

WHAT ARE PERFINS?

BY VOJTECH MAXA

The question in the title isn't as naive as it sounds and it is not as easy to answer as one might first suspect.

I had to try to answer the question when I wrote a series of articles for the Zpravodaj, the publication of the Czech Perfins Club, on Official Perfins. One day I hope to enlarge the article for the Bulletin.

It is generally accepted that the word Perfin is composed of portions of two others - PERforated INitial - and that it denotes a stamp with some kind of symbol produced by a perforator. But a question immediately arises: what kind of symbol?

Normally the symbol consists of letters or numerals or a combination of the two. Other Perfins are in the form of various geometric patterns such as circles, crosses, squares, triangles, or even lines. On still other Perfins we can observe simplified pictures of various objects such as a windmill, a hand holding a cigarette, an elephant, a cow, crossed hammers, anchors, coffee-grinders, Christmas trees, fish, and flags, just to name a few.

It should be noted here that we usually confound the words Perfin and perfinned stamp. Strictly speaking, a Perfin is the perforated or punched text or symbol, while a stamp with such a perforated symbol should be called a perfinned stamp. For convenience however, the word Perfin is used with both meanings - the symbol itself and the stamp that has been perforated or punched.

All perfinned symbols are formed by holes, usually more than five and sometimes as many as a hundred. But some stamps are punched with special tools shaped like stars, crosses, half moons, or squares or even circles from 2 millimeters in diameter upward. Are these "punches" also Perfins?

In my opinion, punched stamps are Perfins. But before we give any punched stamps the status of a Perfin, we must find out who did the punching and why.

The original and most common users of Perfins were private firms who perforated their stamps to safeguard them against use by unauthorized persons. These firms usually did their own perforating, or, in some cases, bought their stamps already perforated from firms specializing in postal protection devices. But Perfins have also been created by some governments - both national and local - to prevent unauthorized use of postage supplies. And in some cases perforations have been employed by postal authorities to change the character of regular postage stamps.

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Taking into consideration the legal status of their users, all Perfins can be grouped into two major groups: Private and Official. And each group can be further divided according to their roles within the grouping.

PRIVATE PERFINS

This group embraces three subgroups:

- o Perfins used by various manufacturing, trade, banking, and other firms with the sole purpose of protecting the stamps against misuse;
- o Personal Perfins used by individuals who in most cases are philatelists interested in Perfins collecting (the safety factor is secondary and the Perfins serve primarily as philatelic souvenirs); and
- o Perfins for philatelic exhibitions which are used by philatelic organizations for raising money (again, the safety factor is not important).

It will be seen that the second and third subgroups have similar characteristics, but I still think they should remain in separate subgroups. A few examples may help:

- o More than 98 percent of the world's Perfins are or were used by business and industry to protect stamps against unauthorized use. That's why Joseph Sloper created Perfins and Perfins have been an effective security endorsement for postage stamps for more than a century.
- o Jim Harris' personal Perfins JH and HARRIS or L. R. Murray's Christmas tree are examples of personal Perfins used by individuals primarily for philatelic purposes. The Bulgarian Perfin P.L. belonging to Dr. Paul Leverkus (Bulletin, October 1974) also falls into this category.
- o The EL/PEX Perfin used at the El Paso Stamp Exhibition and other such Perfins fall into the final category of philatelic exhibition perforations.

OFFICIAL PERFINS

This group is more complicated, but it also can be divided into three distinct subgroupings:

- o Service Perfins are in reality official or service stamps produced centrally by the post office by perforating or punching specific symbols on regular stamps and distributing these stamps to those requiring them. The stamps can serve as payment of postage on official letters or as postage due, telegraph, railway, or other special purpose stamps.
- o Departmental Perfins are those prepared for the use of a single governmental department (ministries, offices, boards, state-owned enterprises, and so on). They can either be prepared centrally or on the spot by the particular department

which uses them.

- o Cancelling Perfins are used by the postal authorities to render mint or already cancelled stamps unfit for further use.

Once again, a few examples can illustrate these subgroupings more clearly:

- o Service Perfins includes, among others, the Canadian OHMS Perfins, the Australian OS and Sudanese S.G. Perfins, the Luxembourg stamps perforated with the word OFFICIAL or Swiss stamps perforated with a cross. All these are official or service stamps. Other stamps which may be included in this subgroup are Tunisian stamps perforated with a T (for postage due), Spanish stamps with a T and a number (telegraph stamps), and Bavarian stamps with an E (for railway use).
- o British stamps with the Perfin HM/SO for Her Majesty's Stationery Office, are included in the subgroup for departmental Perfins. Others are the Perfins of English county or town councils, the German POL Perfins, and the Chicago I/WILL Perfin.
- o In the Cancelling Perfin subgroup belong all those stamps perforated with the inscription SPECIMEN or similar words in other languages, as well as Russian Perfins applied by post offices to stamps on various postal receipts to prevent the subsequent fraudulent reuse of the stamps.

It will be noted that I have nowhere mentioned stamps with safety devices printed on the face of the stamp - or on the reverse under the gum. These are called security endorsements and do not fall into our sphere of interest. They can be collected - and are a legitimate subject of philatelic inquiry - but they should not be mixed with Perfins.

In summary, then, a Perfin is a safety device applied to a stamp or a piece of postal stationery. It consists of letters, numerals, geometric patterns or various symbols produced by perforation needles or punching tools. According to the social status of the Perfin's user, they are divided into two major groups - private and official - and into several subgroups according to the specific purpose they serve.

I present this definition and classification of Perfins for discussion in the Bulletin because it seems to be a fundamental issue for the further development of Perfins collecting.

Additional comments from readers will be appreciated.

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