

U.S. Stamp Colors: The Elusive Yellow

by Steve Swain

This article explores the use of the elusive color yellow on U.S. stamps. We start with the use of yellow for stamps issued before and after 1958, which was the year of the first use of yellow in the multi-color printing process, then focus on the shades, hues and variations of yellow stamps as well as orange stamps incorporating yellow in their color scheme and conclude with a comparison of yellow used in the major stamp catalogs, online resources, expertizing services and stamp auction houses highlighting the inconsistencies in how colors are identified on some stamps.

Yellow: A Significant Stamp Color

The importance of yellow in graphic mediums, including stamps, is well documented. Combine yellow and red to stimulate a feeling of excitement; yellow enhances a more subdued, cool palette of greens and browns; mix yellow with gray and a bit of black to create a crisp, high-tech look.

A review of the stamps portrayed in a U.S. catalog using color reveals numerous attractive designs using yellow. It is a very prominent and significant color for many stamps. Figure 1 (all figures can be found on pages 32 and 33) presents several examples of these wonderful issues.

Yellow is a significant color in the design of these stamps. The school room blackboard on the 1972 P.T.A. issue (Scott 1463) is boldly emphasized against the brilliant yellow background. The 2011 issue commemorating the Indianapolis 500 road race (Scott 4530) has an exciting rendition of the yellow Marmon Wasp winning the 1911 race. The 1987 25¢ bee and flower issue (Scott 2281) highlights the shining yellow of the honey bee. The 2007 41¢ Celebrate stamp (Scott 4196) artfully combines yellow with red.

Some stamps have even been printed on yellow paper, with some of the most notable examples being the 1961 Kansas Statehood Centennial Sunflower commemorative and the various issues of the late 1970s to early 1980s Americana series shown in Figure 2.

Probably the most famous U.S. stamp associated with the color yellow is the 1962 “yellow color shift” issue (Figure 3, Scott 1204). From the original printing of the stamp honoring Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1953 to 1961, several panes were discovered with the yellow color inverted. Not wanting to create a rarity, the USPS decided to print huge quantities of the color-inverted stamps.

The Elusive Yellow Stamp

The multi-color process for U.S. stamps using yellow began with the 1958 Forest Conservation issue (Scott 1122). So, the question is begged as to whether yellow has always been a significant color for U.S. stamps prior to the introduction of the multi-color process. If so, which stamps, and how many?

A close review of the stamps portrayed in a color catalog reveals, with a very few exceptions, that prior to the use of effective multi-color printing technology U.S. stamps were printed using a single color: red, blue, green, brown, purple or black. A single, primary color was definitely the mainstay for U.S. stamps during the years prior

to the multi-color process, but there were many variations of these colors, such as “pale blue”, and printing varieties due to plate inking or ink preparation so that a range of color was available for most early stamps.

But not yellow. Of the thousands of U.S. stamps issued, with high quality, tightly rendered designs resulting in very attractive stamps, only a very few have yellow as their primary color scheme.

How Many Yellow Stamps?

Relying on descriptions in the Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps and Covers, the 10¢ eagle-and-shield issue of the legendary 1869 “pictorials” set (Figure 4, Scott 116) was the first U.S. stamp having yellow as its sole color.

A noteworthy innovation in the 1869 pictorials was the introduction of the first two-color stamps in U.S. postal history, the four denominations of 15-cents and higher. The 10¢ eagle-and-shield design was adapted for the 30¢ bi-colored blue and red stamp with the addition of draped U.S. flags. These bi-colored stamps are notable exceptions to the one-color rule of that time period.

Following the 1869 issue, very few stamps were issued using the color yellow as the base tint. In fact, taking into consideration regular issues, commemoratives, airmail and special delivery, the list of stamps classified as yellow-only includes the 1869 10¢ Eagle-and-Shield (Scott 116) and the 4 varieties of the 10¢ Washington of the 1908 series (Scott 338, 356, 364 and 381) shown in Figure 5.

