

by **Damian Läge**

The FOURNIER Archive

Documents of modern stamp printing

Introduction

The dissolution of the printers archive –
an opportunity for philatelists all over the world

Whenever a postal administration, a post museum or a stamp printers company dissolves its archives, the world of philately celebrates. Such break-ups have occurred several times in the last decades, above all in the private printing sector in England and the USA and subsequently even with some postal administrations. The philatelic material which came and comes into collectors' hands by these means documents the stamp development process starting with sketches and drafts right up to the final proofs of the printing plate. Due to their scarcity, their philatelic significance and last but not least their aesthetic appeal, these items enrich most top exhibits of traditional and thematic philately. (These are the two exhibition classes that primarily build up on the stamp and are therefore the "target groups" for using proof material.)

The early part of the 21st century offers no less than five large archives to which philatelists from all over the world now have access. Two postal administrations, the United Nations and that of Tonga, put their archives at disposal. Through the Versailles Collection the largest accumulation of material from the French government printers came onto the market and with Courvoisier and FOURNIER the year 2007 opens the complete archives of worldwide contracted stamp printers to collectors.

The U.N archives (the issues for New York, Geneva and Vienna) was sold as one lot through auction in Switzerland for several million dollars. The original artwork as well as a small part of the proofs were sold through auction as single lots in 2003 by an American auction house in a special sale whereas the largest part of the proofs are probably slumbering in bank safes somewhere in the world. As the drawings are usually oversized (so, not particularly suitable for exhibition pages) so far little of this material has been seen at the large exhibitions.

In contrast, the archive of Tonga and the politically annexed island of Niuafu'ou including all artwork and proofs is practically all in private collections and in many high

class thematic exhibits. In addition to personal contacts the sale took place mainly through the internet giving collectors direct access to the material. The lots were mainly made up of single items splitting larger prints and plates by cutting them down to individual stamps. This radical separation was useful above all for the thematic collector yet the reconstruction of the whole printing process can only be done as a mosaic.

The Versailles collection was not an archive as such but more of a huge accumulation of drawings, proofs, and presentation issues from the French government printers. Over a period of 50 years a private collector, as is said with personal contacts to the majority of engravers, built up this gigantic collection. The collection was put on sale in the USA in two special sales. Whereas only a small part was offered in smaller "collector suitable" lots, the greater majority was offered as large lots for the retail trade.

Also the archive of the private Swiss printing company Courvoisier, which was put up for auction in spring 2007, was mainly divided up into large lots. Although Courvoisier had printed many thousand stamps over the last 50 years for a multitude of postal administrations, surprisingly the archive was not very extensive: The printer had only kept one set of colour plate proofs of each issue (nicely mounted onto exhibition sheets as one would expect from a Swiss company). These sheets show the colour plate proofs (in all colour phases) for each stamp and include proofs of four to five stamps per page. As nearly all auction lots included either all phase trials of a large definitive issue or even all the stamps printed for one country, only a very small percentage would have been sold to collectors. The greater part was taken over by dealers who had come from all over the world or by those who bid over the phone. These items should now come onto the market piece by piece.

The archive of the Spanish company FOURNIER is much more extensive than that of Courvoisier. Whilst on the whole Courvoisier probably printed slightly more stamps than Fournier, they only kept one set of phase trials of the finished printing plate. Fournier however, who nonetheless printed many thousands of stamps for about 40 postal ad-

ministrations, took all stages of the stamp production process into its archives, from the artwork up to the finished printing plates. Not only can the whole production process be comprehended but also documented in private collections due to the dissolving of the archive. The company Gärtner, who will be dissolving the archive, kindly gave me the opportunity for a random viewing of this extensive stock so that I was able to get an excellent overview of the FOURNIER production process. It is my pleasure to present my conclusions in the following report.

The chosen images should help to correctly classify the enormous variety of proofs from the multiple stage production process. It is important to generally differentiate between three stages: the stage of artwork, the stage of proofs for the individual vignettes (sometimes called “die proofs”) and the stage of the plate proofs.

