

Essays, Proofs, and Specimens of Vatican City Airmail Stamps

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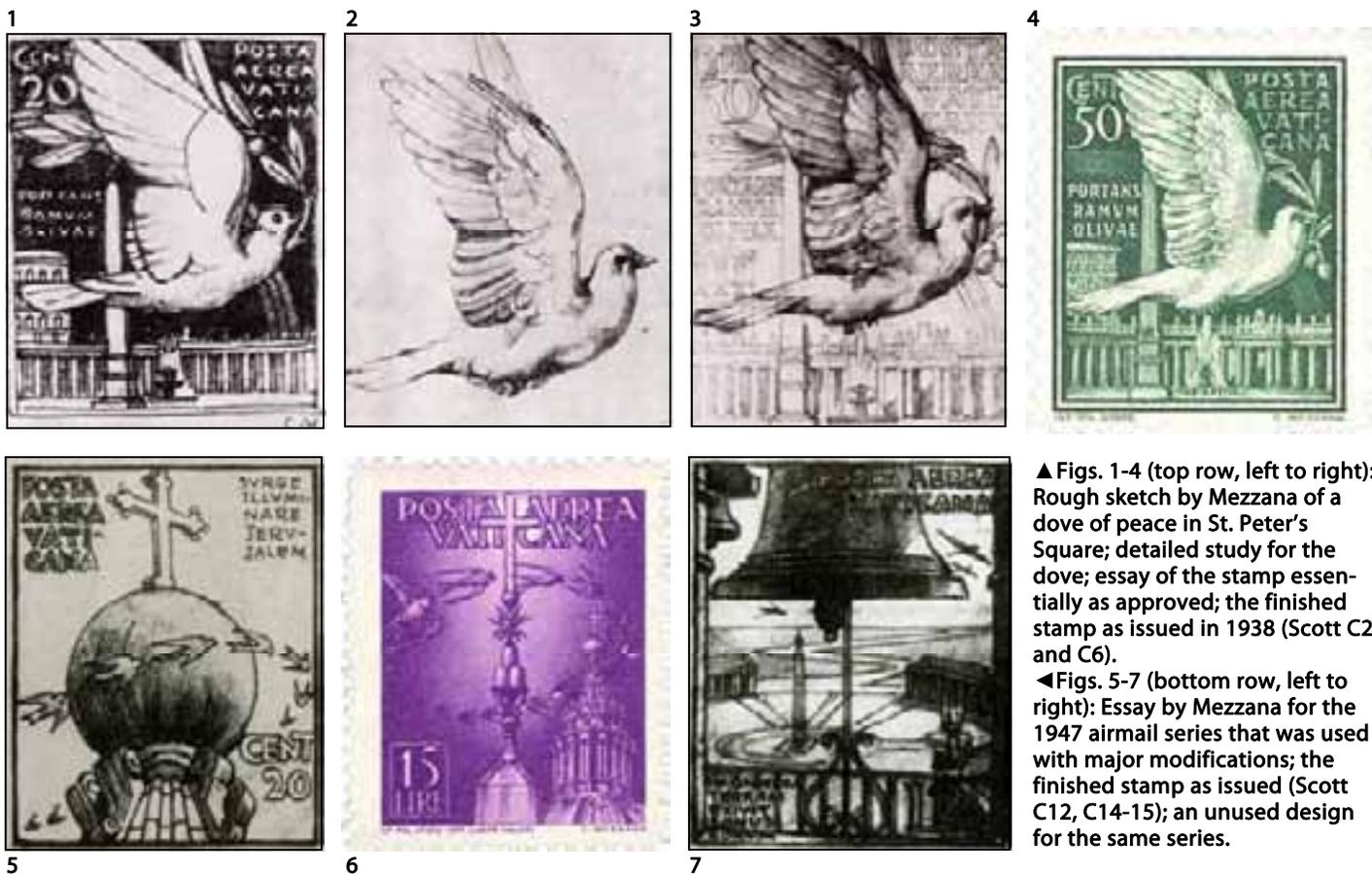
The collecting of archival philatelic material such as essays, proofs, and specimens has been a full-blown specialty in the arena of United States philately for many decades. An entire section of the *Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps and Covers* is devoted to them. Some of the most revered American philatelists studied them—Edward H. Mason, Clarence Brazer, George T. Turner, and Morton Dean Joyce to name just a few. The *Essay-Proof Journal*, edited by Barbara R. Mueller, remains one of the best philatelic journals ever published in the United States.

Collectors of Vatican City philately have not embraced this important specialty to the same degree. A major reason is lack of knowledge. In the 57 years that this journal has been published, for example, there has never been an article devoted to essays, proofs, or specimens, and only the Italian-language *Catalogo Enciclopedico Italiano* attempts to record proofs and specimens. This article aims to introduce readers to the subject through the prism of airmail issues. It concludes with a comprehensive table showing just what sort of material is available for each airmail issue.

