





**IT'S A SECRET!**

How closely do you look at your stamps?

# It's A Secret!

If we simply “collect” a stamp and put it into our album, quite often we are missing something.

Many stamps reward a closer look by containing secret marks that may have been put there officially or added surreptitiously by the designer, engraver or printer.

From 1870-71 The National Bank Note Company was contracted to print U.S. stamps. The quality of the printing was deemed unsatisfactory and in 1873, a new contract was awarded to the Continental Bank Note Company.

As they would be using the same printing plates, the Continental management wanted a way to tell their stamps from the previous issue, so that if there were future complaints, they would know which company was at fault.

The plates were given to the company's engraver who added tiny marks to each stamp for all the values from one to fifteen cents. For some reason, they did not alter the three top values.

Because they worked on the plates rather than the original dies, all 300 images on the plate had to be marked individually and as this was done by hand, there are minute differences which allow experts to determine the position of the stamp on the plate.





On the three cent stamp, the small ribbon below the "H" was filled in with dark shading





On the ten cent stamp, a crescent was added within the circle below the word postage.





The first Japanese stamps were extensively forged but the Japanese forgers were clever.

So that they could not be charged with forgery, they added two little characters to the stamp, on this one, at the base of the central writing. This apparently says "reference collection" – if you can read it.





It is estimated that 80% of the classic Japanese stamps in collections are forgeries.

Not all carried the secret marks as the main object was to defraud.

Even those with the marks were often concealed.

Sometimes this was done by making them the same colour as the design.

More often, they were hidden under a forged postmark.





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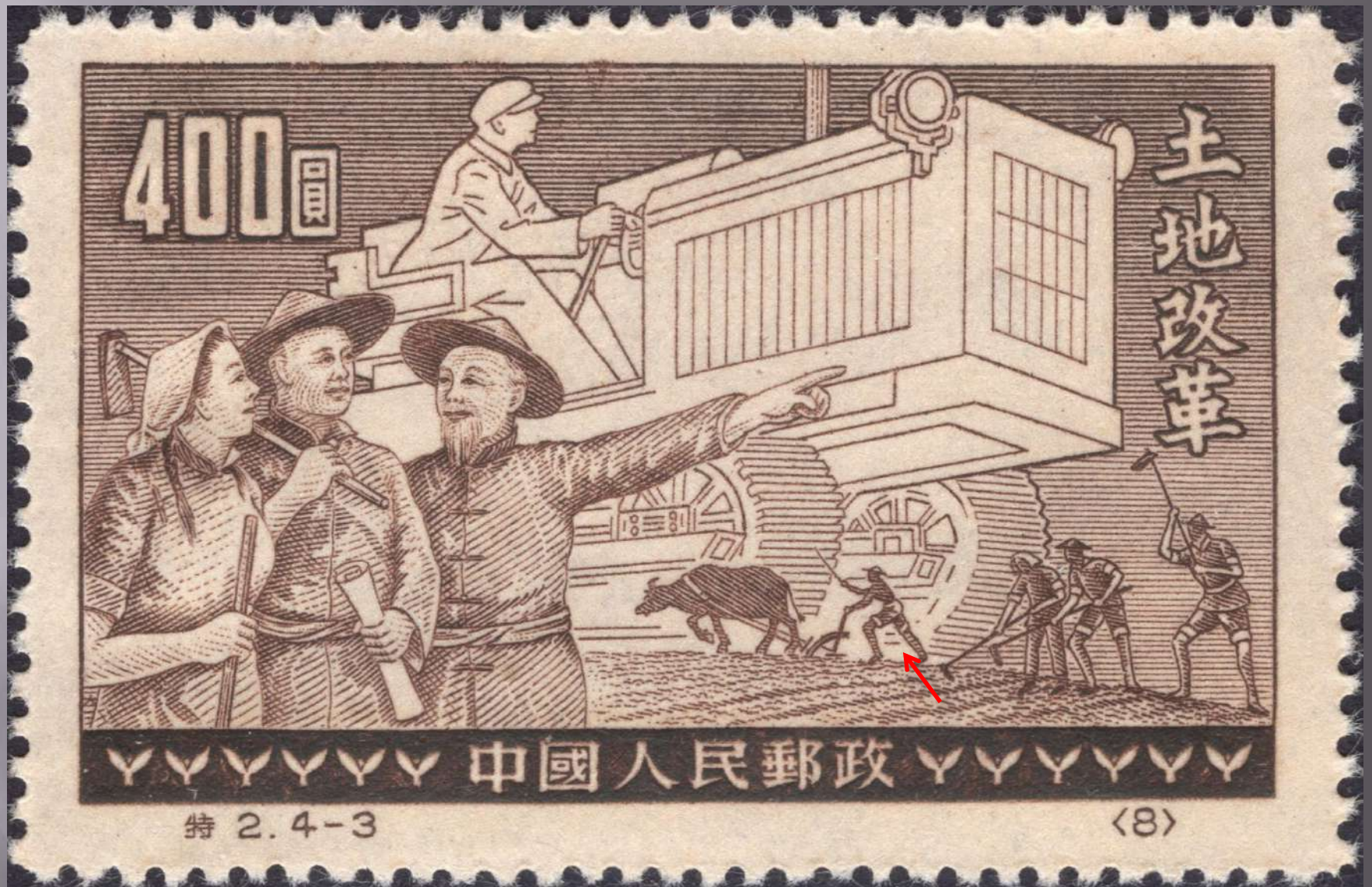
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Early PRC stamps are also quite valuable but were reprinted for collectors in their millions. The Chinese made sure that the reprints could be identified by adding slight differences to the engravings. On this set an extra line was added between the plowman's legs.



A shadow of a person's face and hands holding a tool, cast against a wooden plank background. The shadow is dark and occupies the right side of the image, with the person's face looking towards the left. The background consists of vertical wooden planks.

