Stamps and Color
By Tom Fortunato

A 2020 presentation for the Rochester Philatelic Association
There are two different approaches one can take to tackle the subject of stamps and color...

- **The Scientific** - discussing colorimetry, colloidal systems of fine pigment particles dispersed in a solvent (otherwise known as ink!), additive and subtractive color systems, X-ray diffraction to determine composition, spectral analysis, etc. For something like that, do a Google search and have fun.

or...

- **The Relatable** - something understandable by everyone. If that’s *you*, continue on!

A good site to start... [http://inventorartist.com/primary-colors/](http://inventorartist.com/primary-colors/)
Introduction

Take a good look at this stamp. What color is it? Purple, dark purple, lilac, grape? Are you sure? How did you decide? How do stamp printers and catalogs describe its color? This brief presentation explores the role color plays in our philatelic hobby.

- What is Color?
- Describing Color
- Stamp Inks
- Printer Samples
- Stamp Color Guides
- Comparing Catalog Colors
- Fun with Stamp Color
As defined on the Crayola crayon web site, “Color is the aspect of things that is caused by differing qualities of light being reflected or emitted by them. To see color, you have to have light. When light shines on an object some colors bounce off the object and others are absorbed by it. Our eyes only see the colors that are bounced off or reflected.”

https://www.crayola.com
What is Color?

Start with the primary colors of blue, red and yellow. Mixing these make others—blue and red make purple, red and yellow make orange, yellow and blue make green, and so on. Back in grade school you probably learned the acronym “ROYGBIV” to help remember the order of the color spectrum.
So, how can one describe a color? Think about it. While there are basic color names whose origins are perhaps lost to history, like “white,” many color shade and tone names come from flora, fauna and other natural things around us, like...
The color pallet of Renaissance artists was created by mixing oils and natural ingredients from plants and animals. One of the red pigments was made from cochineal beetles found on oak twigs. The color "Carmine lake" comes from the Latin word *carminium* from Sanskrit *krmiya* (red dye) produced by a worm *krmi*=worm and from Latin *minium*=cinnabar/red lead.
Describing Color

An early effort to standardize the nomenclature of color was by German mineralogist Abraham Gottlob who wrote, “Werner’s Nomenclature of Colours.” In 1814 it was updated by Scottish painter Patrick Syme who added color swatches using Gottlob’s specs. It was used by scientists and naturalists to describe the world around them. Printers used it to help identify ink colors.

The book had color tiles to compare the item in question with. It was found so useful that Charles Darwin referred to his second edition copy to describe the flora and fauna he found on his various expeditions around the world. Some of these color names found their way into stamp printer vernacular.
Stamp Inks

Fast forward to 1840 and the production of the world’s first postage stamps. The consideration of their color was secondary only to the design itself. Black and blue were eventually decided on in part to best display the engraving artistry of the design and make them readily noticeable on an envelope.

The Line Engraved Postage Stamps of Great Britain, Bacon, 1920  
Within a month of their May release, a problem developed. Power of creosote was being used to remove the red ink used to cancel the stamps. A black colored ink formula was then tried, again without success. On June 27 Rowland Hill wrote, “I shall prepare a report on the subject of obliteration, and propose to adapt (sic) a light colour for the penny stamps.”

* “The Line Engraved Postage Stamps of Great Britain, vol. 1,” Bacon, pp 90-91
Thus was born the “Rainbow Trials,” a series of experiments using different stamp ink formulations on different papers tested against various cancellation inks to determine the best combination to prevent stamp re-use.
The eventual “winner” of the trials was, as Hill expected, a lighter colored stamp that could become well cancelled with black ink, the 1d “penny red.” The initial printing came from the same seven penny black plates, numbers 1A, 2, 5, 8, 9, 10, and 11. Plates 12 to 177 were used to print further imperf penny reds with corner alphabet sets I and II. Later printed block from plate 132 onward based on the margin star.
Stamp Inks

But what color was it? Like its predecessors, these were printed by Perkins, Bacon and Company. Claimed to be “pink” by J. B. Bacon, he said it was made from “rose-pink, prussiate of potash, cochineal, carbonate of potash, and oil.” The result was red-brown, but the nickname “penny red” stuck and is used to this day.
Color shades have several causes...

- inks and oils used obtained from different sources
- wrong ink formulations mixed
- absorbency of the paper
- viscosity of the ink when applied
- temperature and humidity of the printing room
- oxidation of ink over time
- chemical alteration after printing
Printer Samples

Put yourself in the shoes of a stamp printer a century ago and even today. How could you best display your work to prospective clients and standardize specific colors by combining inks to be used in their various issues?