Essays¹

During the Second World War, preliminary stamp drawings by the great designer Corrado Mezzana were purchased by Major General Edgar Erskine Hume (1889-1952), Chief Medical Officer for the Allied Military Government in Italy from 1943-45. Following Hume's death, his Mezzana essays were exhibited at the now-defunct National Philatelic Museum in Philadelphia on two occasions: the 1953 International Exhibition Postage Stamp Design [sic] and the 1954 Vatican Marian Year Philatelic Exhibition. The former NPM was famous for its well-illustrated exhibition catalogues, and five of Mezzana's airmail drawings were reproduced in them.² These are pictured below (Figs. 1-3, 5, and 7); doubtless there are more.

The top three are progressive pencil studies for the 50 centesimi and £2 values of the 1938 airmail series (Scott C1-8). These were published in the catalogue³ for the 1954 Vatican show, but I have rearranged them in what I believe to be their correct order. From right to left: the rough concept; a more anatomically detailed study of the dove for the



▲ Figs. 1-4 (top row, left to right): Rough sketch by Mezzana of a dove of peace in St. Peter's Square; detailed study for the dove; essay of the stamp essentially as approved; the finished stamp as issued in 1938 (Scott C2 and C6).

◀ Figs. 5-7 (bottom row, left to right): Essay by Mezzana for the 1947 airmail series that was used with major modifications; the finished stamp as issued (Scott C12, C14-15); an unused design for the same series.

vignette; and the final design almost exactly as produced, with correct denomination and lettering.

The bottom two Mezzana essays were scanned from the 1953 catalogue for the Stamp Design show.⁴ They were prepared for the 1947 second airmail issue. The sketch at right is an early version of the design that was adopted for the £15, £50, and £100 values of that series (Fig. 6), while the striking and dramatic design on the right went sadly unused.

Mezzana also designed the 1948 and 1951 airmail issues before his death in 1954. Essays for these almost certainly exist; Mezzana was a very methodical artist and always made numerous preparatory studies for all his stamp designs. The Mezzana essays are not believed to have been publicly exhibited since 1954, and their whereabouts are something of a mystery (although there are theories). If any reader knows where they are, or remembers seeing them anytime after the Marian Year Philatelic Exhibition closed on November 5, 1954, the author would appreciate hearing from you!

The second—and thus far last—major collection of Vatican stamp essays to reach the philatelic market were by Piero and Andreina Grassellini, prolific husband and wife designers of the 1950s and early '60s. In October 1980, VPS member and former *New York Tribune* stamp news editor Ernest A. Kehr purchased them for an undisclosed amount.⁵ Earlier this year, Grassellini essays were being offered for sale by George Alevizos Philatelic Auctions of California and Auktionshaus Christoph Gärtner GmbH of Germany with the notation that they were 'ex-Kerr' [sic].

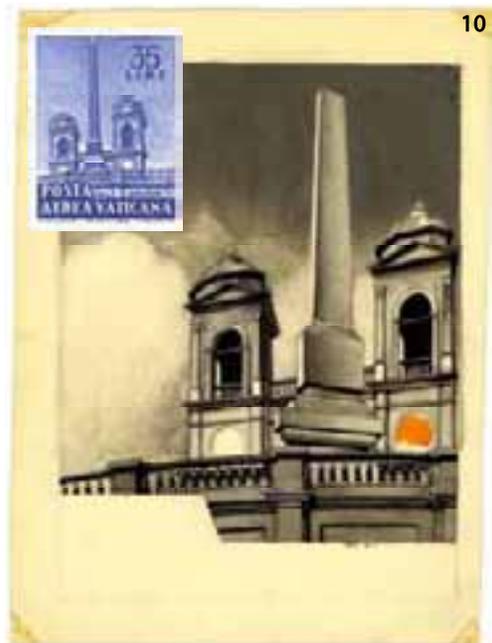
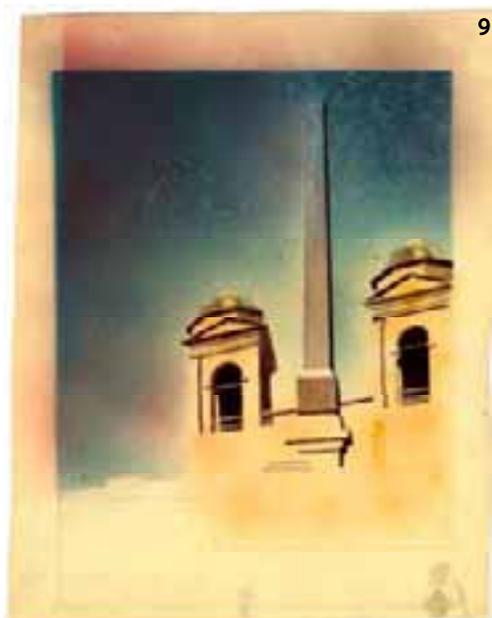
Seventeen essays for the 1959 Roman Obelisks (the only airmail set designed by Grassellini) were sold as one lot: first by Alevizos on eBay for \$500 and then by Gärtner in their May 28-30, 2008 live auction for €380 plus an 18% commission (approximately \$750). One piece was really cachet art executed for the Golden Series covers, reducing the number of stamp essays in the lot to sixteen. However, another Grassellini Obelisks essay owned by Kehr was not sold by either Alevizos or Gärtner.⁶ All of the artwork is either watercolor on vellum or pencil on parchment and is similar to the issued stamps (Figs. 8-10).