In the early days, engravers were rarely identified. This was for several reasons.

The same engravers produced bank notes and there was a fear that if their identity became known, criminals could find ways to pressure them into producing counterfeit plates, such as by threats, intimidation or kidnapping.

The best engravers were highly sought after so there was a reasonable fear of poaching by other companies.

Despite that, some engravers signed their work but often in a secret way by making it hard to find.





Wilhelm Gottfried Nüesch liked to include the initial “N” somewhere in his engravings.

He started doing this when he went to Argentina.

This was the first time he did it in 1899.



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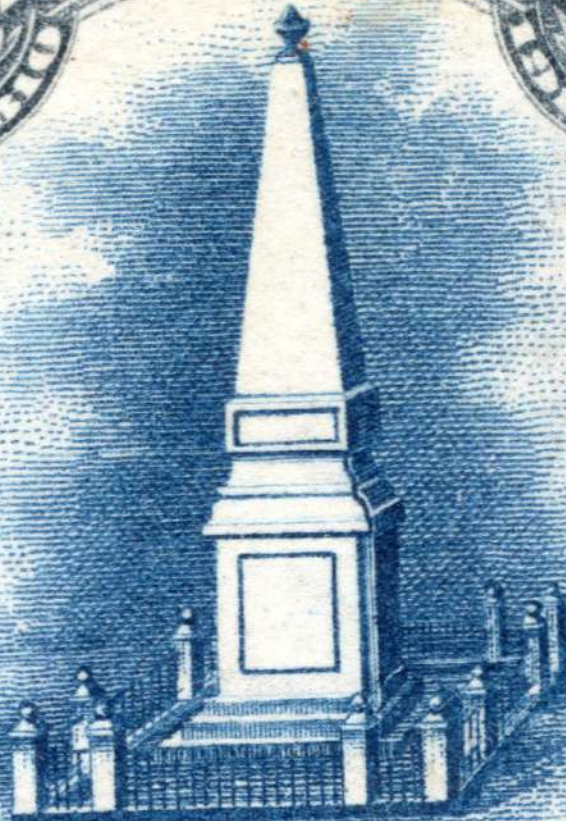
He started doing this when he went to Argentina.

This was the first time he did it.





REPÚBLICA ARGENTINA



PIRÁMIDE A MAYO

1/2 CENTAVO

















Frederick Schirnbock was another who liked his work to be signed. This was fine when he worked for countries like Austria who had no issue with this but with those who discouraged the idea, he would sometimes hide his initials in the picture.





In this stamp for Vatican City, Schirnbock engraved the vignette while the designer, Enrico Federici engraved the frame and lettering.

Federici hid his name in the border while Schirnbock added his initials to the path.



FEDERICI DIS (Designer)



F Sch Sc (Sculpsit - engraver)







Federici

FSch

In 1935, Canada made the decision to hide the date of issue on all their stamps. This was in addition to those stamps which incorporated the date into the design.

The only official exceptions were the 1962 cameos of Queen Elizabeth II, the 1965 Churchill, the 1970 Group of 7 Meeting, the 1976 Queen Elizabeth II, the 12 stamps of 1979 showing provincial flags and the postage due stamps of 1967-68.

They also suspended the practice from 1971 to 1973. Nobody seems to know why, or why they started doing it again.

Although on some issues detection is easy, on others it can take some time.





Having said that, I have not been able to find the date on this stamp. It was re-released a year later with a new engraving and different printer but still no date. This shows that it was the designers who were adding the dates to Canadian stamps.

Canada

17



International Year of the Child 1979  
1979 Année internationale de l'enfant



open

This stamp is one of the easy ones to start with.

It has both the “open” date in the design (twice) and a hidden date.





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It has both the “open” date in the design (twice) and a hidden date.

open



Canada

12



Inuit - Hunting Les Inuits - La chasse



Canada

12



Inuit - Hunting Les Inuits - La chasse



Canada



*Trionyx spinifera*

postage · postes

17



Canada



©1978

*Trionyx spinifera*

postage · postes

17





Engraved stamps  
can be more  
difficult if they  
are all one colour





Interestingly, this stamp is dated 1957. However, the stamp was not issued until the 1959 royal visit. After the engraving was prepared the authorities decided to wait for a special occasion to issue the stamp.

