

Fabulous Firsts: **Austria** (June 1, 1850)

by John F. Dunn



Austria Sc. 1

One of the true treasure chests of philatelic study are the issues of Austria. An area consisting of some 37 kingdoms, principalities, duchies and cities without a unifying factor; with a wide variety of methods to carry the mail; and despite extensive study already done there still are discoveries to be made.

The various attempts to unify in a Federation, under Prussia; a postal treaty signed April 6, 1850; the reign of the Hapsburg Empire over an area which today includes the Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, parts of Italy, Poland, Russia, Rumania, and Yugoslavia; and the formation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the end of World War I all add to the multiplicity of postal areas and possibilities for study.

In the official postal gazette, the stamps were announced on April 27, 1850. Despite the short time for production and the changes in value, they were at the counters and sold on the scheduled date of June 1, 1850.



A cover with a vertical pair of the 1850 9kr blue tied by Vienna June 1 [1850]—the first day of issue

There even are letters dated May 27, 1850 (see page 2) that bear stamps. Covers with stamps cancelled June 1, 1850 are key pieces in an Austrian collection.

Dr. Johannes Jakob Herz, Postal Inspector in Lower Austria, was one of the key people in the introduction of the first Austrian stamps. Following a suggestion by



The “May 27” cover, Austria’s first use of a postage stamp, the 1850 6kr brown, tied to a cover from Vienna to Pest. The letter was written on May 27, 1850 and deposited at the suburban Leopoldstadt (Praterstrasse) letter collecting office where the 6 kr stamp was applied to pay the postage and cancelled with a grid of red/magenta manuscript lines. Then it went on to central Vienna, where it was further cancelled by an italic 2-line “WIEN / 27.MAI” datestamp. The cover also shows another strike of the date-stamp at the top right.

The rate from Vienna to Budapest was 6kr for 1/2 loth weight over a distance of 10 to 30 Meilen until June 1, 1850 (when the stamp was to be officially issued) and then it would cost 9 kreuzer, so the sender was getting in “under the wire” by posting early, and the suburban postal clerk may have been ignorant of the official date of use of the new postage stamps, or may have ignored it.

Postal Director Viertaler, he went on a tour to study the experiences in countries where stamps were already in use. Basing his wide-ranging postal reform suggestions on findings in England, Belgium and France, Herz suggested that the stamps bear the state coat of arms or a portrait of the emperor.

Stamps were only one aspect of the overall reforms proposed by Herz. Among the other reforms, the rate system was changed to enable the more efficient handling of the rising volume of letters. The English postal service charged a fixed penny rate, but Herz proposed a multi-zone system with lower rates for local letters and printed matter.

To increase efficiency, he also recommended canceling the stamps by the town postmark instead of stamping the letters with a town postmark and a canceller.

On September 14, 1849, the Minister of Commerce, Baron von Bruck, submitted the proposals to the Emperor, and on September 25, 1849, Emperor Franz Joseph signed the decree, annotating: “received these applications for the reform of the rates for the transportation of letters and mail coach. My authorisation. Schonbrunn, September 25, 1849.”

A decree issued on October 1, 1849, commissioned Dr. Herz to establish the essays, features, use, cancellation, retail and clearing of proceeds from the sale of stamps. The print order was given on February 5, 1850.

There were five denominations—1 kruzzer yellow (page 1), 2kr black, 3kr red, 6kr brown, and 9kr blue (Scott 1-5)—all exactly alike in design. The values originally were fixed at 1, 2, 3, 6 and 12 kruzzer, the idea being that one postage stamp would be available to pay each of the postage rates for ordinary letters.

In addition to these stamps, values in Italian currency (5, 10, 15, 30 and 60 centesimi) were required for the Upper Italian areas (Lombardy-Venetia Scott 1, 3-6, see page 4). One of the reasons for issuing the centesimi stamps was the fact that the Italians would have benefitted from the difference in the exchange rate. The official exchange rate



Scott 2



Scott 4 pair



Scott 3, 5, with St. Andrew's crosses (see page 6)

Lombardy-Venetia Sc. 1, 3-6 (there is no Sc. 2) and a scarce combination usage of Austria 4 and Lombardy-Venetia 4



for the Italian currency was 20 kreuzer for one lira (which equalled 100 centesimi, so that 5 centesimi equalled 1 kreuzer, 10 centesimi equalled 2 kreuzer, and so on.

The memorandum of association signed between the Austrian and the German postal services on April 6, 1850, stipulated uniform rates, and fixed the postage for ordinary letters up to a weight of half an ounce for more than 20 miles at 9 instead of the envisaged 12 kreuzer. For this reason, when the first stamps had been distributed, but before they were issued, the maximum values had to be lowered from 12 to 9 kreuzer and from 60 to 45 centesimi, respectively—and almost one million kreuzer stamps and half a million centesimi stamps had to be burnt.