The artwork:

From the sketch to the final drawing

Before a printer can actually print stamps a long way has to be covered. This starts off with an agreement between the postal administration and the printers regarding the subject matter to be used. Postal administrations (or contracted agencies) might already have a very precise idea of the motive design or they might only come with a general idea. In all cases, an artist (or several artists) will be commissioned either by the postal administration, an agency or through the printers to present a design for a stamp in form of an enlarged artwork. The artwork phase is thus the first important stage in the production of a stamp.

This process has a typical procedure. The artist comes up with the first ideas, makes sketches and designs parts of the stamp. Such sketches can also be found within philately. The majority originated from the estates of deceased stamp designers which at one point or other was sold and reached collectors hands. Likewise, one finds sketches of complete designs, usually from the same source, which had not been developed to a stage that the artist would have handed them in to the postal administration or printers. These sketches of the complete stamp are known as preliminary drawings. To a certain point these kinds of sketches already belong to the evolutionary history of a stamp, but only in an exceptional case will sketches and preliminary drawings be taken into an exhibit. They are just too far off from the finished stamp and thus of little philatelic importance.

It starts to get interesting as soon as the artwork is submitted to the postal administration or printers. The artist contends for the project with such a drawing (“submitted artwork”). The submitted artwork can be accepted or rejected (accepted artwork vs. rejected artwork). Rejected artwork usually goes back to the artist. In a number of

cases they are still bought and stay in the archives of the postal administration or the printers.



SUBMITTED ARTWORK/DRAWING

The artwork for the miniature sheet with whales was submitted to the postal administration of Niue as a stamp sized drawing on a preprint card. Some of these nine illustrations were accepted, others substituted by different motives. The overlay (in this case opened) contains a suggestion for the distribution of face values.

The accepted artwork usually requires a slight revision so that the illustration can display the desired visual effect on a small stamp. Sometimes typographical modifications have to be made. All this occurs in accord with the artist. At the end of this process the artist presents a reviewed version, the so-called final artwork. This final artwork is the basis from which the first proofs originate.



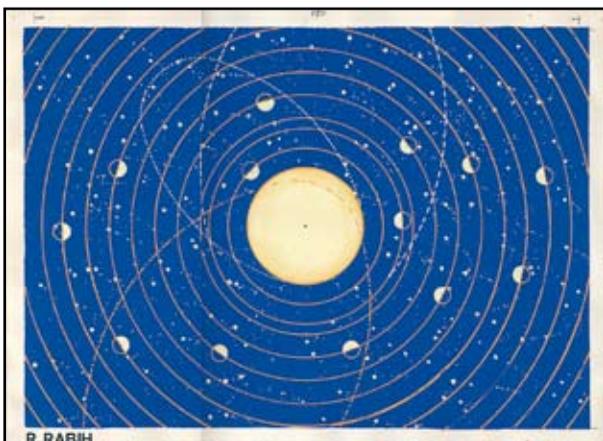
FINAL ARTWORK/DRAWING + OVERLAY

The final artwork of the illustration is without the black parts. These were produced in a separate printing stage. Such print technological requirements are to be taken into account by the artist so that the final drawing can differ considerably from the submitted artwork.

The five phases of drawings which have just been mentioned also define the philatelic importance of the proofs: The final artwork ranks the highest as it is the direct draft for the proofs. Followed by that is the accepted artwork which in turn is more important in the creation of the stamp than rejected artwork. In terms of philatelic importance there is a gaping breach to non submitted preliminary drafts whereas sketches are usually of no importance.

This scale is rather general. The FOURNIER archive includes a majority of final artwork and at least the accepted drawings (To distinguish one from the other it is necessary to compare them to the issued stamp). In few cases rejected artwork was archived as well whereas preliminary designs and sketches seem to be completely missing. Practically all the artwork from the Fournier Archive is therefore of higher grading.

The artwork phase still has some interesting details to mention. The first thing would be that the final artwork of the actual illustration is nearly always separated from the part with inscriptions. The reason is simple. As soon as the first essays of a final artwork are made, the design is defined. Subsequent changes are mainly possible with the colouring whereas shape can only be changed with great effort (if need be back to a new final drawing). This is the reason why printers like to work with an overlay, a separate printing layer in which all text components are located. This overlay is separately produced (mainly monochrome as a covering colour) and it is not until the production print that it is included in the actual illustration of the stamp. In order to see how the stamp will look like with the final artwork sometimes a transparency with the overlay or with a design is laid onto the archived final drawing. (The essays for the final artwork and overlay are naturally made separately.)



