 100 greatest U.S. stamps in a book called — you guessed it! — "The 100 Greatest U.S. Stamps." Another pick is an early Nova Scotia stamp (1853) with a charming etching of a young Queen Victoria in an elaborate

diamond border (right). Some like the "Black Jack" (left) — the stunning close-up engraved portrait of U.S. President Andrew Jackson (1861).



At left is another favorite — a stunning double portrait of the ship "Bluenose," put out by Canada in 1929. A note on illustrations: Remember you can enlarge them on your screen to enjoy the detail, especially in the engravings.

The original quest that inspired this stamp adventure was to identify and present to you a well-grounded rationale for the World's Prettiest Stamp. Also, the World's Ugliest Stamp (because: why not?). These goals so far have eluded me, but the quest has led me into interesting territory. I set off a couple of years ago, paging through my stamp albums (always a pleasure) and accumulating candidates in each category — “pretty” and “ugly.” So far my collection-within-a-collection is closing in on 500 stamps, which I have tried to keep in some balance between “good” and “bad.” I love gathering the pretty ones — because they are so pretty! As for the ugly ones in my albums — I’ve avoided looking at them for years, skimming right over them. However, now that I’m looking particularly for the most boring, garish, awkward, crude, offensive, inscrutable, etc. stamps, they jump right out at me. I sense I’m going to be having a lot of fun with this project, and I hope you will enjoy it too.



What makes a stamp pretty? Oof. Should I quote the poets, and the clichés? No. If we’re talking about stamps as art, then surely beauty is in the eye of the beholder. (Oops, that’s a cliché.) Is there a universal standard? Stamps are an invention of western society, starting with the British Penny Black (right) 180 years ago. They have a practical purpose, and a face value. The stamp engraver’s art developed as the British



scrambled to become the pre-eminent imperial power in Africa. Some of the most beautiful stamps yet made came out of African colonies like Basutoland, Nyasaland, Rhodesia, Sierra Leone — and the Belgian Congo (see two at left). Does it mar the intrinsic beauty of the engraver’s art to have it serve the colonial project? I suppose so.

Sometimes the subjects of these stamps are politically incorrect if not racially disrespectful. Other countries have issued stamps with morbid or inflammatory themes — gloating in victory, traumatized by defeat.

There are propaganda stamps that range from incendiary to deadly dull.

This Belgian Congo stamp designed in the 1890s fascinates me, not just because of the delicate engraving and coloring, but because it pictures the first African railroad carved out of the wilderness, at great human cost.



The crude and shocking stamp from North Vietnam at left shows the destruction of a U.S. B-52 bomber by a surface-to-air missile during the war; the stamp at right, from Nazi Germany, is a nicely engraved battle scene; in the foreground is the empty helmet of an enemy soldier (British?), presumed dead.

The prettiest stamp will be beautiful through and through, in all its meanings. The ugliest stamp may be offensive or tainted in its theme or significance, or just plain plug-ugly. If a stamp is particularly well-done, even though it serves a scurrilous purpose, it may belong in a third, hybrid category — pretty/ugly. Conversely, if it is homely but for some reason has redeeming significance, let's call it ugly/pretty. That's four categories. Enough!

From time to time I have come across stamps that were formally designated “most beautiful” for that particular year. You can look it up online. It seems that panels of judges or online contests through the Universal Postal Union or an offshoot contractor consider the full range of stamps issued during the year. What a proliferation of philatelic phantasmagoria that must be!



This Norwegian stamp of an owl was chosen as the Most Beautiful Stamp of 2018 by a panel of 40 expert judges at the Nexofil competition in Madrid. OK, it's nice enough, but frankly I don't see it as anything special ...

(Speaking of stamp proliferation, consider the the annual output of, say Equatorial Guinea. You'd be surprised how many stamps are produced by that tiny, tyrannized mineral-rich, captive state in west Africa. Every stamp issued in the name of that immiserated nation should be high on the list of ugliest

— just because of the execrable regime it represents. That's my opinion, anyway.)

