



On Topic: Your Opinion

Wayne L. Youngblood

An occasional opinion-based column allowing you to sound off on whatever stamp-related topic is on your mind, or to react to an item previously published in Topical Time. Submissions are welcomed.

What's Wrong With "Illegals?"

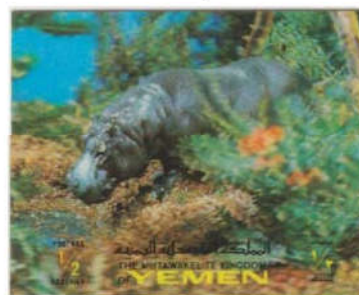


In his extremely well-written article on the preceeding pages, William Silvester decries the proliferation of recent "illegal issues" – that is, those stamps either "issued" from non-existent postal entities or from those countries in turmoil that are not currently able to release their own stamps. Clearly, those issues are not actually valid for postage (although some get used), nor do they benefit anyone other than the creator. But how is this different than many current "legitimate" issues from countries that contract out their stamp programs to mass-production stamp manufacturers?

With his discussion, Silvester opened an extremely important dialog that needs to be continued, expanded and examined in depth throughout the hobby from many different aspects as – arguably – bogus issues affect topicalists more than any other segment of the hobby. Certainly, we want to avoid illegal issues whenever possible.

However, a couple of his assertions appear to fall a bit short of the mark: *"Organized philately should ensure that such material is not sold at their events and stamp publications should prohibit their being listed for sale. eBay and other auction sites should institute policies to ban these illegal items from being sold, even if listed under the title of labels or cinderellas. The trade should be able to expel members who deliberately deal in such material where laws are being broken."*

In spirit, these are worthwhile goals to help "clean up" the market, but the policing of the hobby has a long, checkered and ineffective past with – perhaps – the least-effective effort being the notable American Philatelic Society's "Black Blot" program (1962-77). Preceding that effort was the 19th-century Society for the Suppression of Speculative Stamps, another noble – but failed – attempt to rescue collectors from speculators – and themselves. Without tracing the history of these efforts in detail, the most spectacular legacy of both is the very real fact that some of the "worst"



A legitimate lenticular 3-D stamp from Yemen, one of dozens produced for several different countries. These stamps were never intended to be used for postage.

offenders identified by each are now highly valuable stamp issues. Granted, the focus of both was primarily on speculative issues, rather than true “illegals,” but the net effect is still the same. Attempting to limit what one can or cannot collect simply whets desire for the forbidden, with a frequently corresponding effect in valuation.

Let’s examine the policing aspect. Effective policing of anything takes a lot of time, effort and consistency. To be able to punish those who are profiteering means to first determine who is doing it and establish intent. To do this, then requires consistently identifying those issues that are “illegal” – a near-impossible task.

Further complicating matters is deciding who is the official arbiter of what is or is not “illegal.” Part of the failure of the Black Blot program was a volunteer committee making the decisions. Scott Publishing, too, tried its own hand at censorship, refusing to list stamps it considered either illegal or speculative for years, and not always on the mark.

Then there’s the secondary market. Once these items have been created and sold to collectors, attempting to chase down and prohibit additional sales of them amounts to nothing more than censorship and market manipulation. Besides, once they have become a chapter of philatelic history, they have a place in certain collections, exhibits and studies.

While we can hope the Universal Postal Union and various law enforcement agencies involved with anti-counterfeiting and similar crimes will take a hard line on these criminal activities, attempting to manipulate collectors and the marketplace will backfire. It always does. ☐

When Art Imitates Imitations?

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Sometime during the five tumultuous years in which Azerbaijan produced postage stamps (1919-24), an unknown company in Udine, Italy, produced a set of six phantom stamps purporting to be from Azerbaijan (1923). Phantom stamps are complete fabrications; that is, stamps that don’t exist in real life, sometimes from countries that don’t exist as well.

The “stamps,” shown nearby, are comparable to today’s “illegals” in that their entire purpose was to deceive collectors.

The trick worked, apparently, as supplies of the bogus labels quickly dried up while there was still significant demand. In typical free-market response, the bogus stamps were soon forged! It is believed the forgeries were created by a company in Belgium. The forgeries, an example of which is shown above right, are a bit more crude than the “genuine” bogus issues, with rough perforations and gum that is white and smooth. Both sets are now highly collectible. ☐

