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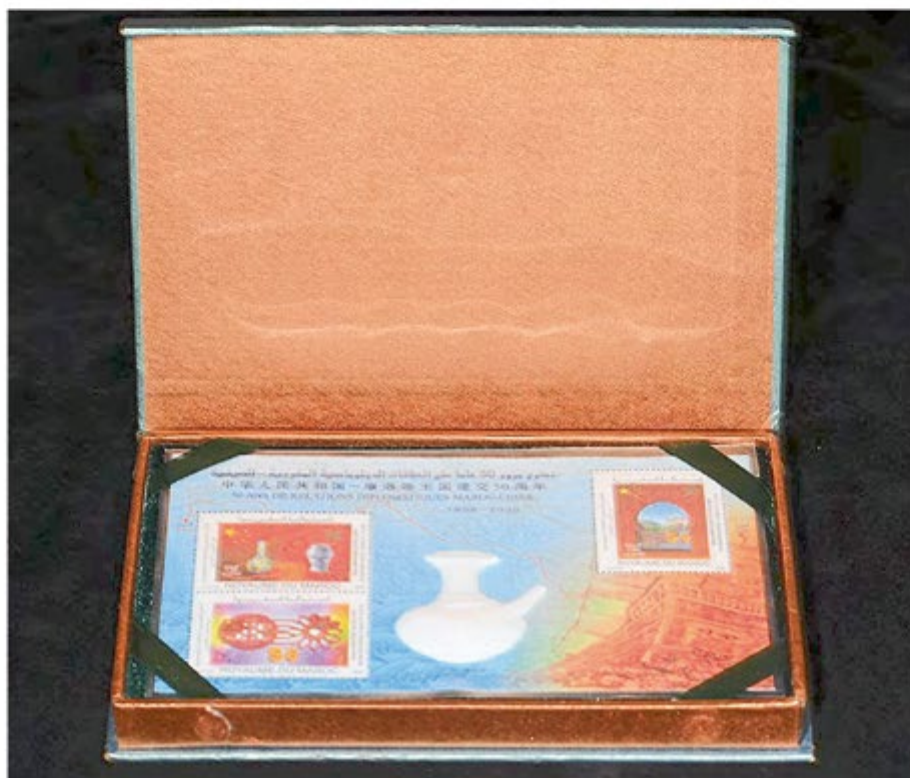
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Introduction

A ceramic transformed via heating materials, typically including kaolinite (a clay mineral), in a kiln to temperatures up to 1,400°C, porcelain is one of the most famous products to come out of China. The hardness and strength, low permeability, elasticity, whiteness, translucency, resonance, as well as resistance to corrosive chemicals and to thermal shock may explain the material's popularity and utility in the household as well as industry. Its contemporary and historic usage is vast- from utensils such as pottery to other tableware, figurines, dental applications, sanitaryware, electrical insulators, surgical scalpels and other laboratory wares. The use of porcelain is thus widespread in many industries. With a history going back some 2,000 years, porcelain production spread to east Asia, and then to Europe in the 17th century via trade. The English name itself originates from the old Italian, 'Porcellana' or cowrie shell, on account of its resemblance to the white, immaculate surface of the bleached versions of these molluscs. And in a nod to its origin, the material is also referred to as 'China' or 'Fine China'.

Porcelain artefacts have featured prominently in postage stamps from the People's Republic of China (Figs. 1–5).



Figure 1. People's Republic of China, Jingdezhen China, 1991 (SG 3766–3771).



Figure 2. People's Republic of China, Longquan Pottery, 1998 (SG 4326–4329).



Figure 3. People's Republic of China, Ceramics from the Jun Kiln, Henan, 1999 (SG 4363–4366).



Figure 4. Joint issue by People's Republic of China and Belgium, 2001, showing porcelain (version from China, SG 4594–4595).



Figure 5. People's Republic of China, Northern Song Dynasty Ceramics, 2002 (SG 4698-4701).

In this article, we shall describe a set of miniature sheets issued by Poste Maroc, the official postal agency of Morocco, to commemorate the relations of that country with the People's Republic of China. Significantly, one of these have a large piece of embedded porcelain.

The Morocco Issues

The issue by Morocco commemorating 50 years of diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic of China, 1958-2008, was issued on 30 October 2008 (according to first day cancellations seen on cover for the three stamp set). The regular stamps (SG 1213-1215) and souvenir/miniature sheet (SG MS1215a) are the items to be discussed in this article. The three stamp designs were reproduced on a 171 x 111 mm paper miniature sheet (Fig. 6), the stamps of face value 3.25 (x 1) Moroccan Dirham (MAD) and 7.80 (x 2) MAD. All three stamps show an amalgamation of Moroccan and Chinese artefacts and symbols, including ceramics (SG 1213), the Moroccan Gateway and the Great Wall of China (SG 1214) and conjoined Chinese and Moroccan symbols and flags (SG 1215).



Figure 6. Morocco, 50 years of diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic of China, 1958-2008, on paper (SG MS1215a).

Two special issues with the same design were released in smaller quantities. The first one (Fig. 7) is entirely on silk, the second (Fig. 8) is also on silk but more innovative, in having an approximately (at its longest axes) 45 x 50 mm porcelain embedded jar.



Figure 7. Morocco, 50 years of diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic of China, 1958–2008, on silk (SG uncatalogued).



Figure 8. Morocco, 50 years of diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic of China, 1958–2008, on silk with embedded porcelain (SG uncatalogued).

The one with porcelain was released on 7 November 2008, and sold only in the Chinese Embassies in Germany, the proceeds going to Morocco for development works. The presumably limited number released makes it one of the most sought-after items in modern philately. Comparative prices currently include US\$22–33 for the regular (paper) version, about US\$120 for the silk one, and a whopping US\$850–900 for the limited silk with porcelain 'diplomatic' issue.

Postscript

The only other genuine porcelain stamp (SG 3271) is one issued by Post AG/ Österreichische Post, the Austrian postal agency, on 20 March 2014 (Fig. 9). It shows the Viennese Rose (the symbol of the Vienna Porcelain Manufactory) on Augarten Porcelain. This type of porcelain has been produced for nearly three centuries by hand, and is typically used in the manufacture of beverage sets (such as tea and coffee), lamps and vases. The artwork in this particular stamp was completed by hand.



Figure 9. Austria porcelain stamp (SG 3271), front and back of original card with stamp.

This article features the only stamps officially issued using porcelain by postal agencies of Morocco and of Austria. The first is a premium product, and surely, the Holy Grail of modern philately.