The meaning of a stamp can be greater than its appearance, its theme or its intended purpose. These meanings



Please don't buy the false piety of this stamp of Equatorial Guinea, which purportedly honors the “holy year” of 1975. Four years later, Dictator [Francisco Macías Nguema](#) was overthrown by his nephew, [Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo](#), who has ruled ever since. A major oil producer, Equatorial Guinea is the richest country per capita in Africa — though ranking 144th on the 2019 Human Rights Index. Half the population lacks access to clean drinking water and one in five children dies before the age of five. (Source: Wikipedia)



This remarkable set of stamps won first prize as the Most Beautiful Stamp of 2002 in the International Stamp Printers Conference in Seoul. Interesting? Yes. Beautifully done? Yup. The most beautiful? Well ...

invite critique and story-telling. Beyond that, there is the personal meaning to the collector — whether he/she purchased the stamp from a local post office (“post-office fresh”), or from the USPS philatelic bureau, for example. If the stamp was won online or at an auction or in trade, it might gain luster for being a bargain, or gain value for the legitimately high price you were willing to pay because of its rarity and desirability.

Is a rare stamp “better” than a common stamp? Alternatively, the world’s most beautiful stamp may be one of the most common — for example, one bearing the classic Machin portrait of Queen

Elizabeth II (right), which has graced billions of letters since the first set was issued in 1967. Or how about the world’s rarest stamp, the unique One Cent Black on Magenta from British Guiana in 1856 (left)?

Interesting questions — that I’m not answering, at least not yet.



At left is another great rarity — the famous U.S. airmail “inverted Jenny” stamp. Fabulously expensive, but most beautiful? Uh, no.



While daughter Kate was stationed in Namibia with the Peace Corps, we stumbled across what may be the “most beautiful stamp in the world” (see below, right). It’s a beauty, all right. It was chosen by judges at the 8th “Stamp World Cup” in Paris in 2003. Think it’s a potential winner in our search? Why not take a closer look? The elongated landscape with elephants is extraordinary (even though it’s not engraved!). The bas relief design on the sheet itself is splendid too, don’t you think?



Nationalism and self-promotion play a role in the “most beautiful” competitions. This stamp from Serbia picturing a castle (below left) was part of the continent-wide EUROPA issue of 2017. Local postal authorities boosted its entry as most

beautiful for a contest by Europ Post, the organization of European postal authorities. Take a look. What do you think? Yeah, yeah, it’s OK. Nothing special, I’d say. Not any better than other castle designs in the same EUROPA series, like the one issued by Serbia’s Balkan

neighbor, Bosnia-Herzegovina (right). Would you like to know how the contest turned out? Actually, none of the Balkan nations even placed in the competition among 65 total EUROPA entries. There were two categories — an online contest and a

juried competition. In the online voting, Turkey came in first, followed by Poland and Moldova. The jury picked Finland for the gold, with a tie for silver between

Aland and Italy, and the bronze going to tiny Liechtenstein.

But what the heck. If it helps to keep the peace between restive Serbs and Bosnia-Herzegovinians, let’s give them each a consolation prize. Well done, Balkan patriots! Pretty stamps!

As we proceed in our search for the world’s prettiest/ ugliest stamp, you will soon detect a bias of mine in favor of engraved stamps, ahead of stamps printed by lithography, typography, photogravure or other processes. Fact is, I am a nut for hand-engraved stamps. This may compromise my integrity as judge of the world’s most beautiful stamp, because if I ever get there, I expect to choose an engraved winner. This isn’t strictly fair. There are spectacularly beautiful



Here is the stamp Serbia pitched for top honors in the Europ Post contest in 2017. Actually the stamp isn’t strictly from Serbia, but rather from the “Syrpske” republic carved out of a portion of neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina. Serbia claims the region as its patrimony, and Bosnian authorities have managed to finesse the deal so far.



Above: Turkey, the online favorite. Below: Finland, the pick of the jury (is that a whimsical ice castle?)



stamps created using those other methods, and I shall endeavor to present a liberal and inclusive gallery of these beauties for your inspection and our collective consideration.



This is not to claim these stamps as among the most beautiful in the world. A two-stamp tribute to “commerce” and “banking” is only inspiring up to a point, unless you are a truly devoted capitalist. But oh! The engraving! It’s spectacular. Go ahead, enlarge the screen image. The closer you get, the more beguiling the artistry. I can almost hear those coins clinking, almost smell and touch that crisp greenback!