The only known example of the unissued 12kr, killed by a single vertical stroke.

This design shows the Arms of Austria on a shield surmounted by a crown with “KKPOST STEMPEL” (Imperial-royal postage-stamp) at the top and the value in KREUZER at the base. While the design is simple and was not highly regarded when it was issued, it is now considered to be attractive and dignified.

The coat of arms was given preference over other motifs. In the restless era after the revolutions, it seemed more neutral than the Emperor's portrait. The design was submitted by Dr. Herz in essay form, but the actual creator of the design is not known. It is believed that he was an employee of the government printing office.

The original die or matrix was engraved into a hard wood block. It lacked the value in the lower box, the imperial crown on top of the coat of arms was larger than the final design, the twigs at the side of the coat of arms were reversed, and the upper inscription had higher letters.

The word to the right at first read "STEMPEL", was changed to "STAMPEL", and then back to "STEMPEL"—meaning revenue stamps.

The engraver and stamp cutter, Hermann Karl Tautenhayn, then cut a master block into steel. The copper molds taken from this master block were used to produce single-piece casts which subsequently were assembled to printing plates. From this the necessary secondary dies were cast by the electrotpe process. The face values were individually soldered into the blocks, which explains the great number of types.

The secondary dies then served as matrices from which electrotypes were cast in ordinary type metal. These electros were clamped together in a printer's chase to form the printing plates. The casts and plates were made and the stamps printed at the State Printing Office in Vienna.

The stamps were printed using the typography method in full sheets that consisted of four counter sheets.

The photo on page 6 also shows a sample illustration of the watermark. Each counter sheet had eight strips of eight fields, consisting of eight rows by eight columns, with one row having four stamps and the remaining four positions filled with a St. Andrew's Cross. (See also page 3.) Thus, every counter sheet had 60 stamps.

This layout was a deliberate choice. At that time, a gulden equalled 60 kreuzer; the price of an entire sheet thus was as many gulden as the value of the stamps in kreuzer. For collectors, stamps with St. Andrew's crosses are especially desirable.

Two different sets of plates were used for each value. In the early series the stamps were spaced 2-1/2 mm apart horizontally, while in the later plates the distance between

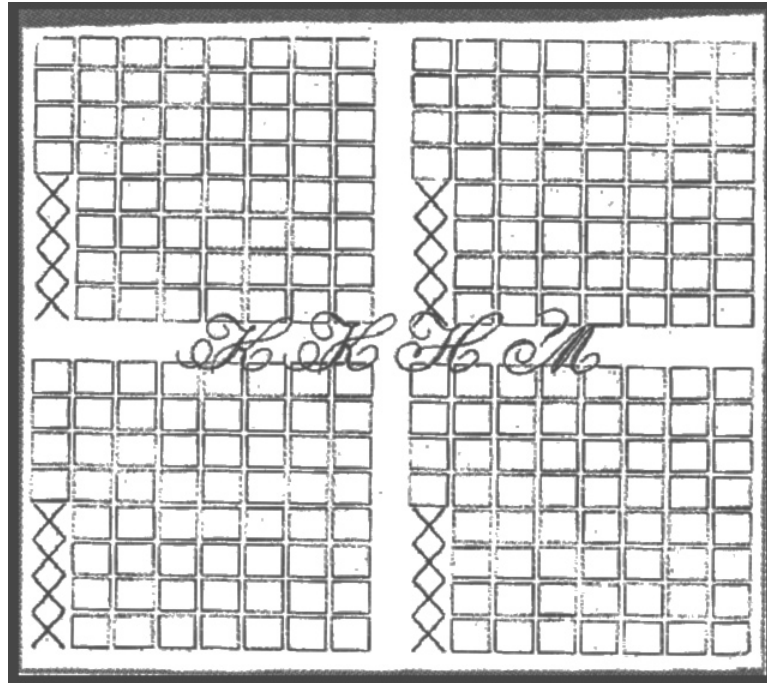


Diagram of the full sheet, with a sample illustration of the K K H M watermark added.

the stamps was almost 3-1/2mm. In making up the plates, from four to eight blocks were added with a St. Andrew's Cross in relief upon each of them. Unused specimens with cross (or even a portion of it) attached are practically unobtainable and used specimens are scarce even in the case of the commonest denominations. These varieties are well worth hunting for.

The paper at first used was hand-made and like all hand-made papers it varies considerably in thickness. In fact it is easy to differentiate this paper into two main classes which may best be described as thick and thin. Both the thick and thin varieties were watermarked in the sheet with large open letters "K K H M" meaning "Kaiserlich-Konigliches Handels-Ministerium", or Imperial and Royal Ministry of Commerce.

