



"Short Transfer": A Misnomer

By Ernest A. Kehr

(Editor's Note: The following remarks are excerpted from Mr. Kehr's address at The Philatelic Foundation BALPEX Seminar.)

Unless one is intimately familiar with all the technical processes of the intaglio art, it is easy to misunderstand how some varieties of importance to philatelic studies came into being and so often have been misnamed.

"Short transfer" is one of these, for in fact there is no such thing -- unless a siderographer was careless, which is highly unlikely. Let's take a step-by-step look at the real causes of a stamp's design being a small fraction of a millimeter smaller than it should be.

A. Plate sizes were determined by the measurements of the printing press bed, hence craftsmen had to calculate how many designs were to be transferred for the most efficient and economical production of finished sheets.

B. Prior to 1854, when perforations first were introduced, stamps were snipped from sheets with scissors or other manual cutting tools, so only minimal space was needed between horizontal and vertical rows of stamps. Accordingly, security printers so laid out the plates that individual transfers were impressed virtually on top of one another so each sheet would have the maximum number of stamps for delivery to postal authorities.

C. Both the die and later, the transfer roll, were meticulously examined to be certain that each properly had complete incisions and reliefs, before the siderographer commenced his exacting work.

D. Did you ever watch a baker impress a mold (matrix) into a layer of kneaded dough to make a cookie design, and note that after each stamping, the dough around the edges was squeezed up because the mold displaced some of that impressed? Well, the same principle applies to siderography. Under the tremendous pressure, displaced metal of the plate must go somewhere other than underneath (because it is prevented by the transfer press' solid bed).

In laying down a plate, the "squeezing" forced metal up and above the surface -- usually in the direction of the rocking in of the transfer roller and its relief design.

E. If left uncorrected, the tiny ridge(s) "squeezed" up between the stamp designs would preclude proper inking and printing of the finished plate. Accordingly, either the

siderographer or a qualified engraver must remove them to the exact level of the plate's surface first by most carefully using a scraper and then an abrasive stone and burnisher. And since the margins between stamp designs were exceedingly narrow, it was not at all impossible to "erase" a microscopic part of the design at the top and bottom or the sides of a transferred design. That really didn't matter to either the security printers or the postal authorities. They never imagined that future philatelic scholars would pay so much attention to production details; just so long as an issued stamp had the fundamental necessities that it would validly prepay mailing charges.

In making plates for many of the early (pre-1854) stamps, such security printing firms as Toppan, Carpenter, Casilear & Co.; Perkins Bacon, Thomas Ham, etc., didn't allow sufficient margin space to allow for correction without "damaging" adjacent stamp designs.

That, then, is the reason so many of our earliest classics are to be found with tiny missing portions of a stamp design, improperly misnamed. The real description should be "removed" or "erased" top, bottom, or side(s) of a stamp design.

Perhaps this might seem just a matter of semantics, but in fact, why not use the precise terms? Isn't exactness what genuine philatelic study and research is all about?

With the introduction and development of perforations (and rouletting) marginal space between rows of stamps had to be increased. And while erasures were minimized there still were some few instances in which tiny parts of a stamp's design were scraped away.

Today, with advanced technology, this has been all but eliminated. While attending ESPANA '84 in Spain, I had an unusual opportunity to visit the Fabrica Nacional de Moneda y Timbres at the personal invitation of Dr. Angel Quesada, director of the Stamp Production Division. It had just received a brand new German Goebels siderography machine whose computerized system is able to remove in-between stamp design ridges no broader than a hair line!