Some collectors will maintain that absent from this list are stamps commonly identified as yellow, such as the 1913 10¢ Panama-Pacific Exposition (Scott 400) and the 1922 10¢ James Monroe (Scott 562). However, these stamps are purposely not included in the above list of “yellow” stamps because Scott classifies these issues otherwise, as will be discussed later.

“Back of the Book” Yellow Stamps

The especially small list of stamps printed with yellow as a base color can be expanded by including issues in the “back of the book” category, specifically the 1873 Agriculture Department official stamps, Scott O1-O9. (Examples in Figure 6.)

Using designs of the regular issues then in use, these stamps satisfied a request by Congress to abolish the much abused franking privilege. Stamps were issued for the Executive branch and its subordinate departments, with Agriculture being one of those departments.

True, the various printings of the Agriculture Department stamps range in color from yellow to golden yellow to olive yellow. However, the generally accepted major type of the issue was printed solely in yellow, and that is how it’s listed in Scott’s.

An interesting note is that official stamps were valid only on government mail and were never sold to the public, so collectors found assembling this long series a challenge and rather expensive. But in 1875, a special printing was made available to collectors of the entire set, un gummed

Yellow...

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and overprinted with “Specimen”. (See Figure 7.)

Yellow has definitely played a significant role in the history of U.S. stamps, whether for regular issues, commemoratives or back of the book items. But in stark contrast to the prominent use of yellow with the multi-color process, yellow as the single, primary tint is a most elusive color for U.S. stamps.

Stamp Color Names

The fundamental strategy adopted by stamp catalogs for naming and describing a stamp color is to modify a limited number of primary colors with adjectives such as “dark”, “light”, “pale”, “bright” and “deep”. Thus, dark green, or light blue, or deep red.

Most importantly, two color names are sometimes combined, such as “orange yellow” or “yellow orange”. Using this convention, the second color name is the primary color as modified with a tint of the first color name. Thus, “orange yellow” accurately refers to a yellow stamp, but with a slight tinge of orange.

“Orange Yellow” Stamps

Continuing our exploration of U.S. yellow stamps and using the combined color convention, the *Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps and Covers* describes the following stamps as yellow, but with a tint or hue of orange, i.e., Orange Yellow (Figure 8):

- 1912-1919 10¢ Franklin (Scott 416, 433, 472, 497 and 510)
- 1913 10¢ Panama-Pacific Exposition (Scott 400)
- 1929 10¢ James Monroe “Kans.” Overprint (Scott 668) *
- 1929 10¢ James Monroe “Nebr.” Overprint (Scott 679) *
- 1932 10¢ Washington Bicentennial (Scott 715)
- 1944 17¢ Motorcycle Delivery Special Delivery (Scott E18)
- 1948 3¢ Gold Star Mothers (Scott 969)

* Curiously, the original un-overprinted Monroe issues (Scott 562, 591, 603, 642) are identified by Scott as orange!

“Yellow Orange” Stamps

An academic explanation of the color orange instructs us that orange occurs between red and yellow in the visible spectrum and is numerically halfway between red and yellow in the Red-Green-Blue color wheel. Thus, it is appropriate to include in a discussion of yellow stamps those in the orange category that have yellow in their combined color scheme.

(There are numerous U.S. stamps whose color is also combined with yellow, such as yellow-green and yellow-brown. However, these stamps are not included in this discussion given that green, brown, etc., do not fall within red and yellow in the visible spectrum as does orange.)

Shown in Figure 9, the U.S. stamps having yellow in their naming convention but only as a tint to orange, i.e., Yellow Orange, are:

- 1875 30¢ Franklin (Scott 46)

- 1873 15¢ Webster (Scott 163)
- 1950 3¢ California Statehood (Scott 997)

Other Yellow Orange Combinations

The color orange has many hues and shadings, one of the most interesting being “ocher”. Two intriguing items in the yellow-orange grouping are the postal stationary color error issues of 1874-1886 (Scott U189b and U190b): the 10¢ yellow ocher on white (Figure 10) and the 10¢ yellow ocher on amber, both considered major color errors and very rare. Only five or six entires of each are thought to exist.