... By creating sample books and “dummy stamps.” The following pages give a representative look at these from several British and US printing firms.
American Bank Note Company (USA)
Printer Samples

Bradbury Wilkinson (Great Britain)
Thomas De La Rue (Great Britain)
Printer Samples

Thomas De La Rue (Great Britain)

Samples made to distribute to printers taking over the Machin De La Rue production contract.
Harrison and Son (Great Britain)

Twenty color variation cards of both designs in each pocket.
Harrison and Son (Great Britain)
So how do stamp catalog publishers determine a stamp’s color for their listings and how do you tell what color your stamp is? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to these basic questions!
Here’s a page from the 1874 Stanley Gibbon’s Stamp Catalogue describing worldwide issues, their denominations, colors and pricing. The colors listed seem rather basic, including those of Great Britain’s earliest issues.
As time went on, color names for stamps and shades became more descriptive, especially when identifying more pricey varieties and newer issues. Stanley Gibbons took the lead by publishing “A Colour Dictionary” in 1899 as a listing naming 200 colors and reproducing 56 color images in concordance with catalog listings. This booklet underwent two revisions published in 1908 and 1913.
Stamp Color Guides – Stanley Gibbons

Pages from Stanley Gibbon’s 1899 “A Colour Dictionary.”
Stanley Gibbons teamed up with two stamp printers to produce an updated “Colour Guide for Stamp Collectors” in the 1920s. Perkins, Bacons & Co., Ltd. printed 100 color reference labels found in the booklet. Attaching the labels was very labor intensive. Interestingly the back cover refers to Harrisons and Sons, Ltd. as the manufacturer of the guide. Colors were matched by Perkins to Gibbons’, “actual stamps chosen by us as samples.”
Colour Identification in Philately.

O R recent attempt to provide collectors with a "Colour Guide" composed of actual stamps representing standard shades, has met with such success, that we have been encouraged to pursue the idea further and present to the present larger and improved Guide its results.

In any case, it would have been impossible to continue running out the various Colour Guides in sufficient numbers to meet the demand, because of the necessity of procuring genuine stamps, and the difficulty of procuring genuine stamps chosen to represent the colour and also owing to the variation in shade of the same stamp from time to time, through successive printings. We have now overcome this difficulty by having printed by the eminent firm of experienced stamp printers, B. P. Frankland & Co., of Ludlow, a series of "labels" specially designed for this. The printing, gilding and packing of these have been done by actual processes used for the production of postage stamps, so that the colours are as near those of actual stamps chosen by us in samples. We have thus been able to standardise the colours shown and to give a much larger selection of shades.

The identification of stamp-colours is a task of some difficulty to many collectors. While there is an infinite range of shade variations as a result of actual printing, there is also considerable divergence of opinion regarding the naming of even standard colours. Our catalogue lines, for example, have been compiled from time to time by different expert philatelists, and have not always been in agreement in the matter of colour description. Then, too, certain of the "classic" stamps have come to be recognised under a particular name, e.g., "Fawn, a fine, "orange-vermilion," and the "scarlet-vermilion" and "orange-vermilion" of the early American issues. Some modern collectors may not agree with every such description, but the stamps are generally known under these names and alterations would therefore be inadvisable.

The use of colour-names in philately is for identification, and must be largely comparative, as between stamps of the same issue. Thus it might be necessary (as in the case of the 3d. King George V, Great Britain) to use for the two shades--violet and blue--distinct names, while elsewhere, where only one shade was in question, the name "violet" would be sufficient to describe it.

The names of the colour-trade have brought into use shades and colours unavailable by the use of stamp-printing, and even the same ink-printing would give different effects according to the different papers used, as line-engraving, typography, lithography, etc. Thus, we get infinite gradations of a particular shade, which must all be classed under the same general heading, helped on by such modifications as "dull," "deep," "bright,"" pale" and so on, when dealing with the scarlet and other shades. We are therefore proceeding in this Guide to avoid these difficulties, and as far as we can, to refer to the shades of the actual stamps themselves. This, however, we shall not try to do in the present "Colour Guide" of our standard in future additions to the catalogue.

