

The Ten Funkiest Stamps of All Time

By Farley P. Katz

Much ink has been spilled and many cartridges drained extolling “the most beautiful stamps” or “the finest engraved stamps” or “the best designed stamps.” And awards have been given to the best new stamp of the year.

I find that all terribly boring. To me, the complete opposite end of the spectrum is much more interesting. By that I mean the funkiest stamps ever produced. “Funky” as in “having an earthy, unsophisticated style and feeling.” See Merriam-Webster Online. And I don’t mean stamps that just have a bad design, poor colors, reproduce some three-year-old’s crayon drawing or are just plain “ugly.” I mean stamps that are so ineptly designed, so primitively produced or printed, so amateurish that you can’t help laughing out loud just looking at them. Ask yourself whether a self-respecting country could possibly have allowed the so-called “stamp” to be issued under its name. If the answer is “Are you kidding?”, that’s what I am talking about.

I’ve enjoyed these stamps for many years. In the last few months I have sifted through hundreds of candidates and chosen the top ten funky stamps of all time. Here they are, in reverse numerical order.

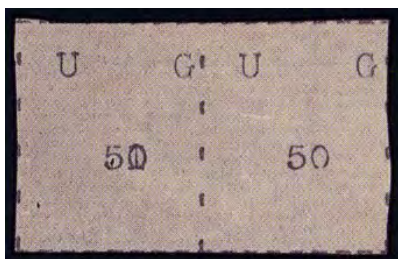
Number 10. Mauritius “Sherwin” Stamp of 1859 (Scott 15). Mauritius’ first two issues, the famous “Post Office” and the closely similar “Post Paid” stamps, were copies of the then-current Queen Victoria stamps of Great Britain. Given the remoteness of Mauritius and the early date, those stamps are tolerable facsimiles of their models. Not satisfied with coming close, in 1859, Mauritius went on a binge and produced no less than three stamps which, in their own unique ways, belong among the top ten funkiest stamps of all time. Apparently Mauritius recognized that the first of these three, the Lapirot Stamp (number 2 below), was about as bad as a stamp could be and decided something less egregious was called for. Someone, possibly Robert Sherwin, recut the 1848 Two Pence stamp plate, thereby producing what is known as the “Sherwin” stamp, among



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Number 9. Uganda 1895 Typewritten “U G” Stamps (Scott 2-40). Find yourself in a remote African country in the late nineteenth century? Want to issue postage stamps just like the big countries do? No problem! Got a typewriter? Great! Got some paper? OK! Got some correction fluid? Not been invented yet? No problem, no one will notice the typeovers. And so Rev. Ernest Millar of the Church Missionary Society typed himself into philatelic funk history. “UG(h)” is right!² Later in the year success went to his head and the Reverend got a *new* typewriter with a *violet* ribbon, Uganda’s first small step on the long path away from funk. Did I mention that the currency of the stamp is the Cowrie?!!



Number 8. Nowanuggur (India) Stamps of 1877-88 (Scott 3-5). Nowanuggur



gur is one of the native Feudatory states in India. Along with the other native states, Nowanuggur produced some fabulous funky stamps. Shown is the three dokra (half anna to you) black on yellow stamp of 1877-88. Who knows what it says? Who cares! It's got all the best aspects of primitives, sloppy writing dashed off in a few seconds without apparent thought, irregular lines that don't meet and terrible printing. And symmetry? Forget it!

Number 7. New Caledonia 1859 Napoleon III Stamp (Scott 1).

In 1859, on the remote Pacific island of New Caledonia, the authorities badly wanted a postage stamp. They got their wish. Sergeant Triquerat undertook to draw the new stamp on a lithographic stone. The stamp bears a portrait of Emperor Napoleon III, copied from the then current French stamp. It's so crude, for years I assumed it was Robert Louis Stevenson or maybe Paul Gauguin. The frame consists of various squiggles and doodles which ominously surround the portrait. The only word for this stamp is scary. What is really incredible is that the Sergeant drew not one, not ten, but 50 different versions directly on his lithographic stone, each one grotesque in its own individual way.



Number 6. Kishangarh (India) 1899-1900 Two Anna (Scott 11A).



Kishangarh is another of the native Feudatory states of India that have been an endless source of philatelic funk. However, the Two Anna stamp of 1899 tops them all. It depicts Maharaja Sardul Singh according to Scott Catalogue. The Maharaja's face is almost entirely lost in a dark soup of lines that run indiscriminately over both the background and his face. And where is his nose? Or mouth? All we see is two big round eyes staring out from an indecipherable mess. It's hard not to laugh just looking at this one. And that is why it comes in at Number 6 on this list

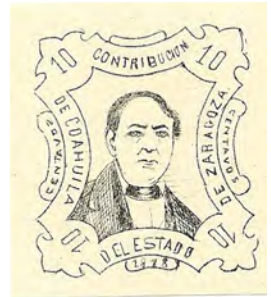
Number 5. Mauritius "Dardenne" Stamps of 1859 (Scott