FINAL ARTWORK
Final drawing of the illustration without text



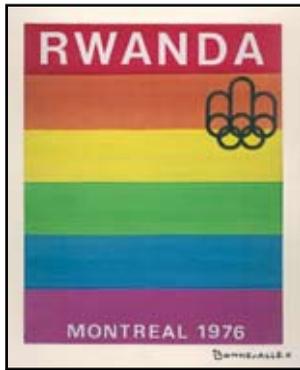
OVERLAY
Draft for a text overlay. The face value is still 0.00 - these figures get inserted right at the end.



FINAL ARTWORK
Final drawing with placed overlay

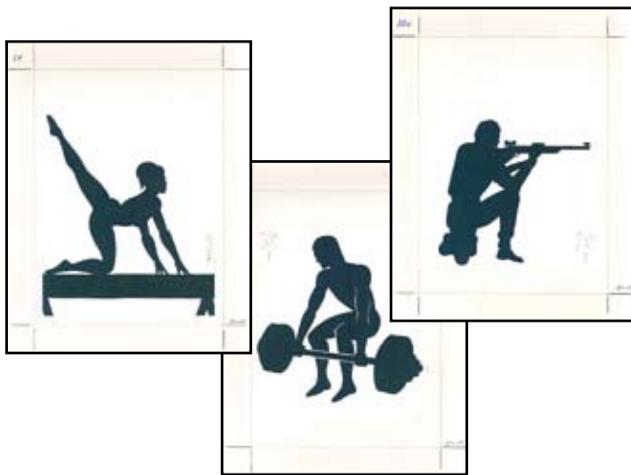


FINAL ARTWORK
When illustrations and text parts are produced separately this can arise to certain reusability if a stamp is to be reissued with the same illustration. This was the case for the definitive series of Aitutaki when the final artwork of the bird stamps was simply furnished with a new overlay for the changed face values and frames. One must also mention those stamp sets whose single stamps make up a basic outlay on which an additional illustration can be projected. Generally there is only one final artwork for the basic outlay whereas additional illustrations are treated technically like an overlay. A separate final drawing would then be necessary. The Rwanda issue for the Olympic Games 1976 are a fine example for this procedure.



FINAL ARTWORK (Joint background)

Joint background for the Olympia issue of Rwanda 1976.



Three examples of foreground illustrations for the Olympia issue of Rwanda 1976.



Colour definitions were already decided upon in the draft phase. The illustrations show a card with designs for the planned Olympia series of Burundi. The series includes 10 values whereas in part some have the same illustration. Six drafts are carried out as complete submitted artworks the other four have just been forshadowed. The bottom of the card suggests how the 10 colours are to be distributed on the 10 nominal values.

The individual die proofs: Defining the colour composition

The first colour trials are taken from the final drawing. The colour rates are divided into yellow, blue and magenta. (Nowadays this is done by computers, at the beginning it had to be done by a skilled and experienced hand). Black, gold and silver are used as covering colour. Additional printing colours can be mixed and added in individual cases if necessary. This colouring must be properly controlled. Does the composition of the colour rate correspond to the illustration? And is the colour intensity correct?

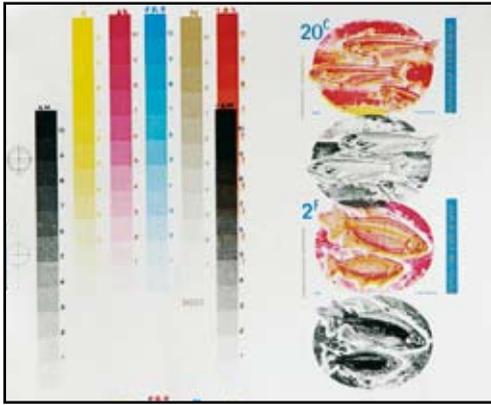
These two questions have to be answered separately by means of proof printing. To do this, prints of single designs are made by a special machine called a proof printing machine. These are done alternatively for all colours together (complete colouring test), for single colours (colour intensity) and for two or more colour combinations (e.g. combining blue and yellow to obtain the correct green tone). These single prints are also known as die proofs, single die proofs or single dies (and strictly to be distinguished from the plate proofs which are done in a later stage).

