

PRETTY/UGLY COLORS PART TWO

Delicious Colours

Welcome to the other side of the “terrible colors/delicious colours” stamp essay. Last time, I explored some of the most vulgar, insipid, offensive, ill-advised colors on stamps through the ages and around the world. There was a kind of morbid fascination involved, so I’m not surprised if you have kept up with me. What could these stamp designers have been thinking?

Now, happily, we are in the land of delicious “colours” (note the British spelling, which I use to connote refined pleasure). What follows are stamps, also from many eras and places, which display the most pleasing and harmonious colors I have seen in my years of stamp collecting. Since my ultimate goal is to determine the most beautiful stamp in the history of philately, surely stamps with delicious “colours” deserve full consideration.

This set of high-value U.S. stamps (left and below) started in 2008, to cover priority and express mail postage. The landscapes and cityscapes were sometimes familiar, sometimes a surprise, but always cleanly drawn and lavishly hued, harmonious combinations of design and color. I have 24 stamps of this series, ranging in value from \$4.80 to \$26.35. Scenes include Grand Central Station, Big Bend, Bethesda Fountain, Mount Rushmore, Sleeping Bear Dunes and the USS Arizona Memorial. I can’t single out the prettiest one for



consideration, but I hope the judges will give each one a fair viewing in the finals. The distinctive and pleasing color palette makes the series instantly recognizable.

You see I have started with a series of American stamps. Sure, why not start with the familiar? Only I bet these stamps are not particularly familiar, since they rarely appear on envelopes or travel through the mail. That's one reason I have made a special effort to collect cancelled, or used, copies of these high-value stamps — because so few of them have been used. I also thought the unused (mint) stamps themselves were worth collecting because of their limited circulation. (Hint, hint, investors!)

In this essay I plan to proceed from one deliciously coloured stamp to the next, without special notice of country or date. I'll hop all over the place, celebrating the sheer pleasure of looking at stamps whose colors glow, resonate, soothe and inspire.

Stamps from the United Nations are something of a quandary to this stamp collector. Few of them have held much value over the years, though they often are attractive and well-designed. Sometimes the themes get clunky. Now we're talking about stamp colors, and I have to say, this stamp of sun and clouds (below) took my breath away the first time I saw it — and every time I've looked at it since.



As mentioned, U.N. stamp themes can be clunky — human rights, UNESCO, disarmament, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development ... Many of these stamps are undistinguished,

some of them downright ugly. However, let me cling to my theme of beautifully colored stamps, and single out this stamp (right), one of three in a colorful series, issued in 1961 to mark the 15th anniversary of the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF. There is something at once inviting and hypnotic about the blue and green colors behind the black silhouette of the bird feeding its hungry chicks. This is a rare example of an allegorical design with a dynamic color element that lends a sense of fresh and vibrant urgency to the mission, which is to help the young.



At left is a very nice stamp issued for Dahomey in 1961, as it was becoming independent from France. The blue engraving is actually two colors, nicely blended. But my purpose

in displaying this stamp, as well as the colorful one below, is to set off the 6 franc stamp at right. What a striking contrast of arresting colors! The intense vermillion at the center draws the eye like a magnet. Delicate border engravings in hues of rose and light

violet enhance the stamp's exotic quality.



Here's a plug for the extraordinary series of GB stamps celebrating landscapes on the British Isles and beyond. At right is a scene in Wales; below are Hadrian's Wall (dating to Roman times) and a fabled rock in Australia. There are many more scenes, each one saturated with color, a feast for the eyes. How will we ever pick the ones that should figure in the Most Beautiful sweepstakes?



(I can't believe I allowed those non-engraved stamps into the beauty sweepstakes! After all, they're just pretty photographs.) Now it's back to engraved beauties, like this pair from Austria, part of a short set issued in 1948. Vibrant colors, eh?





Isn't this fun? Suddenly we are in the Cook Islands, viewing a scene in Rarotonga described as "Departure Point of Maoris for New Zealand, 1350 A.D." The stamp from the 1949 series is a beautiful engraving, rendered in violet with a brown border.

