PRETTY/UGLY STAMPS — WERE CLASSIC BRITISH DESIGNS THE PRETTIEST?

In contemplating classic British stamp designs, it makes sense to start at the beginning — with the "classic" Penny Black of 1840, designed by Rowland Hill. The superb example illustrated at right does not come from my collection — my own Penny Black barely has four margins, and sports a bold red Maltese Cross cancel. (It's worth maybe $100, while a mint copy with four ample margins would cost you thousands.) Take a look. Remember you can enlarge the image on your screen. Admire the intricate engraved filigree in the side margins; the intense black background with — what are those, highlights? Stars? The profile portrait is itself a classic — in the form of a bust, which the skillful engraver depicts in eye-popping, three-dimensional boldness. Floral badges in the upper corners and letters in the lower corners (signifying the position of the stamp in the plate) complete the design, except for three words in sober white serif caps: "POSTAGE" at the top, "ONE PENNY" below. What could you possibly add to this stamp? Perhaps the name of the country? But why? No other country has ever issued a stamp. The Penny Black is like a philatelic poem — everything needed to make it whole, and nothing more. **

** I suppose you could debate including those letters at the bottom. Who cares about plate position? The British soon dropped the device, and no one picked it up.

Amazingly enough, Great Britain has never had to put its name on its stamps. By the time the Universal Postal Union started up, in the 1870s, England alone was allowed this remarkable act of British understatement. If the stamp had no national identifier, it could only be Albion's. God save the queen and all that — and by all means put the kettle on.

In 1967, Great Britain issued the first set of its "Machin definitives." Sir Arnold Machin developed this portrait of Queen Elizabeth through a painstaking process that involved plaster casts and numerous presentations — including one with a wreath and toga. The stamps were popular from the start, and quickly took on the name of their creator. Since then, successive sets of Machin definitives have come in hundreds of colors, varying sizes, mostly printed but occasionally engraved (see example, right), going through one iteration after

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION: This early stamp from the Cape of Good Hope (1855), Britain's first issue for an African territory, is widely considered a classic. The "Cape Triangle" may appear crudely done at first glance, but blow up the screen and take a closer look. The robed allegory Hope is seated on a rock in a charming pose, an anchor by her side. The type is similar to that used for the Penny Black. These unusually shaped stamps are not all that expensive — though the ones that are well-centered and in good shape are worth lots more. Many collectors have sentimental feelings about the Cape Triangles, which somehow seem to match the triangular tip of Africa.

another through the years, from Sterling to decimal to non-denominated, never straying far from the minimalist original: a profile portrait, as if a bust, with the value at lower left. Nothing more. Nothing more needed. No name of country? Nope. (Stop asking.) Could a design this simple, so sound that it has endured for a half-century and counting, its universal presence one of the most familiar images in global history — could it possibly end up being the Prettiest Stamp in the World? Let's leave the question open for a while.

Meanwhile, let's move on to a couple of royal portraits. Well, call them a couple of royal dual-cameos. The first one, at left below, looks like two completely different people. Of course they are one and the same — at left, Queen Victoria as the teen queen at her coronation in 1837; to the right, the dowager queen 60 years later. The stamp is from a long series with the same design, issued for the Sexagenery by Canada in 1897. Stamp values range from 1/2 cent to $5. (Interestingly, the black 1/2 cent is unusually valuable. The highest values — $1, $2, $3, $4 and $5, are very expensive indeed.) I was able to purchase this stamp, the 8-center, for $16.53, even though its catalogue values are as much as $110. Looks like a good deal to me! (Stamp aficionados will note that the stamp is woefully off-center, which reduces its value.) I acknowledge few will select this stamp as the world's Most Beautiful. I value it, however, for its historical resonance; the mesmerizing effect of comparing the two portraits and contemplating how they encapsulate the Victorian Age; I also appreciate the bargain!

I won't dwell overlong on this second double-cameo (right), celebrating the coronation of King George V in 1910. He is at right, and his queen, Mary, is at left. Again, this probably won't end up on anyone's final list for Most Beautiful Stamp. George V was an able king who grew increasingly popular with his subjects, though Queen Mary was by some accounts quite a pill. Still, I find something stately about the long set, with intriguing color combinations, including claret and brown (6d), plum and rose red (10d) and red orange and myrtle green (10/-). The 1 pound stamp illustrated here is a particularly haunting juxtaposition, the portraits in glowing carmine, set off by a bluish slate frame. Apologies for the "perfin" cancellation holes punched in the stamp,** along with the heavy purple revenue cancellation. Those blemishes brought within my reach a stamp that otherwise would have cost me hundreds.