The Grassellini Obelisks essays retain the character of real, working artists' sketches. Most of them have pinholes in the corners or tape where they were affixed to drafting boards. Erasures and redrawing are common. One essay for the £25 and £200 values, showing the Egyptian obelisk of Ramses II in the Piazza del Popolo, has an unrelated, hastily drawn map in the corner; another has a study of the letter "O". Piero Grassellini (1912-1963) was an architect by training, and through these essays it is possible to trace the careful development of detail in the obelisks and nearby buildings.

Proofs

The next step after approval of an artist's essay is production of the die (for intaglio and lithography printed stamps), plate (for offset), or color separation

► Fig. 8 (top): Rough sketch by Grassellini of the Sallustian Obelisk and the façade of Trinita dei Monti church in the Piazza di Spagna. Note the placement of text at the top of the stamp, its tall format, and £100 denomination. Fig. 9 (middle): An intermediate study in watercolor. The perspective has changed and there is a lack of fine detail, but the inscription tablet has moved to the bottom. Fig. 10 (bottom): Another watercolor study. This is essentially the vignette as approved, except that on the finished stamps (Inset, Scott C35 and C39) the obelisk and façade (but not the balustrade) are shifted to the left.



negatives (for gravure). These are used to create the printing plate (intaglio), stone (lithography), blanket (offset), or cylinder (gravure). At both points in the process, proofs are taken for quality control purposes, and collectors of U.S. philately are familiar with the array of proof material that results. These include large die proofs, small die proofs, and plate proofs (either as singles or, occasionally, in multiples).

Vatican airmail proofs are not as multifarious. Die proofs are unknown except for the 1971 airmail series, which was produced by a combination of intaglio and gravure methods. All other known airmail proofs are imperforate singles or (rarely) multiples cut from a sheet-size plate proof printed on thin cardboard or, for the 1951 Gratian and 1956 Archangel Gabriel I issues, pink paper.



Fig. 11 (left): A plate proof pair of the £1000 high value of the 1949 UPU 75th Anniversary issue (Scott C19). These are unrecorded in CEI. Fig. 10 (right): An imperforate plate proof single on pink paper for the £500 high value of the 1951 Gratian issue (Scott C21).

The only post-1971 airmail proofs that may have come on the market would be for the November 27, 1990 issue, depicting the apostolic voyages of Pope John Paul II during 1989. This set was printed by Hélio Courvoisier of La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, whose archives were sold at a charity auction conducted by David Feldman, S.A. of Geneva on April 21, 2007. Two volumes with more than 1,000 pieces of Vatican proof material, offered as a single lot, brought €48,000. It is probable—but not confirmed—that material for the 1990 airmails was included. The Courvoisier archives consisted mostly of imperforate, single progressive color proofs cut from full sheets. According to the sale catalogue, only one specimen from each proof sheet escaped destruction.⁷

Specimens

Specimens were created by postal administrations for submission to the Universal Postal Union, which in turn distributed them to other member nations to ensure that legitimately issued stamps could be recognized in the mail-

stream. Exactly how and when these came on to the philatelic market is unclear, but they have and can be collected. They are considered scarce; the 2004/2005 edition of the *Catalogo Enciclopedico Italiano* sets €25 (about \$33) as the minimum value for a *single* Vatican specimen stamp; complete sets generally command a premium.⁸

Vatican City produced specimens for most new issues, including airmails, from 1929 until the 1970 Apostolic Voyage of Paul VI to Uganda issue. During that period, only the 1958 Domes II airmail series does not have any known specimen copies.

Until 1958, Vatican specimens were produced by overprinting ordinary copies of the stamp with the word *saggio* in black, blue or red (a bit misleading since this is actually the Italian word for “essay”). Starting with the Antonio Canova issue, specimens were instead created with a perfered-in *annullato*. The overprint or perfin rendered the stamp invalid as postage. Both the overprinting and perfin methods of creating specimens are relatively easy to forge, and specimen overprints should be expertized.