An olive center with an orange border for the 8d stamp (right) continues the arresting colour scheme for the Cook Islands 1949 set. Likewise the 3 shilling stamp below, with an ultramarine center and blue green border.



See why I am so beguiled by the colours of stamps from the south Pacific? Look at these beauties from Western Samoa (1935) — the 1d (right) has a black center and a rich carmine lake border, while the 3 shilling value (below) is bright blue in the center, with a brown orange



border. You wouldn't think it would work, but it does.





These stamps perplexed me as a youngster. Where is Norfolk Island? It looks for all the world like a scene off the coast of Maine. Perhaps a Canadian seascape? Eventually I learned it's an Island in the south Pacific, with administrative ties to Australia. I grew up looking at these stamps and enjoying the peaceful view, even imagining myself sitting in the sun beside the water, inhaling the piney scent of the conifers all around me. (Turns out Norfolk Island is famous for its pines, and not much else.) The restful colours of the stamps (bright green, slate) contribute to the ambience of the familiar, comforting scene. Here you could be refreshed and restored. Was this all just in my youthful imagination, or is there really a bit of magic in this familiar yet exotic stamp?

Two more quick ones: At left below, is an admittedly old-fashioned design featuring the allegory of Victory in this 1920 issue from Barbados. But oh! The colors! The contrast between the jet-black center and the intense orange red border gives the eyes a resonating treat. The domestic scene below right, from

Bermuda's definitive series in 1936, is an inspired combination of a rose lake center and a violet border. The result is satisfactory in every way, wouldn't you agree?



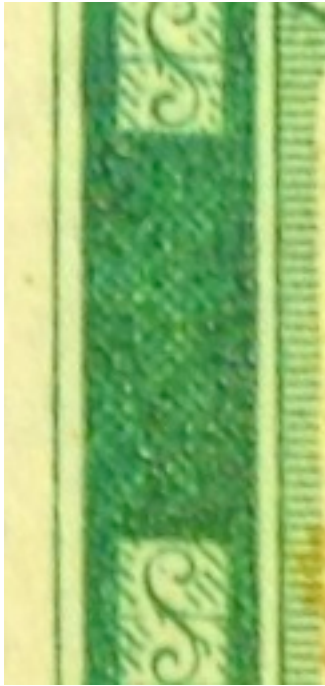
Here are more examples of extraordinary colour from British Colonial stamps. The first is a pair from Hong



Kong celebrating the end of World War II. How could you not be riveted by the bold colors — deep blue on one, a rich brown on the other, both offset by the searing carmine of the flames and the banner reading “Resurgo 1941 1945.” The bold red Chinese inscription is exotic all right — I don’t have a clue what it says. King George VI looks dashing and resolute in his cameo portrait. The phoenix rising and the lions rampant lend their own energy to these dynamic, colorful stamps.

Here is a mesmerizing pair of stamps from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), issued in 1947 to memorialize a new constitution. First, the 15 cent view of the ancient capital Kandy has a greenish black center, and a glowing red violet frame and portrait of George VI. The color combination is oddly harmonious, and the densely engraved bars bring out the intensity of the red violet hue (see enlargement, below). Wow.





Here is the 25 cent stamp from the same set. Notice the richly engraved bars (partially enlarged, left), creating an intense green border which, when contrasted with the bright bister center, creates a quiet eruption of glowing, animated color that is unlike anything I have seen on a stamp. The effect on the eyes is almost sensual, a caress. There is an otherworldly feeling, a resonance between the colors, a sudden deepening of the field and an opportunity to lose oneself in a scene that is brilliant and grand. (You can spend a while admiring this stamp!)



How about these beauties, issued for the newly independent African nation of Chad beginning in 1961. These were high values of the definitive series.



The French engravers and colorists did a beautiful job with these stamps, don't you think?

Another sequence of British colonial stamps deserves mention for its color choices. This includes sets from the British South Africa Company, Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia — which all turn out to be the same place.