A few special characteristics have to be kept in mind with these single prints. Covering colours (black, gold, silver) for example, have to be printed in a way that they are shifted in order to enable control of the underlying colouring (yellow, blue and magenta). As a second detail, a colour bar is printed for the colours used for the single prints (in order to have better control of the colour intensity and if necessary make adjustments). Finally, if the stamp edge cannot be recognised correctly by the testing colours, then a perforation simulation is of help. The selection of examples shows how flexible the proof printing machine could be adjusted to the different requirements.



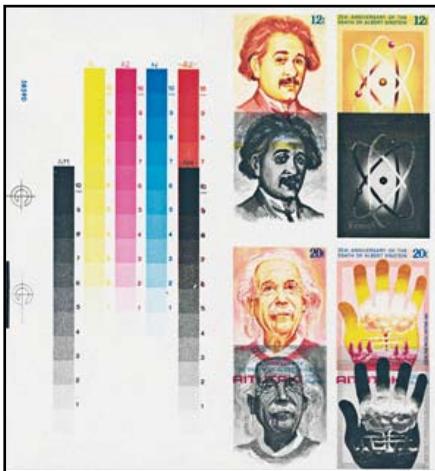
COMPOSITE DIE PROOF / COLLECTIVE DIE PROOF

The proof printing machine was adjusted very flexibly. If, for example, the same colour adjustment was used for several stamps then single prints could be made for all the stamps of a set on the same plate. Here is such a composite die proof, also called collective die proof, for a stamp issue from Aitutaki which portrays the birth of Jesus from the annunciation scene up to the flight into Egypt.



COLOUR BARS

The colour bars show the percentage rate of saturation. In addition to the three primary colours there are two more colours (ochre and red). In order to control this colour rate the covering colour is shifted down by four fields.



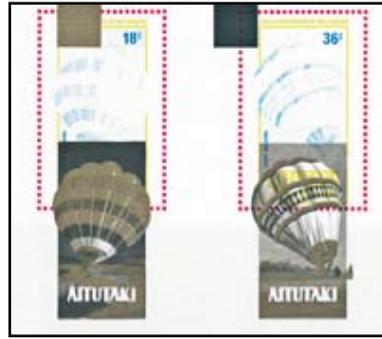
SINGLE DIE PROOF (colours shifted)

Single prints for the Einstein issue of Aitutaki. The stamps were printed as pairs with the same face value so that the final drawing and the first trial prints were pairs already. In order to control the primary colours (yellow, blue and magenta) intensity of the single prints the covering colour silver was printed far off. The special proof printing machine was adjusted accordingly. The colour bars of the colours used are found on the edge. The shifting of the silver colour is very distinguishable.



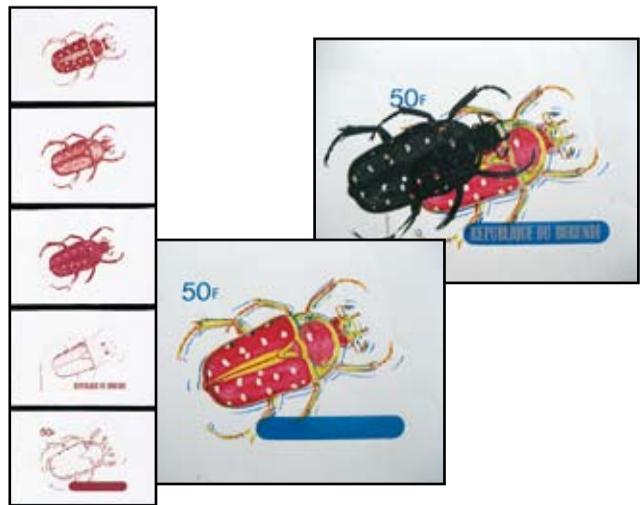
SINGLE DIE PROOF (OVERLAY)

A black overlay was made separately from the actual illustration and for which single prints were necessary as well. In order to control that everything is correct a simulated perforation using the colour black was printed around the overlay.



