

MALTA'S STAMPS

A BROAD SURVEY

by

Dr. E. Aquilina, M.D.

As a British Crown Colony, the Maltese Islands did not fail to walk into the footsteps of Britain's Postal Services, as originated by Sir Rowland Hill in 1814, in view of the much awaited and very popular "Penny Postage" on the 1st of December.

It was thus that in 1860, Malta's first stamp valued at $\frac{1}{2}$ d and used only for local purposes came into existence. The figure was that of Queen Victoria, as seen in profile from a design by De La Ferte'. This was the beginning of the famous Malta Yellow Stamps which remained into existence up to 1885, a period of approximately 25 years.

It has to be noted at this stage that prior to 1860, namely between 1855 and 1885, Great Britain stamps were used for mail proceeding overseas, while local purposes were served with the $\frac{1}{2}$ d Yellows as already stated.

The year 1885, saw the first Malta definitive issue which as might be expected served the dual purpose for local and overseas correspondence. The move was as might have been expected, following the joining of Malta to the Universal Postal Union. Consequently, there was no more use of Malta's Queen Victoria Yellows as they became replaced by a series ranging in values from $\frac{1}{2}$ d to 5s. 0d. in colours conforming to the regulations of this International Body.

It was only in 1899, that the orthodox figure of the Queen was replaced in certain values by pictorial designs which proved to be very popular in later issues. These new values showed a picture of Malta's Grand Harbour, then without the breakwater, an emblematic figure of Malta, a Gozo boat in full sail, a Maltese Gallery reminiscent of the days of the Knights and a reproduction of the Shipwreck of St. Paul from an engraving by P. G. Dore'.

Other stamps replaced the old Victorias in King Edward's short reign of nine years. Basically they also portrayed the effigy of the King while certain values repeated the theme of their Victorian predecessors as the $4\frac{1}{2}$ d and 8d denominations.

With the accession of King George V to the British Throne, a new series came into existence in 1914 which again portrays the head of the Monarch. Here again some values repeated the design in principle of the former pictorial predecessors.

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To mention here the famous 10s. 0d. Block C.A. watermark, again showing the Shipwreck of the Apostle Paul, and referred to as SG. 96, which by itself forms the costliest stamp in Malta's collection.

A complete and radical change in Malta's stamp design, was in evidence in 1921, with the issue of the set commemorating the grant of the first Malta Self-Government. Then followed the issue of stamps both commemorative and definite according to circumstances. Thus followed the Coronation set of 1937 and the 1st Georgian definitive, the overprinted "Self-Government of 1948" was first on sale as a sign of Malta's emancipation in the acquisition of its first post war self-Government headed by Sir P. Boffa. Here again, in virtue of Malta's constitution during the Second World War the British Government had no option but to grant the Maltese Islands their much deserved prize.

By this time commemorative sets came out rather frequently in comparison with what was issued before; but the untimely death of King George VI and the accession of his daughter Elizabeth necessitated the stamps to fit the occasion. The year 1956-57 therefore, witnessed the first Elizabethian definitive series, whose accent was again pictorial, showing in no small way the Island's heritage in magnificent churches, famous monuments, and invaluable works of art.

There followed another period of repeated commemorative issues such as the "George Cross" issue, the 19th Century of St. Paul's Shipwreck, the "Stamp Centenary", "The Red Cross" and others which forced their way into Maltese philately, by now already making a push into the world of stamps.

The famous Melita Stamps series were in two designs, one showing a figure of Malta against a seascape of Malta's shores, the other depicted a group of two figures in fond embrace representing the close union between Malta and Britain. While the former was designed by E. Caruana Dingli the latter was the work of Gianni Vella. Unfortunately considerable speculation was attached to this series which has rendered it rather inexpensive to this very day, always in relation to other issues of this period.

The three issues between 1926 and 1930, apart from their price values, which portrayed the King's effigy, laid stress again on pictorial designs. Thus we find another picture of the Grand Harbour, St. Publius' Statue, Mdina, another Gozo boat, Neptune's Statue, and a reproduction of Gafa's St. Paul venerated in the church which bears his name in Valletta.

Malta's first Commemorative Set was issued in 1935 as part of a Commonwealth Omnibus Issue, and commemorated the Silver Jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary in 1935. Issues of this nature have always proved popular and are still looked for by collectors to this very day.

It was during the reign of King George VI that the very famous "Melita" Set was issued.

With the granting of Independence on the 21st of September 1964 — under the Prime Ministership of Dr. G. Borg Olivier — Maltese Philately inevitably underwent a radical change, as befitted the new political state of affairs.

This change may be viewed from two aspects. First: Commemorative Stamp Issues started making their appearance with extreme frequency, as the occasion demanded. Secondly: a sharp rise in their artistic value was rendered very much in evidence, as the result of the untiring efforts of the designer: Chev. E. V. Cremona.

It has to be remembered that this Maltese Artist had already made an impetus on stamp designs, when, in 1960, he designed the magnificent set of six stamps commemorating the 19th. Centenary of St. Paul's Shipwreck on the Maltese shores in A.D. 60.

Set followed set; Christmas stamps started making their appearance regularly, Commemoratives and Anniversaries occurred with marked frequency — with the designer, Cremona, proving, all the time his high level of artistic qualities, in stamp design. His stamps have often been described as "miniature works of art"; certainly, there's no denying the fact that he put Malta on the International Philately Map.....

Times changed and more Maltese artists were called in to contribute their designs in respect to further stamp issues. Some may argue that the level attained by these falls very short of that reached by their predecessors; but, on the other hand, such matters are intimately connected with maturity and experience. The ice has been broken, the incentive given, and more Maltese artists drive towards progress and perfection, as this highly controversial century of ours demands.

Up to the time of writing, Malta's stamps have never failed to sharpen the Philatelist's appetite to collect more and more of them. They have undoubtedly carried the torch of high artistry and a sense of investment (though this is far from the spirit that this article is trying to convey) which characterises stamps the world over. It is my sincere wish, and I will spare no effort in my personal contribution, to keep this high level of philately. Let us hope that our successors will be injected to say: "I collect Malta stamps!"