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# Butterflies on Early Postage Stamps of the World

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Butterflies (constituting the insect order Lepidoptera) form a powerful symbol, inspirational in representing freedom, liberty and the human soul (Haynes, 2013). Their bright colours, rarity and fragility have attracted both scientists and collectors of both stamps and the insect itself. Unsurprisingly, therefore, they have formed secondary (as background fillers) or primary themes for philatelic releases by over 100 countries and postal agencies of the world (Domfil, 2002) starting from the end of the Nineteenth Century (Hessel, 1968). In this note, we shall discuss some of the early ones, and ending with the issues from the year 1950, when Sarawak's iconic butterfly species, the Rajah Brooke's Birdwing, was released. SG refers to Stanley Gibbons catalogue numbers.

The first postal stamp to depict a butterfly was one issued by the Kingdom of Hawaii, an independent nation at the time, on 8 November 1891 (according to the internet archives at Stampworld.com) or sometime in 1890 (SG catalogue). The image depicted is of its first queen (and last monarch), Lili'uokalani (born Lydia Lili'u Loloku Walania Kamaka'eha, 1838–1917). The ornament visible on her head is clearly a butterfly. The stamp (Fig. 1) is of 2 cent value (SG 22).

A hiatus between this early release and others is noticeable. On 8 April 1924, Hungary issued a three-set under its "Tuberculosis Relief Fund" campaign, one of which (Fig. 2), shows a butterfly on a 300 (x 2) korona stamp (SG 437).



**Figure 1.** Kingdom of Hawaii, 8 November 1891 or 1890. Definitive. 2 cent (SG 22).



**Figure 2.** Hungary, 8 April 1924. "Tuberculosis Relief Fund". 300 (x 2) korona (SG 437).

The first stamp with the primary theme of Lepidoptera was issued by Lebanon in February 1930. Issuance commemorated the 1930 Silk Congress, held in Beirut, and included six values (Fig. 3a–f) of the same design (SG 157–162)- 4, 4.5, 7.5, 10, 15 and 25 Piastres Syriennes (currency in French denominations). The species depicted, unsurprisingly, is *Bombyx mori*.



**Figure 3.** Lebanon, February 1930. “Silk Congress, Beirut” (SG 157–162). **Figure 3a.** Sepia- 4 p (top left), **Figure 3b.** Red- 4.5 p (top centre), **Figure 3c.** Blue- 7.5 p (top right), **Figure 3d.** Violet- 10 p (bottom left), **Figure 3e.** Green- 15 p (bottom centre) and **Figure 3f.** Purple- 25 p (bottom right). Abbreviations: p = Piastres Syriennes.

The 1940s saw the issue of just two additional items, and in both cases, butterflies were the secondary theme- Japan’s 1947 issue entitled “Japanese Culture”, of which one (SG 448) of eight stamps shows *Bombyx mori* on a 10 yen stamp (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4.** Japan, 1947. “Japanese Culture”, 10 yen (SG 448).

The other is arguably a more interesting series, issued on 6 January 1948 by Chile, commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the French naturalist, Claudio Gay (1800–1873). Of the 25 designs (printed in three different colours, with corresponding differences in face value) is *Castnia eudesmia* (ultramarine- 60 peso, SG 381g; green- 2.60 peso, SG 382g and carmine- 3 peso, SG 383g; Fig. 5a– c).



**Figure 5.** Chile, 6 January 1948. 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the French naturalist, Claudio Gay. **Figure 5a.** Ultramarine- 60 peso, SG 381g (left); **Figure 5b.** Green- 2.60 peso, SG 382g (centre) and **Figure 5c.** Carmine- 3 peso, SG 383g (right).

Sarawak can take pride in being the first country in the year 1950 to issue a stamp depicting a butterfly, in this case, the State's iconic Rajah Brooke Birdwing (*Trogonoptera brookiana*), on 3 January, under the theme "Local Motifs" (SG 171), along with 16 other designs. At 1 cent, this stamp (Fig. 6) was of the lowest denomination, and shows a male butterfly. The species is locally as well as internationally protected, and is the national butterfly of Malaysia.



Figure 6. Sarawak, 3 January 1950. "Local Motifs" 1 cent (SG 171).

Several other nations issued butterflies as primary themes on their postage stamp in that year. One was Trieste Zone B (also, the Free Territory of Trieste), in Central Europe, today, a part of Croatia, Italy and Slovenia. The stamp was part of a series of eight, issued on 7 April, under the theme "Domestic Animals", and show silkworm larvae and eggs (SG B44) on a 20 dinar stamp (Fig. 7). This, therefore, may be the first caterpillar depicted on a stamp of the world.



Figure 7. Trieste Zone B, 7 April 1950. "Domestic Animals", 20 dinar (SG B44).

Later in the same year, the Netherlands issued a set of five stamps on the topic "Child Welfare", on 13 November. One of these (Fig. 8), of 20 + 7 cent face value, shows an unrecognisable species of butterfly (SG 731).



Figure 8. The Netherlands, 13 November 1950. "Child Welfare", 20 + 7 cent (SG 731).

The last release in the year was on 1 December by Switzerland, under its 'Pro Juventute' release programme. A charitable foundation in this country, it was established in 1912 to support local children and the youth. Commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the birth of Theophil Andreas Luzius Sprecher von Bernegg (1850–1927), Swiss politician and military chief. Apart from the portrait of the von Bernegg were, inexplicably, four insects- a bee (*Apis mellifera*; SG J135; 30 + 10 francs), and three lepidopterans (*Catocala fraxini*; SG J134; 20 + 10 francs; *Vanessa atalanta*; SG J133; 10 + 10 francs and *Colias palaeno*; SG J136; 40 + 10 francs) Figures 9a–c show the lepidopterans. It can thus be deduced that Swiss army generals had plenty of leisure time to pursue the pleasures of entomology.



**Figure 9.** Switzerland, 1 December 1950. “Pro Juventute. 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Theophil Sprecher”. **Figure 9a.** 10 + 10 fr (SG J133; left); **Figure 9b.** 20 + 10 fr (SG J134; centre) and **Figure 9c.** 40 + 10 fr (SG J136; right).

We have briefly described here early stamps depicting lepidopterans on stamps of the world. Included are both stylised forms, recognisable as such but not discernable to a particular species, as well as those showing known species. These may either be commercially valuable or familiar in the countryside or share a strong relationship with the state and its people. Further, by depicting insects on postage stamps, postal agencies play an important role in public education, such as promotion of entomology as a discipline and helping recognise the role of insects in human welfare (Costa Neto, 2002).

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