SINGLE DIE PROOF (simulated perforation)

If the stamp edge was not clear as with the single prints the perforation would be simulated using one of the printing colours (in this case magenta). Both the covering colours gold and silver were shifted in order to test the blue and yellow part of the colour.



In order to control the pixelation of each colour component printers prefer to use the colour magenta. Here you can see a composite die proof for all single colour components but using red in each case. Equally illustrated is the three colour combination as well as a combination with the black covering colour.



COLOUR TEST

Moreover red was chosen as an additional colour to the three primary colours. In order to control their effect the covering colour silver was shifted three steps to the left.



COLOUR TEST

This is where the yellow printing colour is tested. Due to this it is shifted to the right.



PROOF PRINTING MACHINE

The testing of the printing colours could be realised in one single step. For this purpose paper sheets of the same size were used as was done subsequently with the plate proof prints. As soon as the sheet was finished (as is the case on the left), the print stopped abruptly. This happens very often with the single prints and is not to be considered as damage to the trial print but as a normal part of the technical process.



PROGRESSIVE DIE PROOFS

When the different colours are tested for the same stamp with single prints this is called „progressive die proofs“.



PLATE PROOFS (colour separations)

Fournier, as well as other printers, modernized the dieing of stamps around 1970. Up to that point all colours were mixed individually while a new computer based machine divided the colours into their aspects of yellow, blue and magenta. Here one can see plate proofs from the „old“ printing procedure with specially mixed colours. As Fournier only printed a few stamps following this procedure, this will not be treated in depth in this article. However, the colour prints from the old procedure are noteworthy as the stamp is actually divided into the differently coloured parts of the design.

The printing plate

The last test before the production print

As soon as the colouring was determined, the next step was to transfer the single plate to a printing plate. There was room enough for various stamp sheets (usually 5 x 5 stamps per pane) or blocks. Using plate proofs all 25 stamp fields were examined for errors. This was done by means of phase prints in which the single colours were printed in each case as well as in combination. The yellow / blue combination was important in order to check the resultant green fraction. As soon as all errors had been corrected the printing plate was prepared and a press proof was made.



PRINTING PLATE

The plate had enough space for various stamp sheets. Every now and then single designs were added.

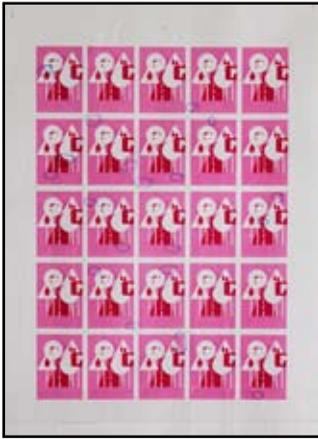
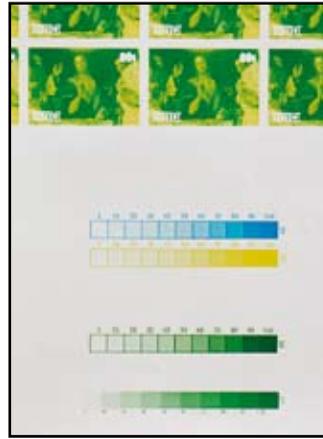


PLATE PROOF

By means of printing single colours (phase prints in printing language) plate errors could be detected and corrected.



PROGRESSIVE PLATE PROOFS (colour test)

Green was tested by combining blue and yellow.



PLATE PROOF (overlay)

In this stage the plate proofs for the actual illustration were still separated from the monochrome (mainly black) overlay with the text information.



PROGRESSIVE PLATE PROOFS (colour test)

When a covering colour was used (in this case silver) the colours of the plate proofs could only be controlled by shifting the covering colour a complete stamp field (in this case downwards). By this one could see all colours in the top row of stamps other than the covering colour as well the complete colour effect underneath.