Endnotes

¹ Artist’s sketches for stamp designs are described here as “essays,” an expedient usage that requires some elaboration. George T. Turner defined a philatelic essay as an impression “taken from a die...for stamps that were not adopted.” According to Turner’s definition, essays must be made from an engraved die, lithographic stone, or typesetting and be either incomplete (e.g., vignette only or frame only) or a complete design that was rejected. Artifacts of the design process were not essays in Turner’s estimation, and not considered to be collectible by most philatelists as late as the 1970s. Only production material was important. During the 1980s, however, preliminary artwork increasingly came to be called essays (probably in response to more of this material coming on the philatelic market). *This is Philately*, published in 1982, stated that “an essay may take the form of an artist’s submitted rough sketch, intermediate or final artwork...providing that...the stamp is either not produced at all or is produced with subsequent modification.” In 1992, the *Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps and Covers* began including sketches under the rubric of essays.

² Non-airmail Mezzana essays pictured in the aforementioned catalogues include studies for the 1936 Catholic Press Conference issue; the 1940-46 Small Medallions definitive series; the 1946 Council of Trent Quadricentennial issue; and the 1950 Holy Year commemoratives.

³ Kehr, Ernest A., ed. *Vatican*. Philadelphia: National Philatelic Museum, 1954. The essays for the 1938 airmail series are pictured on pages 191, 193, and 194 as part of an article contributed by Ernest A. Kehr.

⁴ Freehafer, John, ed. *Postage Stamp Design*. Philadelphia: National Philatelic Museum, 1953. The essays for the 1947 airmail series are pictured on page 205 as part of an article contributed by Steven Bozsoky.

⁵ According to an unsigned and untitled article on page 3 of the November-December 1980 issue of *Vatican Notes*.

⁶ The missing seventeenth essay was pictured on page 16 of *The Phila-*



Fig. 12: UPU specimen copy, 75 centesimi value from the 1938 airmail series (Scott C3).

Table of Known Essays, Proofs and Specimens of Vatican City Airmail Stamps

If a stamp series is not listed, there is no essay, proof, or specimen material known.

Scott	Issue Date	Name	Essays	Trial Color Proofs	Plate Proofs	Specimens
C1-8	6/22/1938	First Airmail Issue	Three progressive pencil sketches by Corrado Mezzana for the design of the 50c and £2 values (pictured). There are probably more.			Red saggio overprints on all values except 75c and £10, which have black overprints. Both horizontal and diagonal varieties are known.
C9-15	11/10/1947	Second Airmail Issue	Two pencil sketches by Corrado Mezzana; one for the design of the £15, £50, £100 values and another unadopted design (pictured). There are probably more.			Saggio overprints on all values.
C16-17	12/28/1948	Raphael & Tobias		Known for the £500 value.	Known for the £500 value.	Saggio overprints on both values.
C18-19	12/3/1949	UPU 75th Anniversary			Known for both values; unlisted (pictured).	Saggio overprints on both values.
C20-21	12/20/1951	Gratian			Known for the £500 value; on pink paper (pictured).	Red saggio overprints on both values.
C22-23	8/10/1953	Domes I				Red saggio overprints on both values.
C24-32	2/22/1956	Archangel Gabriel I			Known for the £5 and £35 values; on pink paper.	Black saggio overprints on all values.
C35-44	10/27/1959	Roman Obelisks	10 pencil sketches (on parchment) and 7 watercolor studies (on paper or parchment) by Grassellini (some pictured). There is certainly one additional pencil sketch and possibly others.		Known for all values.	Annullato perfins on all values.
C45-46	3/13/1962	Archangel Gabriel II				Annullato perfins on both values.
C47-52	3/7/1967	Eleventh Airmail Issue				Annullato perfins on all values.
C53-54	3/12/1968	Archangel Gabriel III				Annullato perfins on all values.
C55-58	9/30/1971	Four Evangelists			None, but die proofs of the engraved vignettes are known for all values.	
C88-91	11/27/1990	Apostolic Voyages of Pope John Paul II			One possible set of progressive color plate proofs.	

telic Nuncio 3:2 (April 1981). It and possibly others are still “out there” somewhere.

⁷ David Feldman, S.A. *The Courvoisier Archive*. Catalogue of Public Auction Sale, April 21, 2007, p. 99.

⁸ *Catalogo Enciclopedico Italiano 2004/2005: Citta del Vaticano/*

Repubblica di San Marino, p. 300. For more information on UPU specimen stamps, see James Bendon, *UPU Specimen Stamps: The Distribution of Specimen Stamps by the International Bureau of the Universal Postal Union* (Limassol, Cyprus: by the author, 1988). Generally fewer than 400 specimen sets of each issue were produced.