Pages from the 1920s "Colour Guide for Stamp Collectors"
Stamp Color Guides – Stanley Gibbons

Pages from the 1920s “Colour Guide for Stamp Collectors”
Gibbons’ circa 1960 guide (Publication 3333) listed 75 “most useful” colors for stamp descriptions using labeled color blocks.
Publication 3333’s 1966 edition increased to 100 color tiles.
Later Gibbons’ guides are much smaller and user friendly with holes in the 200 color tiles to allow better comparison viewing.

Of course Stanley Gibbons was not the only firm producing color guides for collectors. Here is an unidentified German guide dated from 1917 with French and English translations.

Munsell color system: https://munsell.com/about-munsell-color/how-color-notation-works/
The masterwork of US color guides is, “Encyclopedia of the Colors of United States Postage Stamps,” five volumes in four binders. It covers 1847 to 1918 issues complete with Scott color shades for most issues. When available the 1981 set can sell for $500+. 
German catalog publisher Michel has their own color guide, “Farbenführer,” that coordinates 600+ shades with those used in their worldwide catalogs.
Michel also utilizes color code numbers that can be used to identify shades.
Comparing Catalog Colors

Stamp catalog color listings continue to be more divergent as additional varieties and shades come to light for older and newer issues. Do a quick color comparison among them for a few issues.

Australia 1914
KGV definitive,
4d denomination

Stanley Gibbons
Commonwealth and
British Empire
catalogue, 2004 edition

Scott’s Catalogue,
Volume A-B, 2009 edition

Yvert & Tellier Overseas
Volume III, 1972 edition
• yellow-orange
  a. yellow
Comparing Catalog Colors

Germany 1922-23 Airmails

- **Yvert & Tellier Europe Volume II, 1972 edition**
  - violet and rose
  - brown and yellow
  - olive and rose

- **Michel Germany Specialized 1998 edition**
  - dark red lilac and carmine
  - sienna brown and pale yellow
  - dark olive and pale orange-red

- **Scott’s Catalogue, Volume I A-B, 2009 edition**

Comparing Catalog Colors

Italy 1965 Commemoratives

Jet Plane, Moon and Airliner Border A491

Design: 40 l, Control tower and plane.

1965, Nov. 3
922 A491 40 l dk Prus bl & red .20 .20
Unwmk.
923 A491 90 l red, grn, dp bl & buff .20 .20
Night air postal network.


Yvert & Tellier Europe Volume II, 1972 edition
- slate and red
- multicolored

Michel Europe West 1997/98 edition
- dark grey blue and red
- multicolored


Sassone Italy Spec., 2007 edition
- blue black and red
- multicolored
Comparing Catalog Colors

When asked to comment about his role in listing stamp colors, Martin J. Frankevicz, New Issues Editor for Scott’s at Amos Media wrote,

“We do have a color guide that we use in the office. It’s a notebook full of stock pages that have older stamps on them along with the color names they were assigned. I don’t use it all that often, however. For the most part, I don’t really have to because 99% of the stamps that I list are multicolored. I will give colors for engraved stamps of one color, and some stamps produced by other methods having one or two colors, provided they are not produced with a mixture of colors. And yes, when I use our color book, I go compare the stamp I have to the stamps on the stock pages and generally find that the shade of the new stamp doesn’t totally match anything on the stock page.”
Yes, stamps in a catalog with the same color name also show shade differences. Here are pages using Scott stamp colors.
Fun with Stamp Color

The previous slide showed pages from “Filacolor,” a loose leaf thematic stamp album by color created by Donald M. Harper of Evanston, IL in 1959 who also copyrighted a list of worldwide Scott stamp catalogue numbers sorted by different shades.
Collectors and non-collectors have found artistic and clever ways to use stamps in a non-traditional ways. Here are a few!

https://www.tanglecrafts.com
Fun with Stamp Color

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/552183604287038377/
Fun with Stamp Color

https://colormethrifty.com/2020/01/decoupaged-table-makeover.html

Fun with Stamp Color

Works by Peter R. Mason
https://thepostpopartman.co.uk
https://artgallery.co.uk/artist/peter-mason
Conclusion

All in all, a stamp’s color is a difficult subject to tackle. Noted philatelic writer Kathleen Wunderly probably summarized it best in a Linn’s Stamp News article from July 22, 2002:

“Color naming is an issue that required some sort of resolution prior to the publication of the first stamp catalog. I doubt that anyone now living knows the rationale for many of the choices. Not surprisingly, catalog publishers today continue to use whatever names were decided by their predecessors, even though some names may be confusing. Trying to change to new color names would likely result in catalog color chaos.”*

Stamps and Color

Thanks for visiting!