**Perfins (perforated initials) were punched into stamps by private companies and occasionally for government use, to prevent pilferage. A perfin traditionally is worth far less than a regular stamp.

These classic stamps I'm writing about were the products of British artistry, though not strictly from Great Britain, but let's not quibble. Let me also state at this point that my review of classic British designs should not be considered definitive. I expect to offer more examples of British artistry elsewhere, perhaps when considering Masterpieces of Engraving.

In 1935, George V celebrated his 25th year on the throne with the first "omnibus issue" — released simultaneously among British imperial dominions. The four-stamp Silver Jubilee issue included a total of 249 stamps, mostly featuring the same engraved two-color design: Windsor Castle in the center, with George's profile portrait at right in a decorative border. The Most Beautiful Stamp ever? Perhaps not. But it's still a striking design, isn't it? I can't unpack the symbolism of the crown, the orbs, the florets or the small horseman under the portrait without more research

which I am loath to do. Suffice it to say that this “omnibus” set from more than 60 countries, with a charming design, an extraordinary range of color combinations (examples: indigo and green, olive green and light blue, carmine and dark blue), and global visibility, deserves a place of respect in the philatelic pantheon as an emblem of imperial splendor and heft.

Likewise with our next example: The omnibus Peace issue (1945-6) celebrating the end of World War II. (above right) It is less an emblem of imperial splendor than reassuring evidence of continuity. The two-stamp mono-color set contains an updated, face-on portrait of King George VI, looking calm, resolute, well-turned-out and handsome as ever. Next to him is a stunning engraving of the Houses of Parliament, rising majestically from the Thames. This low-value set never became a rarity, and it’s not likely to win many votes as Most Beautiful. However, the stamps gain status as you consider what an important purpose they served as they appeared in the post offices of scores of nations around the world. At the end of a punishing war, they announced that Britain was still a commanding, dependable presence — as stately and secure as that imperial edifice of Parliament, firmly planted at the center of the world.

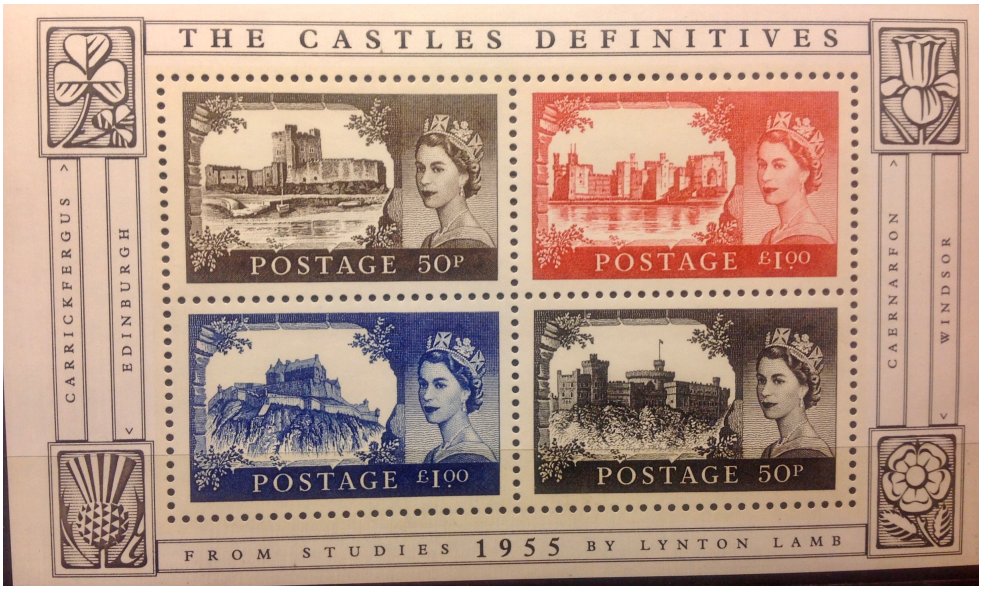
Back to Britain now for some more classic designs. In the stamp at right, the royal lion roars before a tablet announcing the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. This stamp “works” beautifully, even though I know little about the exhibition itself. The lion and the portrait wouldn’t seem to be natural neighbors, and the lily growing out of George V’s portrait frame is oddly asymmetrical, if not incongruous. Yet the general effect is pleasing, impressive, another emblem of empire.

Is that what classic British stamp designs are all about: celebrating empire? If so, the next example is a dilly. This 2/6 regular-issue stamp has George V facing away from the action. To the right Britannia, wielding a triton, is propelled through a roiling sea by an explosive team of horses. It's a *tour de force* of engraving, from the hooves pawing the waves, to Britannia's resolute stand, to the garlanded top border. Who could imagine such a scene? So convincingly realized? Isn't it fantastic?