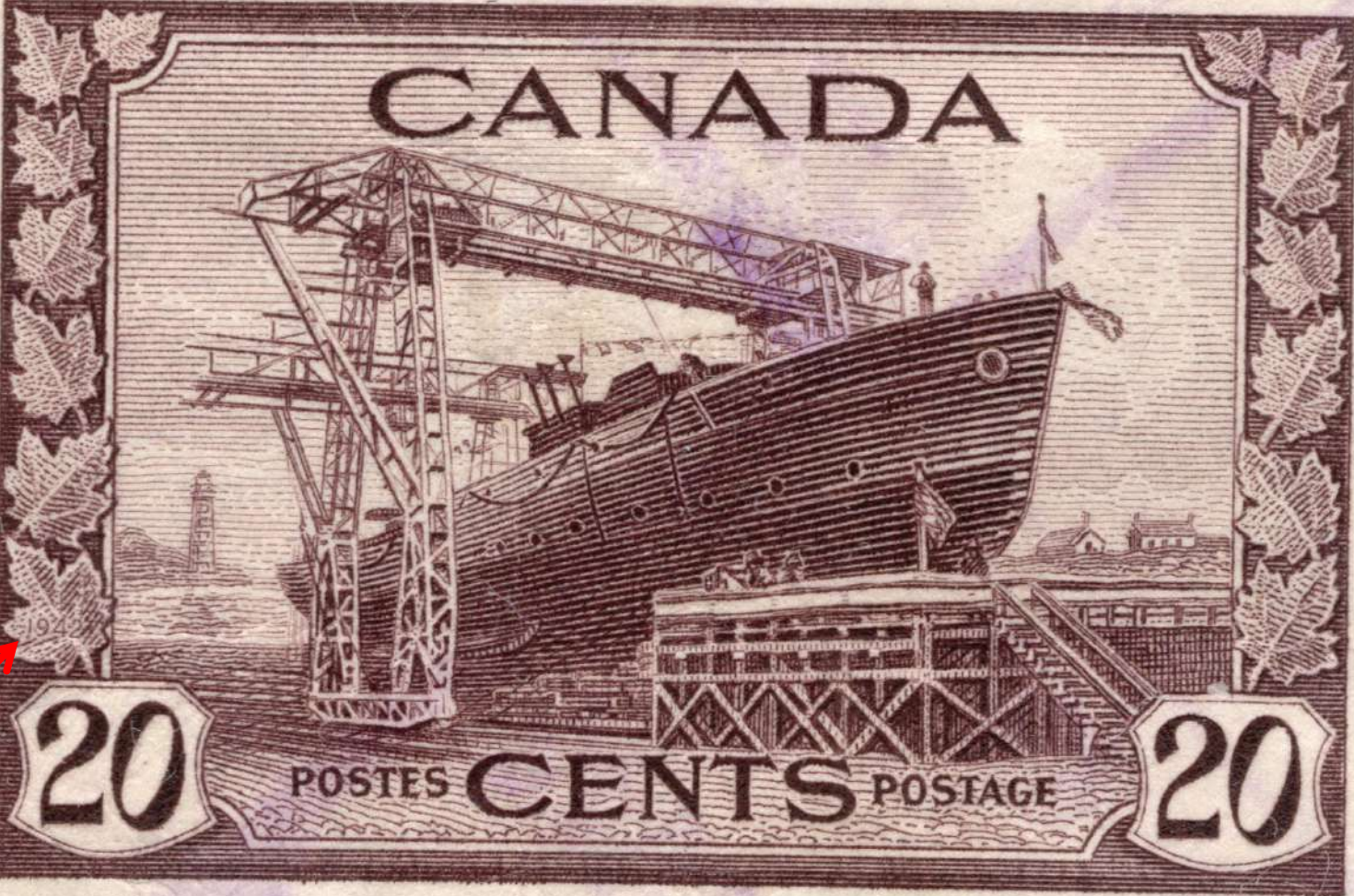




Now for something a bit harder....



CANADA



20

POSTES CENTS POSTAGE

20







I admit it!

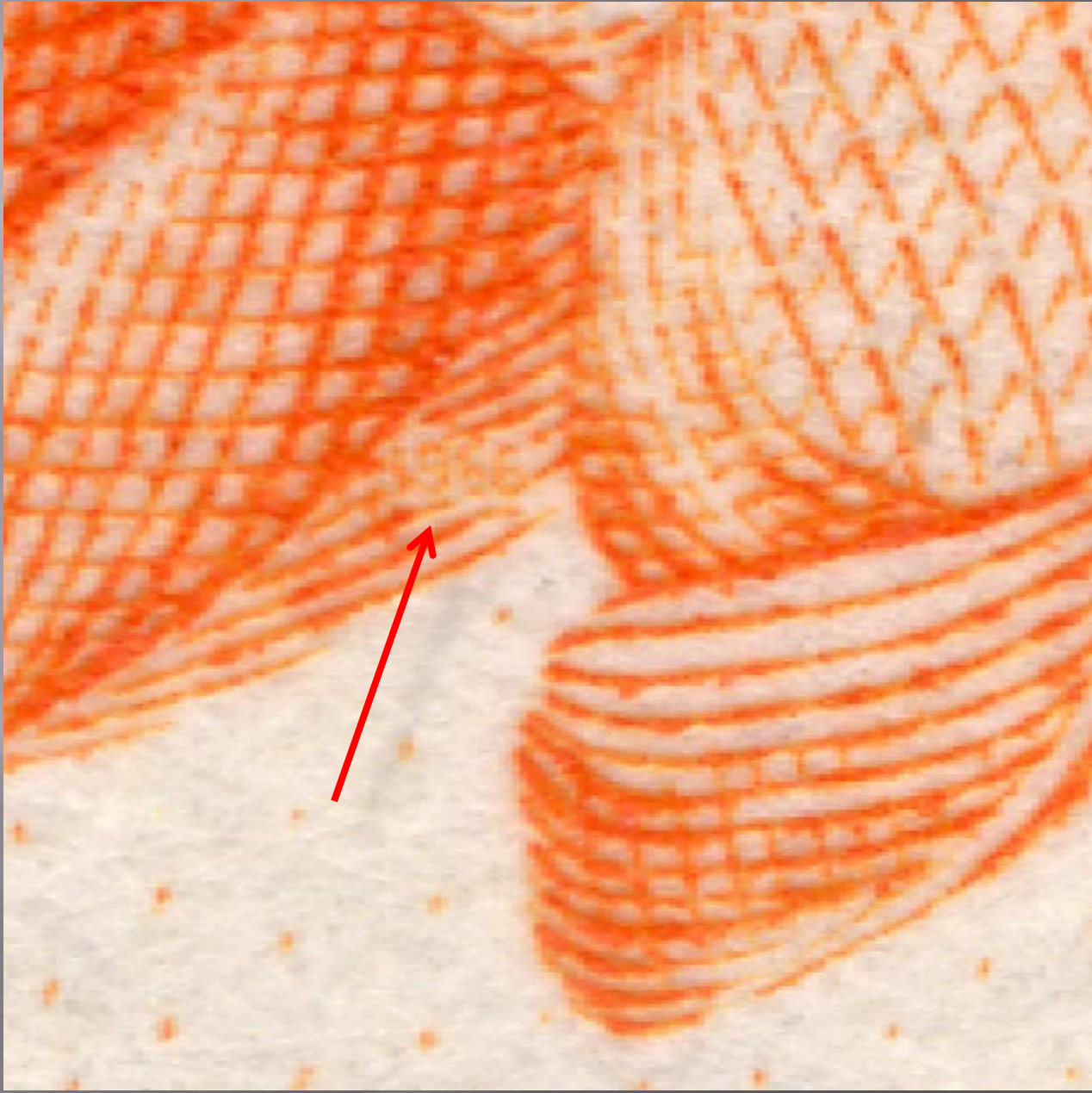
This one took me  
some time.





