

In search of the world's prettiest stamp

Ships and Boats

There is much about watercraft that invites stamp designers to give it a go. The graceful, hydro-dynamic lines of the vessels, the zesty prows slicing through heaving seas, billowing sails and solid hulls — all can be contained and celebrated within the small frame of a stamp.

In my continuing quest for the world's most beautiful stamp (and ugliest one), it seems an organizational necessity that I narrow down

certain “topics” to explore. That is, to isolate a particular subject or genre, then sift through as many examples for the finest one I can find (and perhaps the rankest as well). In a sense, all of the sub-categories I choose are “topics” — for example, French landscape engravings (pretty); obscure allegories (ugly); ugly colors/delicious colors; you get the idea.

This essay will explore ships and boats on stamps, in hopes of finding the world's prettiest stamp in this topic. You'll see various and sundry examples, along with captions considering their qualities.

It also seems worthwhile in my quest to pause a moment to dip into the deep and wide subject of topical stamp collecting.

I say “dip into” because I am reluctant to go there. Like most collectors, I have my priorities, standards, rubrics of value and order and aesthetics. Mine are quite traditional. Topical collectors are a different species altogether.



Pretty? Yes. Prettiest? Well ...



Among the earliest entries in this category are these two stamps issued in the 1890s by the “independent” state of the Congo — a colonial preserve run by Belgium's rapacious King Leopold. The placid scenes of a native canoe (above) and a primitive riverboat steamer (below) tell nothing of the horrors of life for the indigenous people. The engraved, bi-color stamps are pretty enough, though hardly contenders for the prettiest.





Back in the day, Great Britain was the world's foremost sea power. Britannia ruled the waves, before airplanes and jets and satellites and rockets took over. Britain and its colonies issued many stamps featuring ships and boats, and its engravings rank with the best. The three above are from the 1930s. Above left is a steamship plying the waters of the Falkland Islands off the southeastern coast of South America; center is a cat boat out for a spin in the Cayman Islands; at right is an African dhow on Lake Victoria.

The American Topical Association (ATA) is the go-to resource for topical collectors, along with its publication, Topical Time. Upon joining the ATA, you gain access to its topical categories. That is, you could choose the topic, "The Titanic on Stamps," and you could upload a list of 142 Titanic-related stamps in its database. From there it's an easy step to order stamps you're missing and add them to your topical collection. If "completeness" is a desired goal for topical collectors (as is the urge to obtain "complete sets" for the traditional collector), using the ATA database sounds like the way to go.

Since I am not a member of the ATA (nor am I a topical collector), I don't propose to go much further into its workings. While selecting topics is useful and necessary device in my search for the world's most beautiful (and ugliest) stamp, I don't otherwise use topicality as a collecting principle — though I can't really justify why topical collecting rubs me the wrong way. Most topical collectors are fine folks, I'm sure. To me, though, they are not "real" stamp collectors, because they have little interest in a stamp's key identifiers — rarity, national origin, numerical value, age, condition, color, shades, perforations, watermarks — subordinating all these criteria to the all-important "topic."

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The British colony of Grenada in the West Indies adopted a ship in its badge — specifically the Santa Maria, from the fleet of Columbus that landed on the island in 1498.

Above are two examples of the seal used as stamp designs. In the stamp at left, marking the 400th anniversary of the landing, "La Concepcion" refers to the name Columbus chose for the land. The stamps are elegant, and the bi-color high value (right) issued in 1959 for the definitive set looks pretty enough to eat. But the images are stylized and static, not particularly beautiful.



These three stamps from Bermuda feature the racing yacht “Lucie.” The blue-and-black one (far left) was issued in 1936, right after the death of King George V; the middle version, brown-black and turquoise, came in 1938, George VI’s coronation year; the red-and-ultramarine beauty at right appeared two years later. All three are pretty stamps, though the colorists seemed to have a heck of a time deciding which two colors to combine. As a result, I can’t pick the one I like best. (Though I must note the surreal coloring in the middle stamp looks like the diaphanous ghost of Charon ferrying across the River Archeron to the dark realms of Dante’s inferno; and in the right-hand stamp, I like the way the red from the frame bleeds into the sky to create a sunset effect.) Because I can’t decide, I decree that none of these stamps is eligible for the prize as the world’s prettiest.



The long reign Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II (1952-2022) was a golden era for ships and boats on stamps. The engraved examples above are fine examples of the engraver’s art and the colorist’s mastery. While none of them may rank as the world’s most beautiful stamp, they certainly can hold their own among philately’s phinest.



These are gorgeous stamps, aren't they? The definitive series of 1954 from the Falkland Island Dependencies — a series of tiny islands strung out across the south Atlantic — features Queen Elizabeth and different ships of the British fleet through history. Each seems as spectacular as the next — which makes it hard to pick the prettiest. This puts them out of the running — but wait! How about in addition to picking the prettiest *individual* stamp, we also pick the prettiest *set* of stamps? When we get around to reviewing sets, I expect you'll see these stamps again. The effect of viewing the whole group just may blow your mind.



Above are a quartet of boat stamps from Zanzibar. The top two are stylized and rather dull. The 1920s-era stamp on the lower left is exotic, with a satisfying green/black color contrast. But the dhow is too small, the scene too busy. Lower right, the 1957 definitive is colorful (a red sea?). While the center is dynamic and well-balanced, the engraving is crude, particularly the water.

How does a stamp's value figure into the topical collector's priorities? Are rare stamps prized? Would he/she try to find the most valuable stamp in the chosen topic, or prepare to amass the most examples at the most modest prices? And how are topical collections even valued? Does a "complete" collection deserve a premium?

I have a feeling most topical collectors don't worry about such things. They're having fun, doing what they do. I say: Bless them.

TO BE CONTINUED



One more example of British imperial excellence in philately. This engraved Canadian definitive of 1935 captures King George V's racing yacht Britannia with exquisite detail, poise and design. Beautiful? Yes, but please, read on. This is just a tease...