Another element of my bias may have to do with, pardon the expression, white supremacy. Why is it that I am besotted by stamps issued for use in colonies where indigenous populations were held in thrall by imperial powers? There have been beautiful stamps from sovereign nations all over the world, places like the Dominican Republic, China, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia. I dare say every stamp-issuing nation could present at least one candidate for “prettiest stamp”

to include in our contest. (I make an exception for Equatorial Guinea.) But give me a set of delicate engravings with interesting scenes and soothing color combinations from somewhere like Ascension, or Gibraltar, Malta or



Basutoland, and I go into a swoon. My tastes were formed in my time, and it was a time when white supremacy set the standard in the western world for

philatelic beauty every bit as much as it did for art, music, literature and philosophy. (Doesn’t it still?)



Wow. Speaking objectively, I think this remarkable Chinese stamp (not engraved) already may be a finalist for the world’s most beautiful stamp, don’t you?

Well, well, let's not let this discussion of stamp aesthetics get hijacked by a polemic on white supremacy. Suffice it to say that I will do my utmost to keep my biases and reflexes in check. Since I suspect my audience is mostly white —



An engraved stamp from Ascension Island in 1935. Aahh ...

well, that may not be true with my internet blog audience, but you stamp enthusiasts in Nigeria or Egypt surely know where we white collectors have been coming from — I will confidently move onward, with charity toward all.

The best way to proceed, it seems to me, is just to get started. I shall pick stamps from my collection that have attracted my attention as pretty or ugly, and share what information and stories I have about them. In time, we may be

able to tease out the best — and worst — of the bunch. These stamps will be coming from countries all over the world, including the USA, issued during the three centuries stamps have been produced. As we embark on this illuminating philatelic expedition to find the world's most beautiful stamp, and ugliest stamp, let's not be overly concerned with when we will reach our destination. (It may take a while, since we'll be turning to other subjects from time to time.) Rather let us take our ease, enjoy the beauty and yes, examine and reflect on the ugliness we encounter along the way.

Since stamps are still being issued all over the world, the question arises: Has the most beautiful stamp in the world not yet been created? What do you think? If there is such a thing, is it already out there, or is this a challenge for the future?

In upcoming essays, I will present galleries of the world's most beautiful stamps, and its homeliest as well, with descriptions and stories to provide context. None of these stamps will be "average" — it's either great or gross, or some combination. Please sit back and enjoy future episodes on the best — and worst — philately has to offer. Nothing in-between. Let the judging begin; and the stories; and the pictures ...



BONUS ADDENDUM: An example of an ugly stamp and a pretty stamp.

Here is a portrait of Uruguayan hero Jose Gervasio Artigas Arnal (1764-1850), considered “the father of Uruguayan nationhood.” If you happen to be from Uruguay, you know all about him. Many of us have no clue — he is not identified on the stamp. I first thought he was Bolivar! According to Wikipedia, his life was a hectic story of attempts to arrest or kill him as a rebel, alternating with pardons, honors and enlistment to lead successful military

campaigns on behalf of Buenos Aires. A dramatic story — but a boring stamp, wouldn’t you say? Sorry about the missing corner, but the stamp’s not worth anything anyway. It’s a rather crude portrait of Artigas; the design, including the decorative border, is minimally adequate; the perforations are unacceptably crude (no wonder the corner was torn off); and the color! Officially “orange,” it looks more like a rinsed glass of orange juice. Perhaps it has faded since the late 1940s when it was issued. More likely it was a poor choice to begin with. Perhaps hard-pressed Uruguayan postal authorities were making ends meet by diluting their colors. I’ll admit that the damaged corner puts the stamp at a certain unearned disadvantage in the beauty sweepstakes. Still, I hope you will agree that this stamp, torn and faded, surely ranks near the top (or bottom) of the list when it comes to eye-wearying, mind-numbing tedium.



Actual size

Now take a look at this beauty. Go ahead, enlarge the image on your screen. Pick out the artistry in the hand-etched detail. To me, this stamp has a mystical quality, as it portrays a stately portal — the entrance to Government House, a reclaimed 16th century convent — with a massive walled facade rising and shimmering behind it. A guard stands near the entrance to the 500-year old building, as if ready to escort you through the door to Avalon itself.

TO BE CONTINUED

