

Beware the Illegal Stamps

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Do you remember the time you bought that beautiful souvenir sheet that you thought would be perfect for your topical collection only to later discover they were not real stamps? Or the time you spent \$50 on a sheetlet from your favorite country only to find it was bogus? Or when you went to sell some recent stamps only to be told by the dealer they were illegal? Unfortunately, these scenarios are being played out more and more often as the market is being flooded with these phony stamps.

So what is happening? Why are there so many fake stamps on the market?

It started in the 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed into a number of different autonomous states. Profiteers took advantage of the confusion to create a flood of fictitious stamps for recently independent ex-Soviet territories. As their productions became more sophisticated and grew in volume – and as their trading networks extended into the wider world – they took the next logical step of producing illegal stamps for an increasing range of real nations in the developing world, astutely selecting those that were in no position to contest this piracy.



Figure 1. Bogus Djibouti souvenir sheet is labeled "Fishes" and shows birds

It was easy, all they had to do was choose a vulnerable developing country, preoccupied with its own internal problems, where communications and legal resources were impoverished. Better still if the rule of law had evaporated, leaving no dominant central authority to check up on bogus issues. Next, float a pilot issue, and if within a few months there's no comeback, you can proceed to milk the name for all it's worth. These days, anyone with a scanner and some serious image processing software can design stamps, and copyright on the imagery stolen is not a real consideration. (Even Disney, which is well known for its fierce defence of its copyright has done little.) Print the stamps in small sheetlets or souvenir sheets, as they are much more convenient and

profitable than large sheets of single values, and leave some imperforated to sell at twice the price or more. It matters little that the Djibouti sheet is labelled 'Fishes' and shows birds (Figure 1). No problem that your unlikely Afghanistan sheetlet features Marilyn Monroe, even if the Taliban would never have countenanced such a thing. Before Sept. 11, 2001, no one would have noticed as they could not check on the validity of the stamps because none of them were listed in stamp catalogs yet and, by the time stamps of that year were listed, it was too late.

Before long any country that was in political turmoil became a victim of these bogus stamps. Again, they were not up to date in catalogs due to the turbulent nature of their governments and the catalog editors could not always confirm legitimate stamp issues. Angola, Benin, Comoro Islands, Congo, Djibouti, Haiti, Liberia, Mali, Malawi, Rwanda, Somalia, Timor, Tchad and states of the former Soviet Union, just to name a few of the more prevalent ones, are all victims of this practice. They are always issued in the name of an existing country or region, and they have a face value printed on them. The Scott Catalog tried combatting this scourge to philately by listing illegal stamps in their catalogs but they are unable to keep up with the deluge.

Sometimes the illegal stamps are presented by vendors as being collectibles or cinderellas or locals or labels. The problem is that because they cannot be distinguished from the real postage stamps, they are often taken for real issues by many stamp collectors, and though the first seller might make the distinction the next one might not.

So what's the big deal? Any stamp collector who would buy them in good faith will be hoaxed and any dealer that purposely sells them is cheating his customers. The new stamp collector will probably find the truth one day and will possibly give up such an – in his eyes – ungrounded hobby. Also, not only are numerous stamp collectors being bilked but the countries fictitiously represented also suffer. The Comoro Islands issued a statement that sums it up nicely: *"The circulation of these stamps is causing moral and economic harm not only to the Comorian postal services, but also to collectors. Their circulation also discredits the Comorian postal services in the eyes of philatelists worldwide."* Rwanda complained to UPU saying: *"The most outrageous aspect for our country and our administration is the fact that certain miniature sheets illustrate pornographic scenes. This is all the more reprehensible in as much as it is prohibited to use the Post to convey pornographic materials."* Haiti denounced a proliferation of recent issues: *"We wish to make certain that the philatelic community realizes these colorful issues are nothing more than privately-produced gummed or ungummed labels which were never sanctioned by Haitian postal authorities."* Malawi, which lists dozens of illegals, asks the UPU to "identify the culprits and have them prosecuted."

Many small, third-world countries depend on revenue from postage stamps to supplement their economy. With collectors refusing to buy stamps from



Figure 2. This illegal Comoros souvenir sheet shows a multitude of subjects and a very high denomination to attempt to justify a high price.

them due to their fear of buying illegal issues, the people will suffer along with the failing economy.

Aptly termed “Album Weeds” by writers in the late 19th Century, these modern releases bear none of the charm of the old attempts, but have the similar goal of separating collectors from their money. Most of the items seen appear to be primarily topical in nature. They are colorful, come in unused or ‘used’ condition (CTO), with a fraudulent, printed cancel purporting to be from the country whose name appears on the stamp.

So how can you tell what is real and what is fake? Oftentimes, you can’t. Sometimes, however, it is blatantly obvious. If, for example, a large number of unrelated topics are depicted on the same souvenir sheet, chances are it is an illegal issue. Legitimate issues would not show Elvis, Pope John, owls, Scout emblems and submarines on the same souvenir sheet. These are created to cheat as many topical collectors as possible with the minimum of printing costs. Take a look at Figure 2, the from Comoros Islands. It has a multitude of characters on the selvage to appeal to collectors of actors, pirates and space stamps. Another giveaway is extremely high face values that seem to justify high asking prices. (See the Comoros example again, as it has a very high denomination that none of the Comoros stamps in the Scott catalog come close to.) Often, as well, printed cancels supposedly indicating used stamps