PROGRESSIVE PLATE PROOFS

Printing of the single colours also known as colour separations. Yellow / green were printed as a combination by default in order to test the green impression. An alignment error? Yes. The black colour should actually be at the top because the multicoloured proof is composed of the three primary colours. Not until the last printing run was black added as an overlay.



PRINTING PLATE

The finished plate for stamp panes and blocks. Apart from single production the colour bars only appear one more time in the print plates. At the top right hand side one can see the "traffic lights" which in the printing stage will be responsible for the automated control. The overlay with the black colour is still missing and is added in a separate printing procedure.



PRINTING PLATE (gutter pairs)

Finished plates offer a series of unique combinations that are not usually found on issued stamps and blocks after the cutting of the plates. If white paper appears between the stamps or the blocks this is called a gutter pair. These gutter pairs can be vertical or horizontal. If this is exactly at the cutting site of four different stamps then the centre part of a printing plate is called a „central gutter block“.



PRINTING PLATE (gutter pairs)

One can also find gutter pairs in the plate proof prints of miniature sheets.

Presentation issues

At Fournier only by special request

The French government printers are known to have garnished their stamp issues with several presentation issues. A presentation issue is an issue that compared to the stamp offers special aesthetic characteristics. It is prepared as a limited edition after the actual production procedure of the stamp is already concluded. This is the reason why they are not proofs but have their own category within philately.

The best known presentation issues are *épreuves de luxe*. These decorative issues were originally printed by the French government printers with a limited edition of 300 and then distributed through the postal administration. As the stamps of the French colonies and the independent countries created from these colonies were printed in France, these *épreuves de luxe* belonged to the popular extras of the postal administration. As more and more states deviated to other printers to print their stamps, some of the states still required such presentation issues. It was quite common to print 1000 or more *épreuves de luxe* for each stamp.

Fournier also printed for a range of French speaking countries. However *épreuves de luxe* are a very rare side issue and evidently limited to few stamp issues and in much smaller number. This bestows the Fournier presentation issues a special appeal so that one should pay special attention to the few cards with the inscription „ H. FOURNIER - VITORIA (ESPAÑA)“.



EPREUVE DE LUXE

One of the very few *épreuves de luxe* which is found in the Fournier archive.

The philatelic classification of archive material according to degrees of importance

The philatelic rating of artwork, proofs and presentation issues is significantly linked to the following four factors: The role of the respective piece within the production process, the amount of existing copies, demand by collectors as well as the general philatelic importance of the respective stamp issue.

The role of the stamp in the production process: We have learnt that the importance of a drawing depends on how close it is to the subsequently issued stamp. The final artwork is the most important followed by accepted and rejected submitted designs. Drawings or even sketches which the artist did not submit to the postal administration (or the printers) will only be of importance in exceptional cases and are generally dispensable in an exhibit.

Die proofs are as a principle more important than plate proofs. The single prints (die proofs) are the most important step in the production of a stamp. Plate proofs however reproduce the single die to the number of times the stamp is found in a sheet and are only used to control that each printing colour is adequately adjusted in each position of the sheet. This is also necessary for the production process but the creation of the design by die proofs ranks higher in the scale of importance. (The way I see it, the correct description of the general hierarchy would be die proofs – artwork/essays – plate proofs – presentation issues, but it is debatable to which extent certain types of essays of older stamp production procedures are above die proofs.)

At this point it must be indicated that additional notations (colour scale, plate and sheets numbers, manuscript instructional markings and obviously “ready to print” annotations) help to distinguish the role of the respective piece within the production process. Such individual print elements, markings or hand written notations increase the philatelic importance of a piece.



FINAL ARTWORK (with instructional markings)

An impressive final artwork for a stamp from Senegal with image of solar eclipse. The additional markings and production annotations give this design an additional appeal.



ISSUED STAMP

The stamp was issued as a 5 x 5 sheet.