Here is an excerpt from my Stamp Atlas: *“Double Heads” portraying King George V and Queen Mary, which were current in 1910-13, were printed by Waterlows in colors which have rarely been equalled for choice. They were followed by the “Admirals” in similarly well-contrasted shades.*



3d olive yellow and violet; 4d orange and black.

You heard it from the source. Now take a look at these peerless bi-color stamps from Rhodesia etc. — and take note of the delicious colour descriptions from the catalogue.



5d olive green and brown.



8d brown violet and gray black; 10d plum and rose red.



This set of “Admirals” (George V) from 1913-19 (above) displays wondrous color combinations — carmine rose and black (10d), myrtle green and red orange (10/-, left), and violet and black (L1, right).

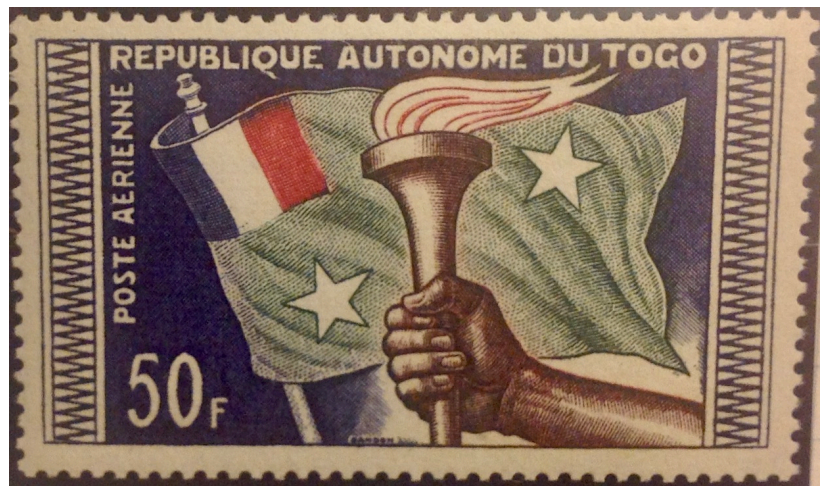


L1 bluish slate and carmine.



This set (above) from Southern Rhodesia (1931-7) is particularly inspired with the 8d (green and violet), 9d (gray green and vermillion) and 10d (carmine and ultramarine). The high value (5/-) is blue green and ultramarine.

Here are two stamps issued by emerging African nations — Togo in 1957 and Cameroun in 1958. I love the colors in these engraved stamps, including the aspirational green of the Togo flag, albeit topped by a fluttering French tricolor. OK, put politics aside. It's a gorgeous stamp, as muscular and sinewy as the arm of the patriot holding the torch of freedom. The background is such a deep blue you can practically see through it to tomorrow.



The theme of the Cameroun stamp is irresistible — a plump and happy baby being held up to the light by a proud mom (auntie?), against a backdrop of the national colors on a field of sparkling blue. What excitement! What a vision! What hope for the future! ...



OK, so it didn't turn out that great. That child held up to the light in 1958 would be in her 60s today, living in a country that is still struggling. The tragic history of the last half-century in Cameroun, in Togo and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa is a tale of lost opportunity and relentless exploitation. Hopes were high as independence day came and went. These strongly coloured stamps capture a sense of the potential for joy and prosperity, the tantalizing promise of freedom. That things went wrong in Togo and Cameroon does not diminish the aspirational beauty of these stamps, or dim their bold, eye-catching colors. That those hopes were betrayed and corrupted in ensuing decades confers poignancy on these beautiful stamps. It also begs the question: How could anyone have expected things to go well after a century of colonial and racial subjugation?

As I draw to a close this philatelic phrolic past some of the most beautifully coloured stamps I know, I would like to engage in a color experiment. A survey. I present two sets of stamps, featuring designs that were issued originally in one color, then re-issued later in two colors. The question I am interested in for each set, and each stamp in the sets, is this: Do you prefer the single-color stamps,

or the two-color versions? Spoiler alert: You might think two colors are always better than one, but don't be too sure!