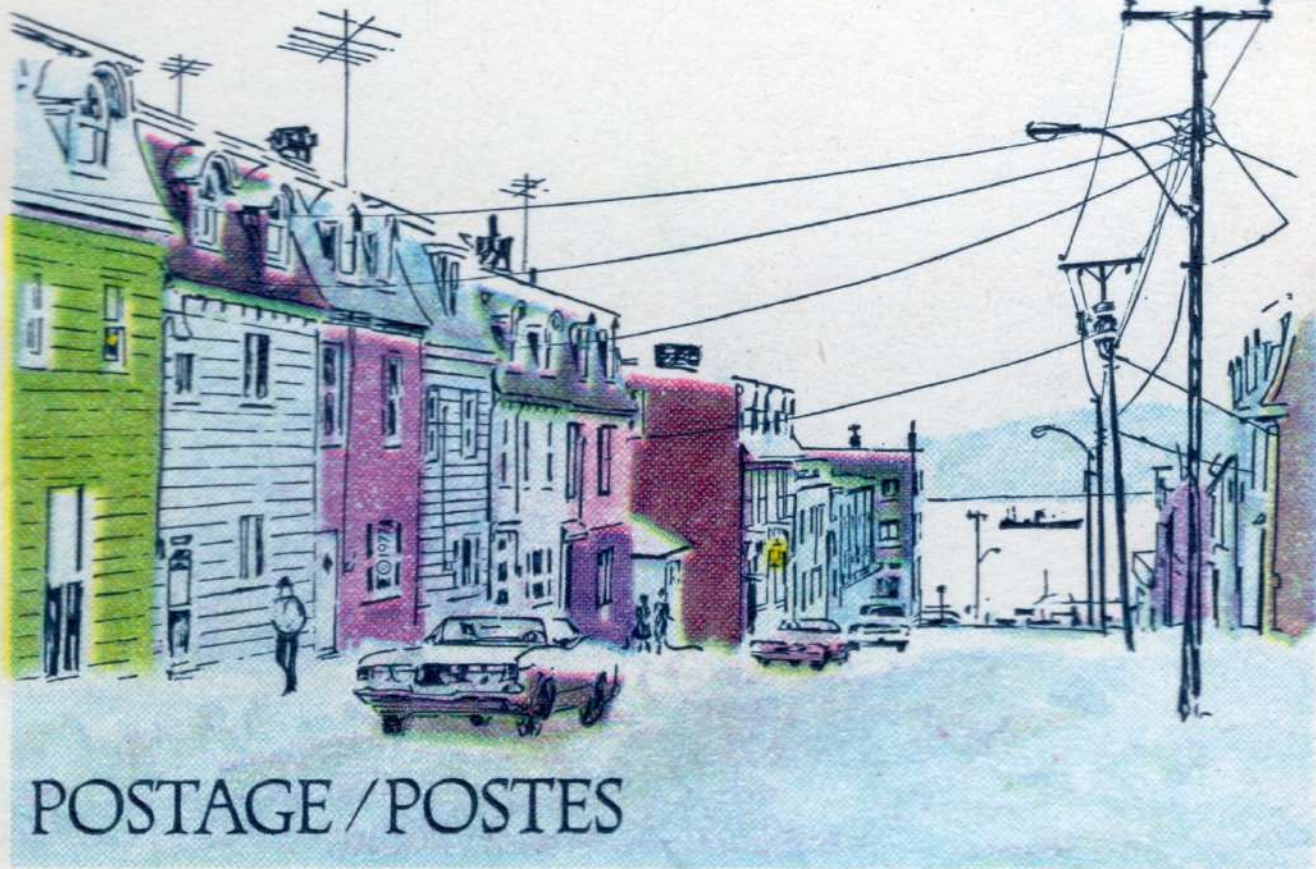
It's here!







