

A Brand New Section in the *Scott Specialized*

By Barbara R. Mueller



Numerous essays were made in the 1860's in an attempt to find a form of stamp that could not be fraudulently re-used. At left, the 1867 Lowenberg decal essays in a design very different from the then-in-use three cent 1861 issue.

Photography in this article by Adrian Boutrelle.

The "Also Rans"

Of United States Stamp Collecting

Quickly now—who was the vice-presidential candidate on the Republican ticket in 1964? And who was Adlai Stevenson's running mate in 1952? Losing vice-presidential candidates are the quintessential "also-rans" (and they were William Miller and John J. Sparkman in the instances cited).

In U.S. philately there is a group of collectibles that may be termed the "also-rans" too, but unlike faded politicians, they are destined to be kept in the public eye by their special new listing in the new 1992 *Scott U.S. Specialized Catalogue*. These are "essays," defined by Scott as proposed designs that differ in some way from the issued stamps.

With more than 2,500 major listings of U.S. postage stamps alone in *Scott*, why bother with such "rejects," as prominent essay enthusiast and chairman of the Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee Jack Rosenthal calls them? Because there is the mystery and fascination with what-might-have-been, the murky first chapter in the life story of a stamp.

Glance through the 68-page listing of essays and you will find some strange-looking designs and some familiar faces, some in stamp format, others the size of greatly enlarged drawings. The black and white truncated illustrations cannot do justice to the colorful originals. Next time you attend a stamp exhibition, look for essays in displays that tell the entire history of a given issue (usually 19th century).

Where do you the collector get these things? They were never sold to the public. Those on the market come from the archives of private printers of stamps as well as the personal portfolios of the artists who designed and engraved them. For most of the 19th century, the artwork or dies for rejected designs usually remained the property of the firms that created them. If and when they were liquidated, such material was acquired by other printers or by private individuals who sometimes used them clandestinely to create collector's items.

As the 20th century progressed, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing instituted ever-tighter controls that have resulted in a

dearth of modern official essays available commercially.

It has been said that essays and proofs (which are the logical extension of the essay, impressions made from a printing surface used in actual production) exist in a quantity of one for every million regularly issued stamps. If you are interested in owning a one in a million collectible at a price often no more than \$25, try essays!

The *Scott* listing is built on the foundation laid by such famed U.S. philatelists as John K. Tiffany, first president of what became the American Philatelic Society, and Dr. Clarence Brazer, a depression-era architect who turned to philately to make a living. With his artistic bent, he was drawn especially to essays and gathered a loyal coterie of fellow enthusiasts in the 1930's. He wrote extensively for the *Collectors Club Philatelist* and established a special study unit of APS, today known as its Affiliate 159. In 1941, APS published his still standard work—*Essays for U.S. Adhesive Postage Stamps*. In 1943 The Essay-Proof Society was formed and in January 1944 the first issue of *The Essay-Proof Journal* appeared, a quarterly still being published today in the identical format as the original.

The users of the Brazer system of listings will note that *Scott* has simplified his rather elaborate (and confusing) combination letter-and-numeral designations for types. The changes are not so radical, however, that an easy transition between the two can be made.

In the *Scott U.S. Specialized Catalogue* the essay listings are, of course, presented in more compact form than in the Brazer book, and minus the explanatory background text. Nevertheless they comprise an entirely adequate introduction to this tantalizing world of what-we-could-have-had. Immediately following the essay section is one for proofs, which has been part of the *Specialized* for decades. But it has been upgraded and expanded with listings for more contemporary collectibles in a similar vein, such as souvenir cards and commemorative panels.

There are very few essays for the earliest issues. Even the two models listed for the 1847's are followed by the note, "The status of *No. 1-E1* (and *No. 2-E1*) has been questioned." Enthusiastic legitimate essaying did not set in until the time of the 1851-57 issue just before the Civil War began.

Some of the stranger looking designs are

the less expensive ones—the Indian and Liberty head woodcuts for the 1861-66 period, for example. In fact, that entire decade was one of wild experimentation with formats and devices intended to foil alleged re-users of postage stamps. With the issued stamps themselves we find the grilled impressions on the regular series from 1867 to 1870. But inventive minds came up with such novelties as decal-type and self-cancelling stamps.