The first set is from the Bahamas. In 1948, a long series marking the 300th anniversary of European settlement of the colony was issued. Each stamp was a single color, starting with the 1/2d orange (left). To me, the stamps look flat; it is hard to see the designs. George VI, the rather stuffy-looking monarch in the portrait, soon died and was succeeded by Elizabeth II. Her first definitive set, in 1954, used the same designs as the 1948 set, updated with a fetching portrait of the young queen, a few other design

changes — and bi-color printing. What a difference! Take a look at the pale 1/2d from 1948, and the dazzling, red orange and black version of 1954 (left). It's a whole new stamp,

with depth and definition in the engraving of the child clinic, plus an eye-pleasing color combination. The same goes for the 1d stamp (right), the 3d

stamp (below), and the rest in the long series. In each case, the effectiveness of the stamp is enhanced dramatically by the

decision to use two colors. The color choices for the 1954 1d bi-color are bold — orange brown and olive green — earthy tones that correspond to the scene of farm technology. The fishing fleet in the 3d is beautifully rendered in black, and the surprising carmine border is a witty choice for the nautical theme. One after another, the bi-color stamps bring to life otherwise drab, uninteresting scenes.



The second stamp series is American, starting with the Trans-Mississippi Exposition set of 1898; a century later, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing issued reprints in souvenir sheets. I have studied the reprints and can't tell any difference between their designs and the originals of 1898, suggesting the engravers used the same plates. Below are two stamps of the modern, 1998 set, printed in two colors: green and black for the one cent, brown and black for



the \$2 value. These are colorful stamps, to be sure. Maybe too colorful. Is it because I am accustomed to the single colors of the original set that these Johnny-come-lately upstarts seem to flaunt such a gaudy air? As far as I'm concerned, the brightly-colored border distracts from the black central design, flattening the scene. Funny, it was just the opposite effect with the Bahamas set, above. Go figure.

Now take a look at the same designs from the original series in 1898 (below). In the one-cent stamp, the green mono-color embraces considerable variations in intensity, creating depth and dramatizing Marquette's cloak; likewise, the varied intensities on the red two-cent invite the eye to move smoothly into the frame and the scene, from the team of horses in front, around to the very last one in line near the horizon. I am convinced that these mono-color stamps from 1898 are prettier and more effective than the bi-color reprints. How about you?



Not convinced yet? OK, let's seal the deal. At right is the \$1 stamp from the Trans-Mississippi issue, as interpreted by the USPS in 1998, with a black center and a red brown frame. The familiar scene, "Western Cattle in Storm," is a strong, dramatic design. It's a nice stamp, sure.



Now look at the original \$1 stamp from 1898. Feast your eyes. Is there any comparison which stamp is more effective? The impact of the raging storm, the stalwart bull and the worried herd could not be greater than in this engraved image. Imagine colors drawn through a prism into hues of black, the most intensity reserved for

the silhouetted figure of the bull, finding its way forward.

Is it pathetic to end an essay on delicious "colours" by celebrating an all-black stamp? Oddly, that's the same color as the world's first stamp (see right), the British Penny Black of 1840. This is not the first time the \$1 Trans-Mississippi or the Penny Black has featured in this narrative. I suspect we are in the presence of one finalist, if not two, in our quest for the world's most beautiful stamp.



ADDENDUM:

Homage to Josef Albers

Take a look at the two stamps reproduced here. Forget about pretty and ugly for a moment and concentrate on color. These two stamps appear to be identical, except that one has a straight edge instead of perforations, which means it probably came from a booklet pane.



The rendering of Old Glory is the same, the colors are the same — or are they? Try not to be distracted by the yellow paper behind the stamp on the right. It's like the visual illusion created by 20th century artist Josef Albers — fooling the eye to believe two colors are different, just because he changes the background color. Surely the stamp on the right doesn't have a yellow tinge in the letters FOREVER USA. Surely not. Surely the red, white and blue are just as boldly hued in each stamp.

But can you really be sure? "Color deceives continually," Albers taught us. If so, how can you really be sure of anything?

TO BE CONTINUED