16-17). Having produced two of the funkiest stamps of all time by the process of engraving (numbers 10 above and 2 below), Mauritius turned to the art of lithography to see if it couldn't master that art and produce an acceptable postage stamp. It couldn't. Louis Adolphe Dardenne of Port Louis drew and lithographed the 1859 issue now bearing his name. The stamps are a one penny orange and a two penny blue copying the then-current stamps of England. (Why quit when you're on a roll?) The hand-drawn heads of Queen Victoria on each value bear only a slight resemblance to each other and virtually none to the queen. Hand-drawn and irregular designs in the panels complement the portraits, producing a lithograph that is every bit as much an insult to her majesty as the engraved Sherwin stamp.³



Number 4. Coahuila (Mexico) Revenue Issue of 1878 (Roberts CO5-12). In 1878 Coahuila, a state in Mexico bordering on Texas, issued its second set of general revenue tax stamps. The first issue consisted of typeset text on yellow paper. But in 1878, Coahuila decided to do something more elaborate, more like the elegant engraved revenues that Mexico itself issued, depicting national heroes in banknote-

style stamps. Not having the money or equipment to make a first class product, Coahuila gave up and produced eight hand-drawn stamps that look like the work of an untalented junior high school student. My favorite, the 10 centavos value, is shown here. If it weren't for the band-like neck tie, I would have no idea who is depicted on the stamp, but I'm pretty sure it's supposed to be Benito Juárez (president of Mexico 1858-72) as he might look after gaining about 50 pounds.⁴ In my entirely subjective rating system, points are awarded if you can't tell who, or what, is shown on the stamp.



Number 3. Yanfu Area (China) Locomotive Stamp of 1944 (JPS No. HZ62).



During China's war with Japan, many localities issued their own stamps, locally designed and printed, often poorly on cheap paper. Ideal circumstances to create primitive stamps. And many great ones resulted. The best of these is the Yanfu Area Locomotive stamp, printed from a woodcut plate on newsprint. This stamp comes from the Huazhong Anti-Japanese War Base, wherever that was. Google fails me. The train's wheels aren't right, there's no cabin for the engineer and the perspective is way off. The result nevertheless is award-winning.⁵

Number 2. The Mauritius "Lapirot" Stamp of 1859 (Scott 14). There must be something about Mauritius. Home of the dodo, it has produced an unparalleled three of the top ten funkiest stamps of all time. As noted above, Mauritius's first attempt to copy the stamps of Britain was not an entire failure, but its next attempt was and resulted in a stamp that is such a weird and awful distortion of its model that it comes in as a close second in this august list. In going for the gold in this category, it's always a good start to dispense with the preparation of a master die and instead engrave the stamps directly on a copper plate by hand, preferably a shaky one. That is precisely the approach Jules Lapirot of Port Louis, Mauritius, took here, blessing us with not one, but twelve different stamps, each one god-awful in its own way. The stamps have been variously disparaged as "dog heads," "monkey heads," and "Small Heads with Fillet."⁶ An English paper called them "the greatest libel on Queen Victoria ever perpetrated on a postage stamp." If QV ever saw these, it would be off with JL's head.



And the winner is (drum roll, please)...

Number 1. The Corrientes stamps of 1856-1880 (Scott 1-8). Corrientes is a province in northern Argentina. As copies of the beautifully engraved first stamp of France depicting the goddess of agriculture, Ceres, these stamps are simply horrendous travesties. There are eight variations, all hand-engraved on a copper plate, each one seemingly worse than the last. After the first year, the currency changed from reales to centavos, so Corrientes just erased the value, leaving the lower tablet blank. The different values were distinguished only by color of the paper. Despite (or actually because of) their incredible ineptitude, these stamps have a folk-artsy charm about them that makes them the grand winners. Their creator was Matías Pipet (1826-1886) who emigrated to Corrientes from Rouen, France, in the 1850s. Pipet was a baker who, as a youth, had been ap-



prenticed to an engraver.⁷ Congrats Matías!!

Endnotes:

1. See Hiroyuki Kanai, *Classic Mauritius: The Locally Printed Postage Stamps 1847-59* (London: Stanley Gibbons Pubs. Ltd. 1981), pp. 104–115.
2. *Scott 1996 Classic Specialized Catalogue, 1840-1940* (Sidney, OH: Scott Publishing Co., 2nd ed. 1996).
3. See Kanai, *supra*, pp. 116-129.
4. Michael Roberts (ed.), *Mexico's Revenue Stamps* (Los Angeles: Mexico Elmhurst Philatelic Society, International 2011) p. 221.
5. See Meiso Mizuhara, *Catalog of the Chinese Liberation Area Stamps* (Tokyo: Japan Philatelic Society Foundation 1988) p. 2
6. See Kanai, *supra*, pp. 81–82.
7. See Louis Stich, *Corrientes: The Issues from 1856-80* (New York: The Collectors Club 1957); Homenaje a Don Matías Pipet, online at <http://www.pipet.com.ar/matias/> (viewed June 9, 2014).