Portions of these letters show on some stamps in each sheet. They are comparatively scarce and are well worth looking for. A few values—1kr, 3kr and 9kr—are found on laid paper and these are of considerable rarity. All but the 6kr are also found on a distinctly ribbed paper—probably

caused by too thin a mixture of pulp being used with the result that the wires of the bed of the frame show—and these are also quite rare. This hand-made paper was not satisfactory and after a time a thick white wove machine-made paper was substituted and this continued in use until the series was discontinued in 1858. No watermarked letters are found in this paper.

The gum used was coated on quite thickly and in the course of years cracked rather badly and frequently cracked the paper as well to the detriment of what should be fine mint specimens. This gum is not soluble in cold water but turns to a kind of jelly which has to be scraped off with a blunt knife if one wants to get rid of it. The stamps that were printed on the thick machine-made paper and coated with this heavy composition are the ones most apt to suffer from gum cracking.

Due to their long time in use, the printing blocks had to be exchanged and retouched several times. As the printing plates consisted of single blocks, each alteration yielded a new plate combination. The relatively primitive production process gave rise to defects in every single printing block. This enables collectors specializing in varieties to reconstruct the individual plates, or to collect major varieties, which are in great demand.

Repairs and retouches also gave rise to changes in individual printing blocks. Austrian specialists have developed a system of Types to classify each stamp according to specific characteristics, including the frame, background of the coat of arms, numeral of value, shapes of letters, etc.

The long validity and the different printings also gave rise to great differences in color. Once, when the yellow for the 1 kreuzer stamp was too light, the printers simply turned the sheets and printed better stamps on the back. Thus the printed on both sides or double-sided prints that are listed in the catalogues.



The unique 9kr "missing 9" variety which got replaced by a postmaster's manuscript "9", used with LINZ 24.JUN. circular date stamp.

There are three distinct types of the 9 kreuzer. In type A the “9” is high and nearly touches the top of the label; in type B the numeral is lower and well centered; while in type C there is a much wider space between the “9” and “K” of KREUZER. The two first named types are equally common but type C, which was discovered a comparatively few years ago, is a rarity.

The 1 kreuzer value is known printed both sides on the hand-made paper and is not particularly scarce. Probably the yellow color used was so hard to see that the printers ran quite a number of sheets through on both sides to be sure they were printed at all ! Most values may be found in more or less pronounced shades, the 1kr in particular varying from a deep orange to a pale yellow. The cancellations on this issue are particularly interesting, and worthy of study. In addition to the regular circular ones containing the name of the town and date, and straight line cancellations in one or two lines, a number of fancy designs are obtainable.

All values of this series were reprinted in 1865, 1871, and 1885, while the 1kr (both colors) and 2kr were again reprinted in 1889. All the reprints are on machine-made paper of medium thickness and have ordinary white gum while the colors are brighter than those of the original stamps and the impressions are, generally speaking, much clearer so that they are not hard to distinguish.



1871 Reprint
of Sc. 3

Because of dissatisfaction with the original design before it even went to print, the stamps were considered a provisional and work on a final version got under way soon after they were issued. Essays were made with heads of Mercury in different sizes for the various values (similar



A Mercury design, used on the 1850 Newspaper issue, Sc. P1. Notice the “STAMP” at the bottom. Reminder: for a closer look, use your pdf magnifier tool.

to bank notes), with the currencies to be indicated in the beard of the messenger of the gods. Other essays showed various portraits of the Emperor.

Other trials were made with various papers, and the catalogues distinguish between the rough, hand-made paper and the smooth, machine-made paper. The gum also was changed several times.

In addition, several experiments were made to facilitate the process of separating the stamps from the sheet. Besides the trial perforations of the Government Printing Office, the “Tokay roulette” is another sought-after variety.



The famous Burrus “Tokay Roulette” cover. It bears a 6kr and 3kr (Sc. 3, 4) tied by TOKAY 24/6 c.d.s. to a folded entire letter to Pest. In the Autumn of 1852, postmaster Alber Szep from Homonna was sent to Tokay and unofficially rouletted the stamps from that town as he had already done at Homonna.

Right, a used single with the roulette most visible most visible at right and bottom. Note as well the roulette in the left margin (arrow).



Although considered a provisional issue from the start, the first Austrian stamps were in use until 1858. They might have been in use even longer, but when the currency changed on November 1, 1858, new stamps had to be issued. Instead of 60 kreuzer, the

gulden equaled 100 kreuzer, so the old kreuzer values were thus no longer correct. Some of the essays that had already been proposed as substitutes for the first issue were taken for the new issue, and the 1858-59 issue with portraits of the Emperor Franz Josef replaced the Coat of Arms issue.



In the year 2000 the WIPA stamp exhibition was held in Vienna to mark the 150th anniversary of Austria's first stamps, and The Stamp Show 2000 was held in London. To mark the two events, Ukraine issued a souvenir sheet depicting Ukrainians in native costumes and the first issues of Austria and Great Britain.

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