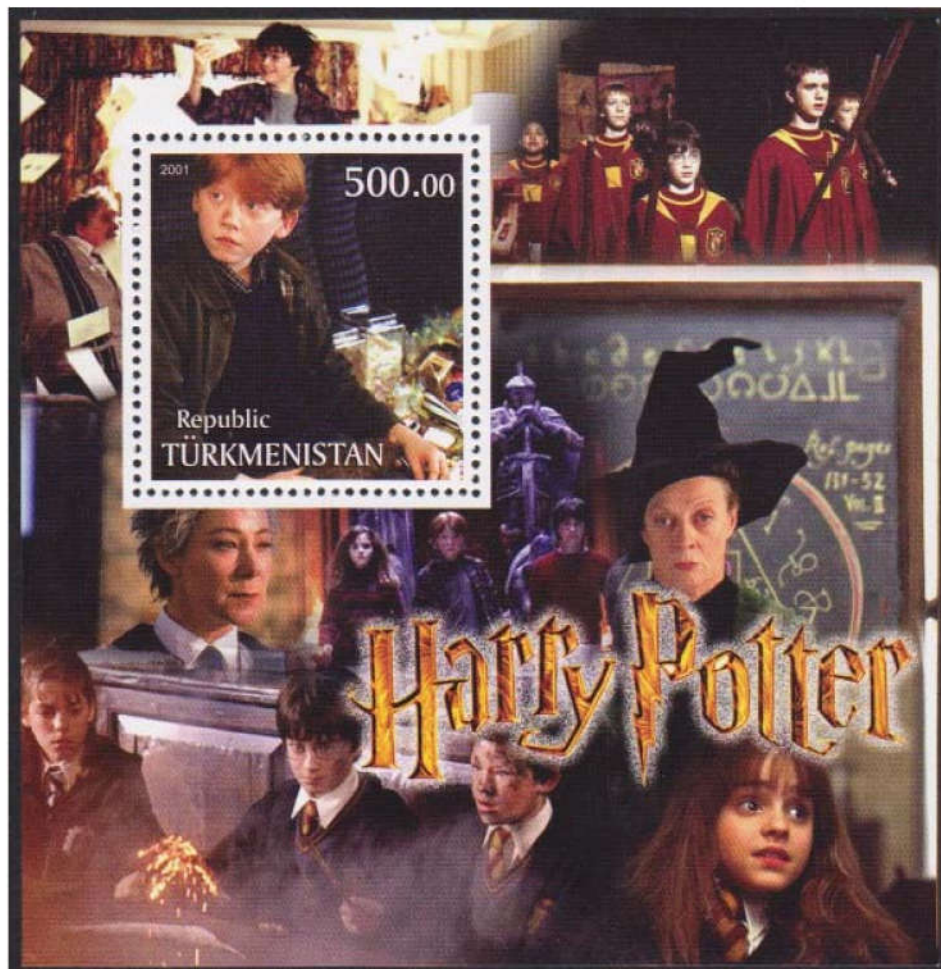


Figure 3. – Legitimate Turkmenistan stamps do not have the words ‘Republic of’ inscribed on them.

don’t always have a date on them. Another indication is that licensed products, such as Disney or Warner Bros, will have their name and copyright on the stamps; illegals don’t. Often, illegals have a date printed conspicuously on them, so by comparing the legitimate issues of the same date in your catalog it often becomes apparent if it is a bogus issue. Figure 3 shows a souvenir sheet supposedly from Turkmenistan but a check in a catalog will show that the word “Republic” does not appear on any legitimate Turkmenistan stamps.

Sale of illegals will stymie some collectors’ interest in philately, because of the lost credibility and bad image of the hobby. This means a massive loss of casual collectors and philatelists alike, which in turn significantly reduces the number of philatelic organizations. These illegals are also insidious in that their colorful subjects (tons of them are Disney knock-offs) appeal to children who waste their money on something no reputable dealer would buy from them (or sell to them), should they wish to, thereby souring them on our hobby.

Hopefully this article demonstrates without any doubts that the illegal stamps are injurious to the image of issuing countries as well to philately as a whole, a fact that hasn't yet been sufficiently understood and publicized. This problem requires concerted action by all in the philatelic industry. Postal administrations should be able to prosecute at every opportunity. 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. Philatelic journalists must keep collectors informed that such issues are rubbish and not worth the paper upon which they are printed.

Some of the information in this article is directly quoted, with permission, from www.pwmo.org/Illegals/what-good-wns.htm. That website, maintained by the Philatelic Webmasters Organization (PWO), discusses the World Numbering System (WNS) or The World Association for the Development of Philately (WADP) Numbering System that identifies bogus issues worldwide through its common numbering system. The WNS was created by WADP and implemented in 2002 by the Universal Postal Union (UPU). The PWO is a non-profit organization located in Switzerland that counts more than 350 members from all continents.

The WADP was founded in 1996 to work against the production and sale of illegal stamps. Consequently, it has published a growing number of circulars in which the postal administration members of the UPU have denounced stamps that were illegally issued in their name or in the name of their territorial units.

See the website www.upu.int/en/activities/philately/circulars.html for a current listing of circulars. Access to the actual circulars is unfortunately limited to UPU members, but the listings of countries with illegal issues can be seen. These sites are well worth perusing.

There are several factors that may reduce the production of illegal stamps, such as the economic downturn, the increase and diversification of stamp production by postal administrations and a better awareness of illegal stamps via the UPU Circulars, printed philatelic literature and philatelic websites. This is a great cause for all stamp collectors to support, if just for the sake of the continuing welfare of our hobby.

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