The amount of existing copies: Scarcity is always a major factor with collecting (and not only in the eyes of philatelists). This is why the amount of available copies also significantly influences the philatelic importance. If there is only one copy (for example final artwork or certain core positions from a sheet printed only in one copy) these are always much sought after. After all, every collector is proud to claim one or the other unique piece in his collection. However plate proofs as a rule are available in greater numbers which arises from the fact that they were printed in complete sheets. If the pane is divided up, this will create a certain amount of copies. They are still much scarcer than the issued stamps however do not match the scarcity of single prints or even the artwork. (In terms of scarcity it is quite different having a complete sheet of plate proofs because usually very few such full sheets are available).

When it comes to the number of available items, die proofs usually range somewhere between artwork and plate proofs. Only a few copies were made according to need and are thus substantially scarcer than plate proofs. It can also happen that only one copy was archived; thus making it unique. Only in very few cases are plate proofs scarcer than die proofs. This is why in terms of scarcity one can confidently assume that the descending order of rarity is artwork, die proof, plate proof, presentation issue.

One must not ignore that plate proofs can be very scarce due to specific circumstances. As previously mentioned in the introduction, the Courvoisier archive had only one set of phase prints (in other words plate proofs) for each stamp. As long as no additional pieces are released by a post archive these will be the only available proofs of these stamps. The auction sale of this archive in spring of 2007 showed that the philatelic world reacted euphorically to the scarcity of these pieces although from a technical printing point of view they were “only” plate proofs.

Demand by collectors: In addition to supply, demand is also a significant factor in order to classify philatelic importance of drawings and proofs. If the stamp was produced for a postal administration whose stamps are collected by many collectors by country, demand for these proofs is

proportionally much higher than for less collected countries. Demand is equally dependant on the total amount drawings and proofs being generally available from this country. When state printers basically hand over all their artwork and proofs to post museums, then any available proof is a gem for the collector. When, however, a large archive is put up for auction, collectors of this country can accordingly choose their degree of specialisation amongst the available pieces.

A second factor which has frequently been underestimated is the classification of a stamp within a specific topic. For many postal administrations thematic collectors have in the meantime become far more important than country collectors thus the thematic attractiveness of a design defines the demand for the proofs of this stamp. This is true for themes as a whole (ships and roses are much more sought after than carriages and strawberries) but also for specific details: If the stamp design is carried out in an exceptional way or if a thematic subject is depicted which is normally difficult to find, then many collectors will want the proofs of this stamp. Also, if there is an especially attractive small detail in the stamp design, demand for the original artwork (which shows every detail of a stamp design on large scale) is extremely high.



COMPOSITE DIE PROOF / COLLECTIVE DIE PROOF

Excerpt from a sheet with die proofs (different colour combinations tests with overlay colour shifted). Bhutan is not a very collected country whereas scouts belong to one of the most collected topics.

General philatelic importance: This fourth and most general facet of philatelic classification is sometimes seen as identical with the previously mentioned demand by collectors: What everyone wants is important, what is hardly collected is of no importance. Even if this is a good general rule it is not enough in order to fully understand the philatelic

importance of a piece. In fact one has to consider how philately developed: From the classic stamp. This is the reason why the early periods are generally more important than modern periods. And anything directly related to stamps is more important than postal documents without stamps. The first appearance of a technical variety or a new aspect in postal history is of particular importance, e.g. the Basel Dove was the first multicoloured stamp (new technical variety) or many of the first flight covers of a new postal route (new aspect in postal history). Modern philately plays a less important role even though there are far more collectors for stamps issued in the last decades than for the very small English and French colonies of the 19th century. Nonetheless the latter gain higher general philatelic importance than modern stamps.

All this has an effect on the proofs: Proofs of classic stamps are, as a rule, more important than those of modern stamps as well as the old and elaborate printing processes (above all line engraving) are, in comparison to modern printing techniques, more prestigious. This is also reflected in pricing: Classic proofs have much higher estimates at auction than modern day proofs even in cases where they are more common and less collected. This price structure however considerably reduces the circle of collectors willing to venture re into collecting a classical area. Modern proofs however, are affordable for the committed collector with an average budget and there are as many rarities and technically interesting pieces as in classic philately. It is for this reason, as either a thematic collector or country collector that it is worth engaging in modern proofs. The FOURNIER archive offers in terms of abundance a unique overview.