

# Varieties or Errors?

By John De Battista

When one starts to delve deeper in our hobby, one possible area in which a collector tends to start specialising in is collecting stamps listed as having differences from the normal issue. Amongst the differences which are generally noted on stamps one may find perforations, watermark orientation, re-entries, retouches, broken type, misplaced type, missing colours and different ink shades.

All these are generally described, rightly or wrongly, as either varieties (in the majority of cases) or errors; with the most known types being classified under the category of “major” and the less known under that of “minor”.

However, I realise that the distinction that should exist between what constitutes a variety and an error has never been really well defined in the mind of most collectors. As such it is very common for one to find that the two terms are usually used interchangeably between one another. Collectors of Maltese stamps are no exception. Such unawareness is further complicated by the fact that even dealers and catalogues, each for their own reasons, tend not to make a clear distinction between the two with the result that more confusion is in the offing for the collector.

My personal view on the matter is that for a stamp to be a “variety” it must have a difference from the normal issue which must:

- a. Be easily identifiable
- b. Is constant throughout a fair percentage of the printing/s.
- c. Can be sourced to the position of the stamp in the sheet / pane or printing/s.

Unless a stamp with a difference falls into **all** of the above categories, I am of the opinion that its proper classification should be as an “error”. The only exception to this is when a stamp has been recalled by the postal authorities and reissued with a distinctive mark. A clear example of such a case is when the Malta 1885 two pence halfpenny blue was recalled and re-issued with a red manuscript tick mark in the top left hand corner of the stamp in 1902. In such instances the stamp can be classified in two ways; as either a distinct issue in its own right or else be considered as a variety.

I feel it is inappropriate to treat errors, whether human or machine, and consider them to be on the same level as varieties. In most other spheres of our existence such products are usually considered as not up to standard and are rejected. However as in other areas, example when a decision needs to be taken whether an interesting item should be restored or not, in direct contrast to most other preservation practices which are commonly deemed acceptable and necessary in other spheres,

this concept too becomes another very controversial issue when looked at from a philatelic perspective.

A simple rule of thumb that one should bear in mind is that if only a very few stamps are known to exist with that “variety”, it is very likely that the “variety” is a wrongly labelled “error”. Also, errors are the result of lack of proper attention on the part of someone in the stamp manufacturing process chain or process quality control, the result of which ended up on the market. It is astounding how the stamp market reacts when this happens and how such mishaps (read errors) are turned into “rare varieties”, obviously fetching nice lumps of money for their sellers! Above all one should keep an open mind on the whole matter, tread carefully and beware of falling into the temptation of trying to collect all the “varieties” as listed in the catalogues. It is certainly not possible.

Do not get me wrong - the point I would like to raise by all the above is not that of trying to incense one type of difference at the expense of the other, but to drive home the importance that when one starts to consider the possibility of starting a collection in this area it is best that one sticks to a well defined objective of what one wants to collect.

I hope the above has given you some food for thought and will help you to decide with care what you would like your specialised collection to represent - varieties or errors?

## **2010 MALTEX XI PHILATELIC EXHIBITION**

The 11th Edition of the Malta Philatelic Exhibition is being held between  
**Friday 8th to Sunday 10th October**  
at the Green Lounge of the Hotel Phoenicia.

The inauguration and blessing of the Exhibition will take place  
on **Thursday 7th October at 18.00 hours.**

This year happens to be the 150th Anniversary of Malta's first stamp, the half penny yellow. To commemorate the event members of the Malta Study Circle of U.K., who are organising a visit to Malta, have been invited to participate.

All members are reminded that, as in previous years, they are invited to attend the official opening on **Thursday 7th October.**