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Study Unit

Sense-ual Stamps

by Bruce L. Johnson

Although neurologists argue about what constitutes a “sense,” they generally name five, based upon a list originally identified by Aristotle: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. There are perhaps several others, such as pain, and I’d personally like to add common sense to the list, but let’s stick with Aristotle’s basic five.

Stamp designers and postal authorities worldwide have long been appealing to several of our basic senses when designing and producing postage stamps. Printers have developed innovative processes that allow the production of these stamps. The present article does not include an inventory of my so-called “sense-ual” stamps, but rather provides examples of each to help facilitate the next logical step—developing a “want list,” because the use of innovative printing techniques in the production of postage stamps is a subject worthy of systematic collecting.

HEARING. Stamps that rely upon our sense of hearing have not yet made an appearance, so far I as I can determine, unless you count the inexorable sound of stamp prices on the rise, at least in the United States. Stay tuned for further developments on this front.

SMELL. Stamps printed using a process that calls upon our sense of smell are today fairly common. The tiny kingdom of Bhutan reportedly issued the first “scratch-and-sniff” stamps on 30 January 1973 (Sc150-150E). This is a six-value set, plus Scott No. 150Ef, a souvenir sheet, all of which commemorate roses. Scott Nos. 150D and 150E on the souvenir sheet, both airmail stamps, were printed on rose-scented paper, supposedly the first scratch-and-sniff (or, “scratch-and-smell” if you’re in Australia or New Zealand) postage.

Scented stamps are given their smell by the use of special ink. Micro-bubbles held in suspension within the ink itself encapsulate the scent. The ink is printed offset onto sheets of stamps. When one gently rubs the stamp’s surface, the micro-bubbles are crushed and the fragrance they hold is released.

Brazil issued four 51¢ stamps on 1 August 1999 (Sc2717a-d). The set promotes forest fire prevention and depicts an anteater, a flower, a leaf, and a burnt trunk. All were printed with ink im-



Bhutan (Sc150Ef), reportedly the first “scratch-and-sniff” stamps



Switzerland, ScB668



Brazil, Sc2717a-d (1 August 1999), as found on <http://www.freestampcatalogue.com/>

pregnated with burnt wood odor on recycled paper.

Switzerland marked several anniversaries of the Pro Juventute Foundation by issuing sets of definitive rose stamps, including its 90th anniversary in 2002; the surtax supported the Foundation. Four stamps in this set (ScB669-B672) smelled of roses, whereas the Christmas rose stamp (ScB668) exudes a seasonal blend that combines fresh pine needles, cinnamon, candle wax, and cloves. Graphic designer Anne Marie Trechslin designed the entire series. Committed to the welfare of children, Pro Juventute today champions an environment in which children can play and develop.

A more recent example of the scratch-and-sniff printing technique comes from New Zealand, which issued a five-value set commemorating flowers (Sc1950-1954), plus a souvenir sheet (Sc1954a), on 2 June 2004. The 45¢ stamp on the souvenir sheet, which depicts the New-Zealand-bred Magnolia



New Zealand, Sc1954a

“Vulcan” (Sc1950), was impregnated with a floral scent. Don’t bother smelling a 45¢ stamp that’s *not* on the souvenir sheet, however; all you’ll smell is the faint aroma of offset lithography.

TASTE. The taste of stamps usually refers to the adhesive used on the back; historically, the taste has been fairly uniform—bad. In the olden days, one had to tear apart stamps carefully along their perforations, and then lick them to activate the adhesive with saliva. If the process was performed extensively, one was left with an “icky” taste in the mouth. Just about the time that stamp manufacturers began to experiment with better tasting adhesives, the self-adhesive made its appearance. This concept is so simple and useful that it was probably trapped deep in the subconscious minds of stamp users and disgruntled postal workers everywhere, just waiting for the right time to be born.

In 2001, Switzerland issued a 90¢ value



Switzerland, Sc1100



People’s Republic of China, ScTBD

(Sc1100) to honor the centenary of Choco-suisse, the Union of Swiss Chocolate Manufacturers. Designed by Ralph Schraivogel and Yves Netzhammer, it’s printed on granite paper with a scratch-and-sniff chocolate coating. Each stamp resembles a block of chocolate in a bar and, when scratched, smells chocolaty. Swiss Post rejected a proposal to make the stamps *taste* like chocolate, too.

I’ve not been able to confirm the claim, but one blogger reports that early last year the People’s Republic of China’s postal service, in honor of the Year of the Pig, which began on 18 February 2007, released a scratch-and-sniff

stamp that smells like sweet and sour pork. As an added bonus, the glue on the stamps reportedly tastes like sweet and sour pork, too!

TOUCH. The sense of touch is used in several ways when it comes to postage stamps. The two printing processes most often used to print stamps are intaglio and offset, sometimes both on the same stamp. Intaglio, perhaps the oldest means of producing stamps, involves engraving, scratching, or etching an image onto a printing plate, which in turn transfers that image onto paper—a simplified explanation of a much more complicated



Antigua & Barbuda, Sc1605D

process! The ink laid onto the paper is raised above the surface, and, if you're very careful, you can feel the ridges of ink, much like the ink on an engraved business card. Braille on stamps represents another process where touch is employed. Several countries have issued stamps noting the accomplishments of Louis Braille, such as the issue from Antigua & Barbuda (Sc1605D). Stamps to honor Louis Braille often commemorate his achievements simply by depicting the process of reading a book printed in Braille; a good example is the semi-postal issued by Egypt in April 1961 (ScB21). More recent commemoratives, however, actually use paper incorporating Braille letters, which requires a special process during printing. The Braille effect is achieved by embossing the sheets of stamps by compressing the paper between a male and female