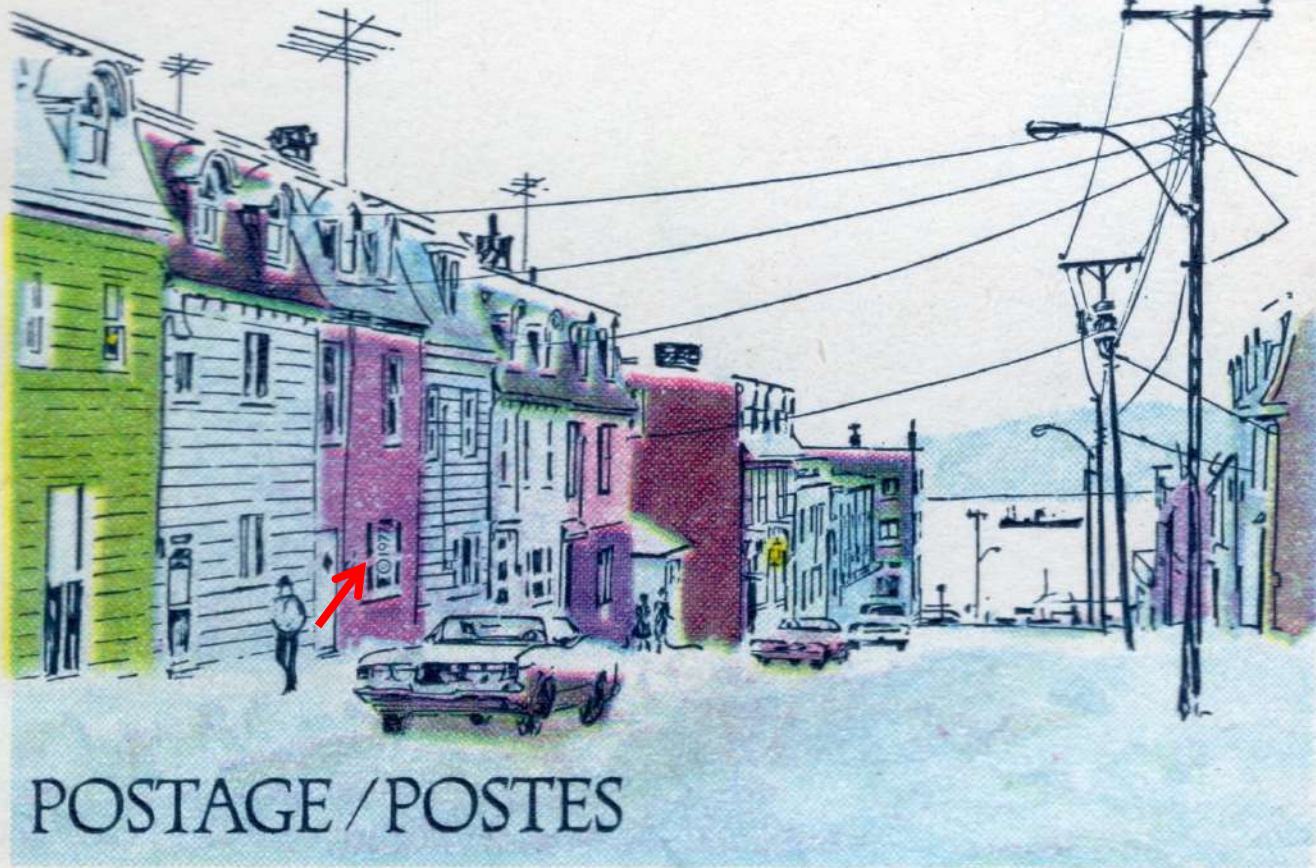
CANADA 80



POSTAGE / POSTES



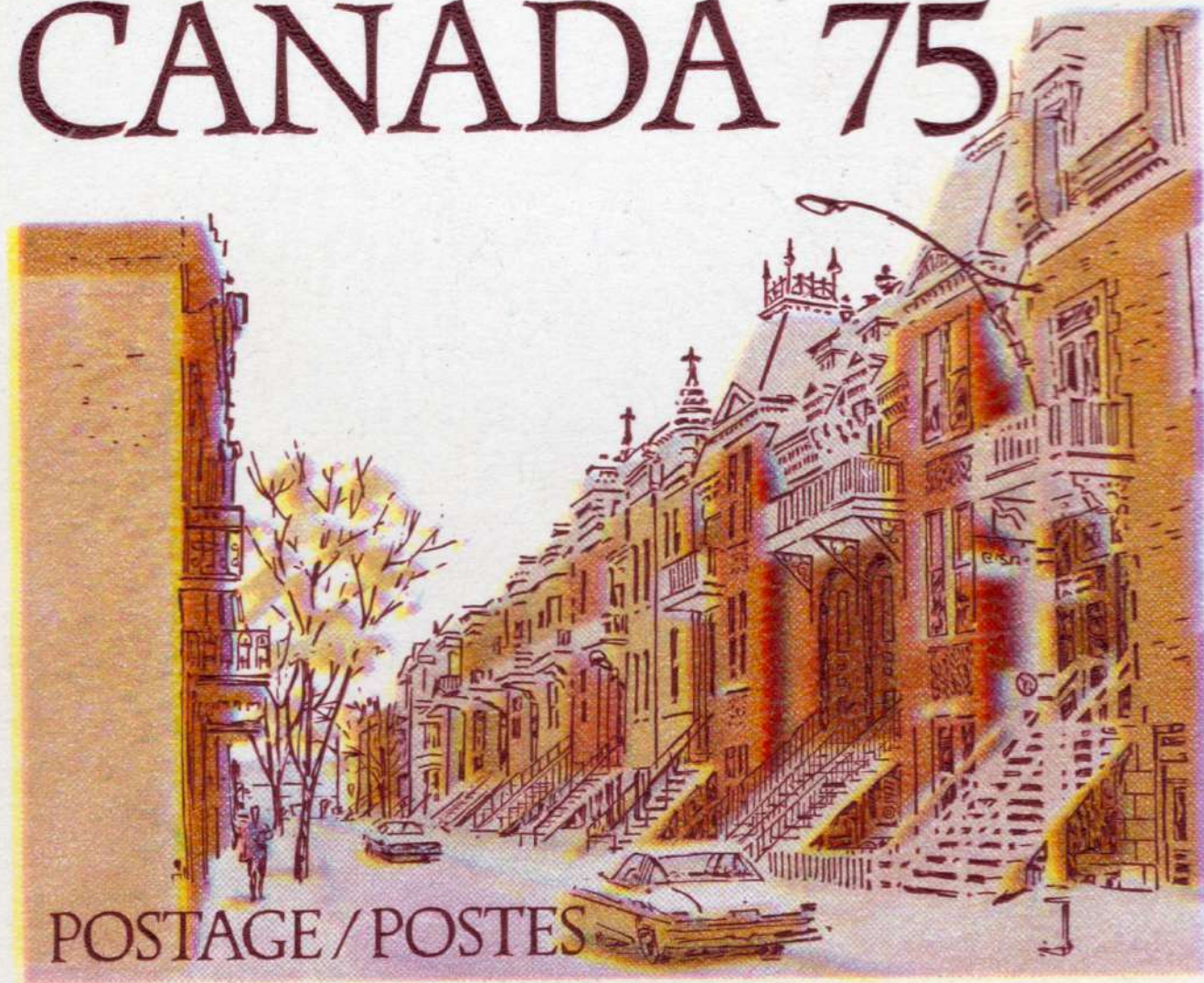
# CANADA 80



POSTAGE / POSTES



CANADA 75



POSTAGE / POSTES



CANADA 75

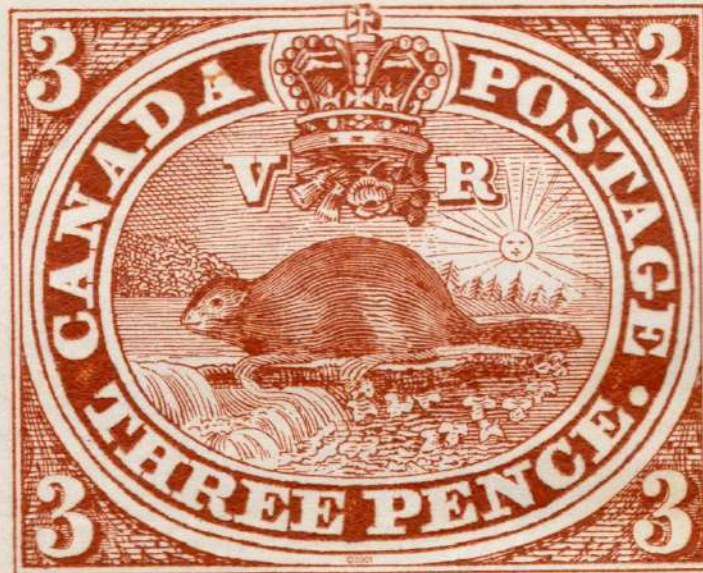


POSTAGE / POSTES



CANADA 47

One Hundred and Fifty Years  
of Canadian Post



Les cent cinquante ans  
de la poste canadienne

1851-2001









©2001





From 1952-62, almost half of the Canadian stamps issued incorporated the initial(s) of the designer. Notable among these was Emanuel Hahn who added an "H" to his artwork which was faithfully copied by the engravers.





Date

"H"

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Canada Post seems to have tolerated this and from 1962 began adding the designer's name on the edge of the stamp sheet.





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"H"

Date



There can be many reasons why an engraver includes something in a stamp that is too small to be seen with the naked eye.

Sometimes it can be purely for artistic pleasure – adding tiny details simply because they can. It reflects pride in the workmanship that rarely gets acknowledged.