As if to acknowledge the classic quality of these designs, the British post office in 2010 issued the souvenir sheet for the Festival of Stamps you see at right. While the stamps in the sheet are printed, not engraved, it's still worth marveling at the fine quality of the reproductions.

Elizabeth II was coronated in 1953, and years before the Machin definitives appeared, she took her place on some classic British stamps. Particularly striking were the high values of the first definitive set, featuring four royal castles. Below you see illustrated the 1 pound stamp, with Windsor Castle, though a different view than the one on George V's Silver Jubilee omnibus set, which is illustrated above. (Imagine living there!) The engraved mono-color stamp features a charming portrait of the young queen at right, with the castle viewed through a *trompe l'oeil* opening that could be some ancient, weedy ruin.

In 2005, the Royal Mail issued a 50-year anniversary souvenir sheet commemorating the designs (right). The stamps are engraved, for all I know using the original plates, though the values have changed to decimal currency. A classic design is always worth revisiting!



British designs stand out when they get recycled in later issues. Something about the original is so striking, so "classic" that it merits being re-introduced to new generations of stamp users and collectors. (Mind you, the examples I offer are not British stamps per se, but rather from British colonies; however, you and I know who designed and produced them.)

Among the most striking examples of this recycling of designs (thus rendering them in some sense classics, no?) is this sequence from Bechuanaland Protectorate. Starting with George V in 1932, each stamp in the definitive set carried the same charming design of Tswana cattle in the veld, with a baobab tree at left. George V passed to his kingly reward in 1935, and by 1938, a new set of definitives was on sale, with the same design, now bearing the portrait of George VI. King George hung on until 1952, and in 1955 a new set appeared — same scene, portrait now of the young Queen Elizabeth II. Is that a classic design, or what?

The ultimate tribute to this design came in 1985, when Botswana, the independent nation formerly known as Bechuanaland Protectorate, issued a short set commemorating 100 years of Bechuana postage stamps. Just look at the design: Back to George V, more than 50 years earlier! (In case you think it odd that a sovereign state would recycle an image from its past as an imperial vassal, keep this in mind: Bechuanaland Protectorate

was formed to protect the Tswana tribe from Boer trekkers, squatters and other indigenous enemies. Britain “protected” Bechuanaland with a light hand — not hard to do in sparsely populated, arid expanses. Independence came relatively smoothly to Botswana in 1966, and the nation has been adequately governed — perhaps not hard to do in a mono-tribal culture with diamond mines. The Botswana and the British continue to enjoy friendly relations. I suggest, therefore, that memories of Bechuanaland Protectorate are not all that painful to the postal authorities of Botswana; indeed, they may well agree with me that theirs is one of the all-time classic stamps.)

I offer a couple more examples of classic designs that were so good, they had to be used again. At left is a stamp from Jamaica with an appealing Caribbean shore landscape — “Coco Palms at Columbus Cove.” It was issued in 1932, during George V’s reign. At right is the same design on a stamp commemorating a visit to the island by the brand-new Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 — 21 years later. The stamp is also beautiful, yes? I have spent time scrutinizing both images, using my handy magnifying glass, trying to figure out if the folks in 1953 used the actual plate carrying the design from 1932. I think so. What do you think?

I ask myself the same question about this pair of stamps from British Guiana: Does the stamp at right from 1954 — “Amerindian Shooting Fish” — use the same plate as the stamp from 1931 (left), 23 years earlier? Did the engraver n 1954 touch up the original? If it’s a do-over, it’s a close replica. Either way, I’d say we’re looking at a classic.

Please check out this strip of late-Victorian stamps from my collection (above). The stamps were issued close to the queen's 60th (diamond?) Jubilee. The design is workman-like, modestly elegant, depicting a monarch of a certain age (by 1897 she was a dottering dowager), in a circular medallion, securely framed by banners announcing "POSTAGE" (twice) and "ST. HELENA." The stamps' value is announced clearly in a tablet below. The colors are unimportant, though the set glows quietly, with a soothing palette that contains a two-color 1 1/2d stamp (red-brown and green) and an unusual yellow 2d. (These stamps are not cheap, but I got a bargain at $14.50 for the lot because the candid seller announced they are "remainders" — that is, stamps cancelled by the post office and sold in bulk to dealers. It happened way-back-when, but the tell-tale triangular cancels cut down the value of the stamps considerably, since they were never postally used, and neither are they unused.)