Lastly, to complete the examination of stamps in the Yellow-Orange spectrum, below is a list of U.S. stamps having orange as their single, primary color.

Printing techniques and inking variations resulted in several shades and hues of the color of these stamps, such as deep orange and red orange. And, arguably, some may even have tilted the color scale a bit toward yellow. Figure 11 provides representative examples of the Orange issues included in this list:

- 1857-1861 30¢ Franklin (Scott 38)
 - 1861-1867 30¢ Franklin (Scott 71, 81, 100)
 - 1870 15¢ Webster (Scott 141, 152, 174, 189 and 199)
 - 1875 30¢ Franklin (Scott 110)
 - 1890 90¢ Perry (Scott 229)
 - 1894 50¢ Jefferson (Scott 260)
 - 1895 50¢ Jefferson (Scott 275)
 - 1902-1903 50¢ Jefferson (Scott 310)
 - 1908 Series 6¢ Washington (Scott 336, 362, 379, 429, 468 and 506)
 - 1913 10¢ Panama-Pacific Exposition (Scott 400A)
 - 1914-1915 10¢ Panama-Pacific Exposition (Scott 404)
 - 1922-1925 6¢ Garfield (Scott 558, 587, 638, 664 “Kans.” overprint, 675 “Nebr.” overprint and 723)
 - 1922-1929 10¢ James Monroe (Scott 562, 591, 603, 642) and Canal Zone issues (Scott C.Z. 75, 87, 99, and 104)
 - 1897-1903 Trans-Mississippi Exposition 4¢ Buffalo (Scott 287)
 - 1932 6¢ Washington (Scott 711)
 - 1938 1/2¢ Franklin (Scott 803) and the Canal Zone overprint (Scott CZ118)
 - 1918 6¢ Curtiss Jenny (Scott C1)
 - 1934 6¢ Winged Globe (Scott C19)
 - 1941 50¢ Airplane (Scott C31)
 - 1893 10¢ Running Messenger Special Delivery (Scott E3)
 - 1925 15¢ Motorcycle Messenger Special Delivery (Scott E13)
 - 1931 15¢ Motorcycle Messenger Special Delivery (Scott E16)
- The two-color naming convention for stamps in the Yellow-Orange spectrum surely provides additional insight into the usage of yellow for U.S. stamps.

Even so, yellow remains a most elusive color for U.S. postage.

Resources and Stamp Colors: Inconsistencies

Both experienced and novice collectors will not hesitate to say that issues such as the 1913 10¢ Panama-Pacific Exposition (Scott 400), the 1929 10¢ James Monroe “Kans.” Overprint (Scott 668) and the 1950 3¢ California Statehood (Scott 997), shown in Figure 12, are most definitely yellow, not orange yellow or yellow orange as the Scott catalog and other stamp resources maintain.

Why such disagreement?

Certainly, this argument is the result of the various shades and hues taken on by stamps due to printing techniques and ink compositions. Also, and maybe most importantly, not all people see color exactly the same. This surely is a significant reason for the different colors attributed to stamps.

But irrespective of “collector” contentions and arguments, are the major stamp catalogs, stamp expertising services and online resources in agreement on standards for stamp colors? Can a collector be assured of a consistent, agreed-upon color definition for a stamp? No, not at all.

There are significant inconsistencies.

A classic example of this are the various uses of yellow and orange, and their combinations, for color descriptions of U.S. stamps. For example, Figure 13 provides a comparison of the color attributed to several issues in the *Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps and Covers* and 1847usa.com, one of many U.S. postage online resources.