It could also be done to test an engraver's skill development. There was a pecking order among engravers. A novice would start on something really simple then be allowed to do the lettering. The next level was to do the scrolls and frames. Then came the vignette engravers with portrait engravers at the very top





This Fort Bliss stamp shows scenes of El Paso in 1848 and 1948 with a centerpiece of the rocket range at Fort Bliss.

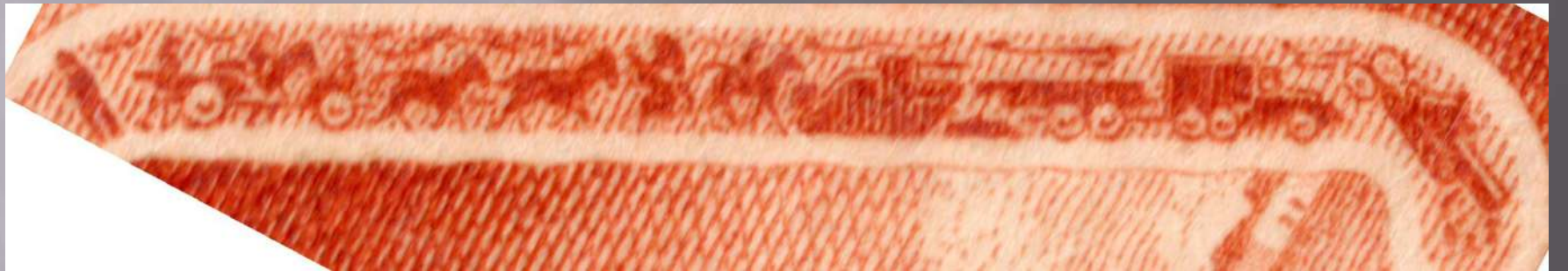
There was no need for the triangular border around the rocket – a plain triangle would have sufficed but the designer decided challenge the engraver who had the job of lettering. Usually this would be a trainee.

Designed by Charles R. Pickering.

Vignettes were engraved by Charles A. Brooks.

Lettering and border were engraved by A. W. Christensen



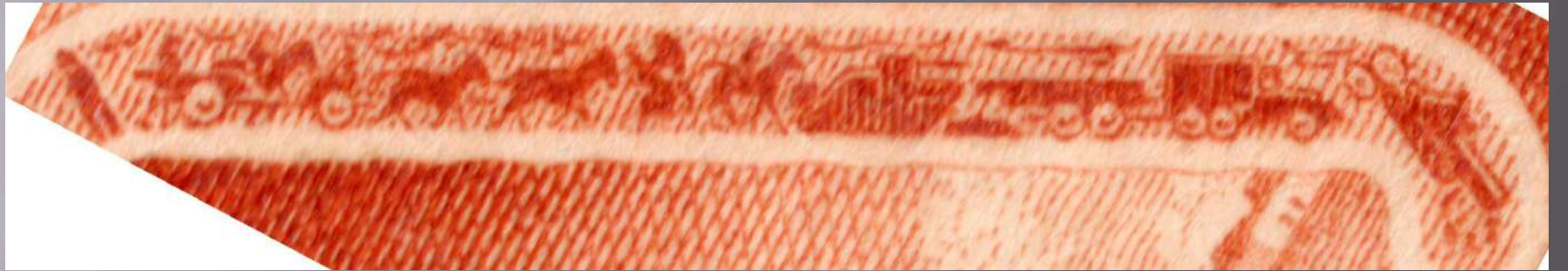


Here is the border, straightened out . It represents the soldiers of Fort Bliss and the settlers of El Paso travelling together for 100 years.