Egypt, ScB21



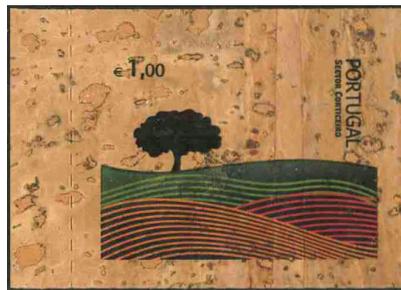
France, Sc2140

die to deform it, thereby leaving an image in relief on the surface. In 1989, France issued a stamp to honor Valentin Hauy (1745-1822), who

founded the School for the Blind in Paris in 1791 (Sc2140). It has Braille lettering embossed within its lower white bar. On 12 February 1981, Venezuela issued a stamp to commemorate Helen Keller (Sc1243)



Venezuela, Sc1243



Portugal, ScTBD

Today an integral part of Portuguese culture, the cork oak, *Quercus suber L.*, grows mainly in southern Portugal and has for centuries been protected by national legislation. Cork is most commonly used to seal bottles of wine. In 2007, however, Portugal used a wafer-thin slice (0.35mm) of "paper cork" as the base for a postage stamp design by Joao Machado. Because of the cellular structure of cork, each stamp is unique, and each has a roughness when touched that varies from stamp to stamp (ScTBD).

SIGHT. Besides micro-printing, and a process using thermochromic ink that can literally change the color of stamps (see below), holograms are perhaps the most common examples of a philatelic experience that rely upon sight. Holograms tend to be used more for decoration than security. Austria issued the first stamp containing a holographic image on 18 October 1988 (Sc1441). This 8-schilling stamp honors exports. Since that initial appearance, more than 40 other countries have issued their own

that shows her initials, HK, depicted using both ink and through embossed Braille letters (in the central white part of the stamp).

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Austria, Sc1441

holographic stamps, and they have become a new topical field in philately. Canada issued



Canada, Sc1442a-b

the first holographic stamp in North America on 1 October 1992 (Sc1442a-b) to commemorate Canada's contributions to space exploration.

Some postal authorities have used lenticular printing to produce postage stamps that "move" (See "Stamps That Move," by Denise McCarty, in *Philateli-Graphics*, April 2004, pages 15, 17). Lenticular technology makes it possible to place several pictures on one stamp. The viewer sees different individual



Netherlands, Sc1250a-b

pictures depending on the viewing angle. The figures in the pictures "come alive," as on the set of stamps depicting skaters from the Netherlands (Sc1250a-b).

A Sense-ual Stamp Tour-de-Force

On 2 October 2001, Great Britain issued an innovative set of six stamps (Sc1993-1998) that employ most of the sense-ual processes that we've been considering. Royal

Post touted the set as "interactive" and issued them to commemorate that year's Nobel Prizes, each stamp depicting items symbolic of the prize categories.

The first stamp, a 2nd value that represents the Nobel Prize for Chemistry (Sc1993), depicts a Carbon 60 molecule. It's covered with a thermochromic film that changes color when warmed; the heat from your finger reveals an ion trapped within the molecule. Thermochromic or heat-reactive inks are relatively new; they disappear or change color rapidly when exposed to temperatures above their set level. When the ink is warmed for a few seconds the color will disappear and, as the ink cools, the color returns.

The First Class value (Sc1994), honoring the Nobel Prize for Economics, was printed intaglio. The heavy film of ink that is applied to the paper under great pressure gives the ink a texture that is apparent to the touch.

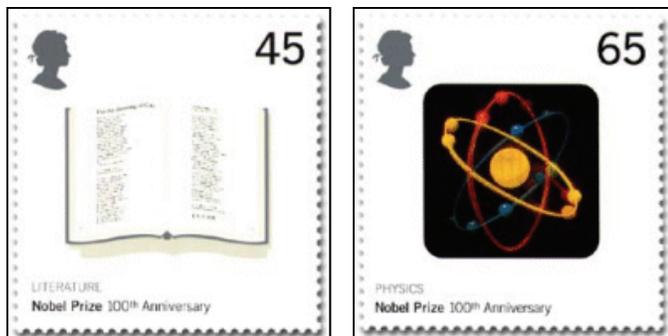
The Nobel Peace Prize is commemorated on the E-value stamp (Sc1995). It's perhaps the best known of the Nobel Prizes and in many ways the most noble, represented in this case by a white dove, which is embossed upon the paper.

The 40p value (Sc1996), which represents Physiology or Medicine, has a scratch-and-sniff coating that exudes a eucalyptus odor (which many noses will categorize as medicinal) when gently rubbed, the first time that scented ink was used on British postage stamps.

The Nobel laureate for 1948, T.S. Eliot, has his entire 32-line poem "The Addressing of Cats" micro-printed on the 45p stamp (Sc1997) honoring Literature. Micro-printing is used primarily as a security device. The text is not legible to the naked eye and can be hidden within a design. The text is fully readable, however,



Great Britain, Sc1993-1996



Great Britain, Sc1997-1998

when viewed under a magnifier.

Finally, the stamp representing the Nobel Prize for Physics (Sc1998), carries a holographic foil image of a boron molecule. Dennis Gabor was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1971

for holography, and this was the first time a hologram was used on a British stamp. A hologram is a clever method of three-dimensional photography, which gives true three-dimensional images on a flat piece of film. If you move your head, the image changes and moves so that you can see around the image.

Many postal authorities are intent upon selling stamps to novice and seasoned collectors to help boost profit margins. They hope the stamps will be retained and never used. Might we reasonably expect additional sensual stamps to be issued as “collector’s items” and appealing to *all* our senses? Considering the recent advent of the “talking” greeting card, can singing stamps be far behind?