Now consider the remarkable spectacle above. At the far left is a Victoria stamp from Leeward Islands in 1890. Its design is similar to my set from St. Helena, except that the frame is crimped instead of round, and the inscriptions read "POSTAGE" on one side, "REVENUE" on the other (makes more sense to me than having "postage" twice). Second from the left is a stamp of the same design from British Honduras (1904) with a portrait of Edward VII, Victoria's successor. In the middle is a stamp from Cayman Islands (1916) using the same design, featuring the next king, George V. Then comes George VI on a stamp from Mauritius (1938), facing right instead of left, but still within the same design. Finally we have Queen Elizabeth II, again from Leeward Islands (1954), with the same design as the one used back in 1890 — 64 years earlier. I'd call that a five-generation classic!

Lest you be inclined by now to conclude that to be a classic, a stamp must be a design of philatelic antiquity — not necessarily so! Consider the example (left) of the first 10-pound stamp issued by Great Britain, in 1993. The beautiful stamp is an anti-counterfeit wonder, printed in multiple layers and colors, with watermarks and light-sensitive pigments, metal bands and who-knows-what-else. (Can you make out the tiny lettering emanating from the lower left corner? What does it say? (spoiler: "TEN POUNDS," repeated over and over and shading from purple to blue to red).

What interests me particularly is the allegorical figure, Britannia. She is seated, bearing a triton in one arm, a myrtle (?) branch in the other, resting her elbow on a shield. She looks resolute — as resolute as Britannia "ruling the waves" in that classic George V design I wrote about earlier (see right for a visual reminder). But it's clearly not the same engraving. Where is the chariot? Where are the steeds? Where are the waves? No, I decided I had to look elsewhere. In perusing my memory, and my collection, I came up with other renditions of Britannia on colonial stamps, some of which are illustrated here. As you can see, none of them is anything like the striking image on the 10-pound stamp. Could this indeed be a Modern Classic?

This last image, right, is neat because the portrait of Britannia takes us right back to the beginning of stamps — to 1840, and the brief existence of the Mulready Cover, a failed experiment in postal letters. (For more on this, see blog post of 8/18/17, "The First Cinderellas.")

Britannia herself goes way back on British-generated stamps — and even further back in British history. The story told by The Independent is that Roman Emperor Hadrian first stamped images of Britannia on coins as early as AD120. Because the Romans had subdued Britain, she was portrayed as a captive. Twenty years later, during the reign of Antonius Pius, Britannia began appearing as a seated warrior, equipped with a spiked shield.

Britannia disappeared from English coins after the Romans departed, and did not return until 1672. According to The Independent, King Charles II chose his mistress, Frances Stuart, Duchess of Richmond and Lennox, as the model for a new medallion. The renowned diarist Samuel Pepys observed on 25 February 1667: “Did observe the King's new medal, where in little there is Mistress Stuart's face as well done as ever I saw anything in my whole life, and a pretty thing it is that he should choose her face to represent Britannia by.” That image endured on coinage, and after 1840 on stamps like those above. During the reign of George III, her spear changed to the less-warlike trident. Her helmet came on a farthing coin in 1821 — still 19 years before the first stamp of any kind.

Brittania’s provenance is amply verified, lo, into the dim mists of Britain’s past. I also have learned that this particular version of Britannia on the 10-pound stamp is — original. This is from The New Yorker of April 12, 1993:
LETTER FROM LONDON …: The image of Britannia on the new 10-pound postage stamp was designed by Barry Craddock, using his wife, Karin, as model. Craddock was selected for the job by the Roundel Design Group, which in turn was commissioned by Royal Mail Stamps. Tells about difficulties in perfecting the design, including controversy over Britannia's proper bra size (36B).

That intriguing snippet led me to the Independent article, which provided more delicious detail:

Mrs Craddock spent six weeks sitting propped up by a pile of books, draped in a sheet, clutching a branch of a tree in one hand and a garden rake in the other while she was drawn by her husband, Barry, an illustrator from Deptford, south London. Balanced against her right hip was an upturned table top.

“One of the most heated debates was over Britannia's bust size,” said Mike Denny, of the Roundel Design Group, which designed the stamp for the Royal Mail. “Britannia must look powerful and imperial, but she also has to be feminine.”

The initial images used were classical, drawn from ancient coins and sculptures. “When we started out her chest was almost flat, which looked ridiculous,” Mr Denny said. “Then we went to the other extreme. Eventually we settled for a 36B size.” That is fitting for a national symbol — Britannia's cup size exactly matches that of today's average female Briton.

For reference, here is another image of the 10-pound stamp. You might want to blow it up to check out Britannia’s bust — don’t be ashamed.

Isn’t this wonderful? A discussion of classic British designs concludes with a discussion of British women’s bra sizes. Consider it a reminder that whether a stamp is classic or common, stamp-collecting remains intimately focused on the human condition.

TO BE CONTINUED