Stamp trivia: This was the first U.S. stamp to show a rocket.

It was also the first U.S. stamp to have a camel on it.





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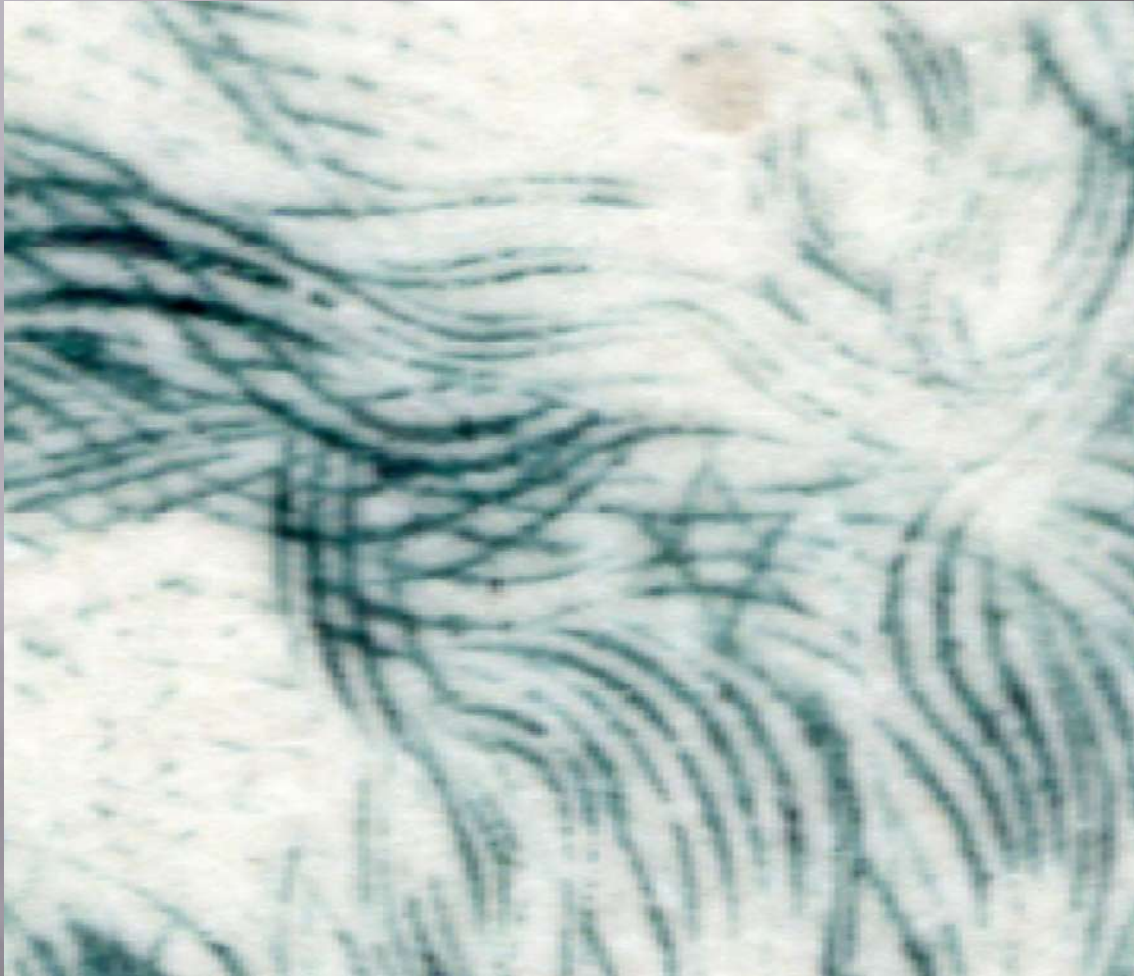
Sometimes when an engraver gets found adding something to a stamp there is a storm in a teacup, politicians bluster and a slap on the wrist is administered. Sometimes there is a much deeper story such as what occurred when someone noticed that a Star of David had been hidden in the beard of Bernard Revel, founder of Yeshiva University.





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# Engraver Surreptitiously Etched Tiny Star of David on U.S. Stamp

August 15, 1987 | From the Washington Post

WASHINGTON — A government engraver etched a tiny Star of David into the design of a \$1 stamp last year--the first time, postal officials say, that a symbol has been surreptitiously placed on a U.S. stamp.

Officials of the Bureau of Printing and Engraving said Friday that the mark was added by Kenneth Kipperman, who was arrested by District of Columbia police in June and charged with threatening to blow up the site of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The bureau, part of the Treasury Department, ordered an immediate review of hand-engraved stamp dies after the star was discovered as a result of a telephone tip. The dies are the metal plates from which most U.S. stamps are reproduced.

The review does not focus solely on stamps engraved by Kipperman, although bureau spokesman Ira Polikoff said that several of Kipperman's designs are under scrutiny. As of Friday, no other secret marks had been found on other stamps, Polikoff said.



From then on, with a zeal that would have made the CIA proud, they began seeing signatures everywhere.



This stamp, engraved by Slania, had already caused a storm of protest from those who said the job should have gone to an American engraver, making it an ideal target. As Slania was known for hiding things in his work, those squiggles in the grass must be his signature mustn't they?





Of course, if you have a good imagination, you can find letters anywhere in squiggles and though I don't believe Slania deliberately signed this stamp, there are places where you can see his name... well, sort of. You can also find many other letters that could mean anything you want them to, if you try hard enough.