The popular 1869 series is represented by a lengthy list of experiments in designs of many colors which closely parallel the issued stamps except for smaller numerals. These were also printed on so-called safety paper that had all-over background networks printed in fugitive ink in bizarre colors.

One of the most fruitful areas for debate about the merits of accepted vs. unaccepted designs is the bank note era of 1870-90. The Civil War period obsession with fraud prevention had passed, and the essays were dignified Victorian art works. The essays for the 2c Jackson design featuring Old Hickory in a high stiff collar are especially intriguing. The Continental Bank Note Co. even proposed four designs for the lower denominations which bear a marked resemblance to tax paid revenue essays of the period. Each design consists of a huge, ornate numeral 1, 2, 3, or 6 into which very tiny portrait vignettes could be inserted.

Quite expensive but especially attractive is Continental's three cent Indian maiden in an elaborate headdress. One of these essays bears the erroneous spelling "PORTAGE," while the other has the correct spelling of "postage." Oddly enough, the error version is the cheaper of the two.

A novel concept for paying postage is displayed on the tiny rectangular 1879 Harris coupon essay. A 30-year Postal Bond of \$300 face value was proposed which would pay interest by means of daily coupons worth 3 cents each to be used as stamps. The bond had six pages of coupons, but single examples of the three cent are frequently

found at reasonable prices. Another enterprising concept is found on the *Philadelphia Times* 1890 essay. It is a large, rectangular, surface-printed design believed to



"Bowlsby patent coupon" proposed for 1861 issue. "STAMP of no value without coupon. COUPON to be removed only by POSTMASTER."

have been a prototype for proposed business advertising on stamps.

Of special interest this year are the delicate hand-drawn designs for the Columbian series. Many of these are coming on the market now through the private treaty sale of the Jack Rosenthal collection, along with the even more spectacular bicolored engravings for the 1898 Trans-Mississippi.

The *Scott* listings carry all through the early 20th century commemoratives, which include the very

large preliminary drawings for the Pan-Americans. There is a scattering of models and engravings for the 1902 and the Washington-Franklin issues, but very few of the 1922 regulars. The listings stop with the 1932 Olympics, although the Brazer compilations carried on through the Steven Dohanos designs for the Army-Navy series. Additional 20th century items are found in serialized supplements to the original Brazer work which ran in *The American Philatelist* from 1942 to 1947 and then in

The Essay-Proof Journal in 1948 to 1955.

Included in the "back of the book" segment of the listings are a couple of 1918 airpost items; several interesting special delivery drawings, particularly for the 10 cent green "Merry Widow"; and some postage dues, including the "Unpaid Postage" engravings for 1879. Parcel post are represented largely by photos of wash drawings, as are newspaper stamps, but some incomplete engravings also accompany these listings.

Actually, very little is available in 20th century U.S. essays. They are essentially a 19th century collectible; relics of an era when greater pains were taken in design, even though strictly pictorial subjects were rarely suggested. Their charm lies in expensive ornamentation and layout, usually more elaborate than the relatively plain designs that were eventually chosen. America was not then a throw-away society, so a stamp was an important object. Therefore, printers, vying with each other for lucrative contracts, employed topnotch artists and artisans, well known in their day.

The *Scott* listings embrace 4,500 valued items in more than 1,500 individual entries. The values assigned are, for the most part, generalizations. Knowledgeable observers have commented that for the rarities they tend to be too low and for the more common items, too high. The market will eventually sort out those alleged discrepancies.

Many of the values are printed in italics, signifying essays which are difficult to assess accurately. For the expensive ones, e.g., valued at \$1,000 or more, a value in italics represents a "uniquity" which trades infrequently. For inexpensive essays, a value in italics represents a warning about their status or legitimacy.

Yet there are substantial quantities of many varieties of essays (and proofs) of older U.S. issues on the market in various ranges of affordability to grace all collections. For example, some of the decal-type or "Lowenberg" essays of the 1860s can be had for five to ten dollars each, while the Philadelphia Bank Note Co. essays are in the fifty dollar range.

All of this means that *Scott* has now opened the window and commendably allowed light to illuminate a once obscure area. With such a widely available reference listing in your hands, watch for essays to shed their reject, also-ran character and become major players in U.S. philately. ■



For the 1861 issue, No. 65-E2 (left) and No. 65-E3 showing the progression in design development of the stamp. Note the similarities with the old 1851-57 issue.