For the 15¢ Webster, Scott contends the color is orange with a tint of yellow (yellow orange), while the online resource completely excludes yellow as even being a possible color. Similarly with the 10¢ Monroe, Scott describes the stamp as orange, with no shading at all. However, the online resource contradicts this in describing the stamp as yellow.

An even more significant discrepancy for the yellow or orange color attributed to a stamp is a back of the book issue, the 1875 \$9 Minerva Newspaper stamp, Scott PR27. Scott lists this stamp as yellow, no variations. But the Philatelic Foundation certificate for a copy of PR27 shown in Figure 14 clearly presents the color of the stamp as yellow orange, i.e., a stamp with the primary color of orange somewhat modified with a tinge of yellow; very different from a “yellow” stamp.

And, to pursue this example further, the Spink Shreve Galleries auction house recently described a copy of the stamp as orange yellow (Figure 15).

Thus, three significantly different representations of the color for the same stamp, Scott PR27.

Are Color Charts the Answer?

Are color charts more reliable, providing more commonly agreed upon naming conventions for stamp colors than the catalogs or other resources? Over the years, collectors have had access to several general color guides such as the Subway Stamp Company’s G&K Wonder Color Guide with 140 colors keyed to U.S. stamps, the Michel Color Guide, and the Stanley Gibbons Color Key, all comprehensive and providing credible guidance. But even a

cursor review of these guides reveals an absence of color naming consistency.

Scott provides a useful guide, the *Specialized Color Guides for United States Stamps*, that includes color chips beside which you can lay stamps in an effort to match a color. However, the Scott Publishing Co. does not publish a color guide keyed to each stamp in its catalog because of its stated position that it is simply not possible to produce an accurate color guide true to the exact colors of all stamps.

In a *Linn’s Stamp News* Question Corner in the March 11, 1996, issue, it was reported that Scott declines to issue a comprehensive color guide because of “the general criticism of guides”, i.e., a lack of common descriptive color names among the various catalogs and lack of consistency between colors of the same name in different time periods.

The Elusive Color Yellow

The unambiguous message here is that there is a lack of common descriptive color names for stamps among the various catalogs and other philatelic resources, leaving the collector, or investor, less assured about the exact character of his or her stamps. And, stamp colors in the yellow-orange spectrum for U.S. issues are certainly the focus of some of the most noteworthy color naming inconsistencies and discrepancies.

This again highlights the role of yellow as one of the most significant, and elusive, colors used on U.S. stamps.

About The Author:

Steve Swain has enjoyed all aspects of philately for 55 years. His articles have appeared in *The American Philatelist*, *The Philatelic Communicator*, *Stamps*, *Stamp Insider*, *Georgia Post Roads* and other stamp publications on topics ranging from writing stamp articles for philatelic publications, U.S. Civil War encased stamps and collecting first day covers.

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5: left to right: Sc. 338, 356, 364, 381



Figure 6: Sc. O3, O4, O6



Figure 7: Sc. O3S, O6S



Figure 8. Orange Yellow stamps: Scott 400, 668 and E18



Figure 9. Yellow Orange stamps: Scott 46, 163 and 997



Figure 10. Scott U189b "Yellow Ocher on White" error "Orange" Stamps



Figure 11. Examples of Orange issues: Scott 250, 803, 310 and C1



Figure 12. Yellow, Orange Yellow or Yellow Orange?

	Resource	Color
 1870 15¢ Webster Scott 163	Scott 1847usa.com	Yellow Orange Orange to Deep Orange
 1922 10¢ Monroe Scott 562	Scott 1847usa.com	Orange Yellow to Deep Orange Yellow

Figure 13. Comparison of Stamp Colors from Two Resources



Figure 14. Philatelic Foundation certificate for Scott PR27.



Figure 15. An "Orange yellow" Scott PR27 from a Spink Shreves Galleries auction

#PR27, \$9.00 Orange yellow, bright color, light manuscript cancel, very fine; 2003 PF certificate. [\(Image\)](#)