

BSAC stamps: A color study

... Or should I say “colour”? When describing these extraordinary stamps from the British South Africa Company with their offsetting hues, nuanced variations and subtle, unexpected combinations, it seems inadequate to use the pedestrian term “color” that would apply to the cartoon rainbow, or gum drops, or house paint. How did the artists and designers in London charged with devising the inks for these exquisite engraved images make their choices? One thing is sure: the process was not random. The artist Joseph Albers (1888-1976), who specialized in color contrasts, would have a lot to say about these stamps — how the color pairings shift our very perceptions of tone, hue, intensity, whatever. For more on Albers, check the start of the FMF Stamp Project essay from March 2021 on “delicious colors”: <<https://mancrymf.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/prettyugly-delicious-colours-terrible-colors-1.pdf>>

The first set under review is the “Double Heads,” issued in 1910, the year King George V ascended the throne after the death of his father, King Edward VIII. In the rectangular stamps, the young king poses on the right in royal uniform, paired with his queen, Mary, on the left. The second set, known as “The Admirals,” appeared in 1913 and features a dashing king clad in his naval uniform (see above). The Double Heads set could rightly be considered a commemoration of George’s coronation, with the second filling the role of definitives,



Bright blue and red brown



Bluish slate and carmine



for every-day use. Yet both sets are long — from 1/2d through L1 — so I expect they were used interchangeably, for postage or as revenue receipt labels.



Above are three close-ups to highlight the mesmerizing contrasts of nuanced colors in this set. At left, the 3d has an olive-yellow frame and violet center; the 4d combines orange and black; then there's the 5d, in olive-green and brown, to really blow your mind. (The catalogue lists another example of the 5d with an olive-yellow frame — as in the 3d — calling it a rare error. You can tell the difference, right? How about the 3d's "violet" center and the 5d's "brown"? The same, or different?)

The colors chosen for these beauties are so striking that I have been tempted to include some of them in my ongoing quest for The World's Most Beautiful Stamp. Indeed, I discussed this and the Admirals set in an essay on "delicious colours" from April 2021. <<https://mancrymf.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/delicious-colours-two.pdf>> My Stamp Atlas notes that the Double Head set's colors "have rarely been equalled for choice," and adds, "They were followed by the 'Admirals' in similarly well-contrasted shades."

Over the years, however, my ardor has cooled. It's not just that these stamps are emblems of racism and exploitation. I also detect an element of ... kitsch. Bric-a-brac ornamentation. Cobwebs and dusty upholstery. There is a whiff of Miss Havisham in these post-Victorian doilies. Perhaps it is the snooty pose of Queen Mary, who I understand was no charmer. The formal attire and pretty colors become props in a tawdry and deplorable imperial performance.



Above, the 8d pairs brown violet frame and gray black center; to the right, the 10d colors are plum and rose. Let us contemplate the difference between brown violet (left) and plum (right), then lose ourselves in the brilliant depths of the rose background (right) ...

At right is the Admirals set. As with the Double Heads, the color combinations are startling, arresting, strangely irresistible. Many of the stamps have black centers, which vibrate against the olive-yellow, orange and olive-green frames; then there's the 8d (grey green and violet), and 10d (carmine rose and blue).

Below are some enlargements showing the 3 shilling stamp (bright blue and red brown), 5 shilling (green and blue), 10 shilling (yellow green and carmine), and L1 (violet and black).





I'm sure you were too polite to notice that in the previous illustration of a page from my British Africa album, there is a key stamp missing from the Admirals set — the 7 shillings and 6 pence value. It's a rarity, probably because it was an unusual value and not many were printed or used. It would cost \$100 or more to buy — if I could find one. To save face, let me show off another 7 shillings 6 pence BSAC stamp (see left). It's from a different set, not as rare, but still ... aren't you a little impressed?

TO BE CONTINUED

xxx idols