Despite assurances from the U.S. postal authorities, the secrets keep right on coming. In 1994, they commissioned Albert Hirschfeld, the cartoonist for the New York Times to design a set of stamps depicting Stars of the Silent Screen. Since 1945 when his daughter was born, he has hidden her name, Nina, in almost all of his drawings and it appears in each of the stamps. This time it was presented as a challenge to encourage people to buy more stamps. See how many you can find.

**RUDOLPH VALENTINO**



**USA  
29**





**USA  
29**



**CLARA**

**BOW**



USA  
29



CLARA

BOW

USA

USA  
29



CHARLIE CHAPLIN



USA  
29



CHARLIE CHAPLIN

**USA  
29**

**LON CHANEY**





USA  
29

LON CHANEY

MMA











USA  
29

ZASU PITTS





USA  
29

ZASU PITTS

**HAROLD LLOYD**

















**KEYSTONE COPS**



**USA  
29**

**KEYSTONE COPS**



**USA  
29**



**KEYSTONE COPS**



**USA  
29**

**KEYSTONE COPS**



**USA  
29**



**KEYSTONE COPS**



**USA  
29**



USA  
29

THEDA

BARA





USA  
29

THEDA

BARA









Secret marks can be very useful if, like me you want to know who engraved a stamp. Both Chinas put the details of their stamps on the official website but they both just list all the engravers who worked on a set without identifying individual contributions. The Republic of China (Taiwan) put out several sets of engraved stamps showing owls and as usual, listed four engravers for each set of four stamps. Fortunately, whether sanctioned or not, the engravers added their names secretly into the design.





The four engravers who worked on this set were:

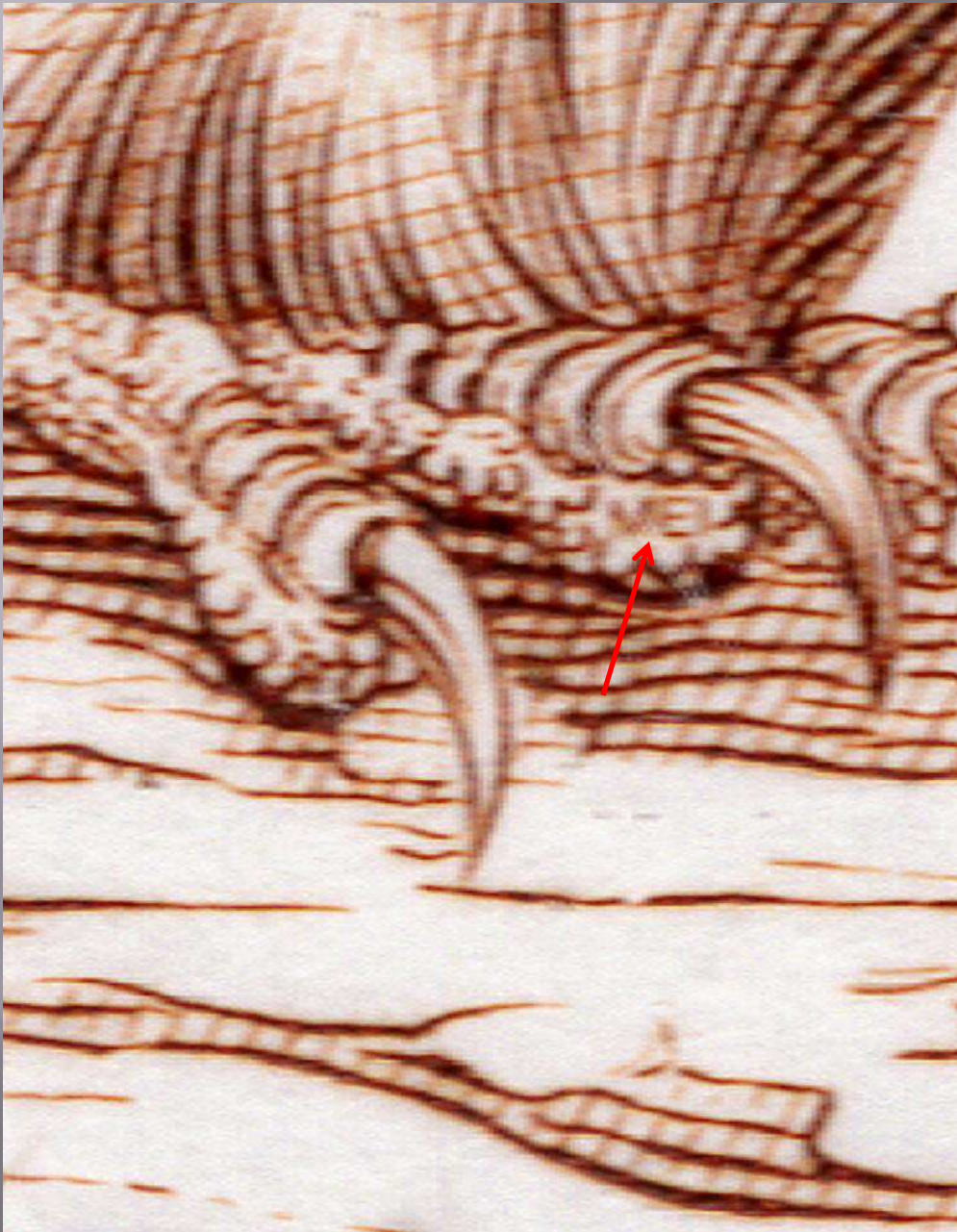
Qian Zhao De

Huang Lian Cai

Chou Mei Ling

Chen Yueh Guey

If you look between the talons you will see that Chou Mei Ling engraved this stamp.



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Sometimes, people's suspicion gets the better of their intelligence. This stamp caused a furore when it was released as some fairly imaginative individuals claimed that it contained the image of Hitler in a top hat. They might just as well have complained that it hid the image of Caspar, the Friendly Ghost who can also be imagined here.



Adolf



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Adolf



Caspar

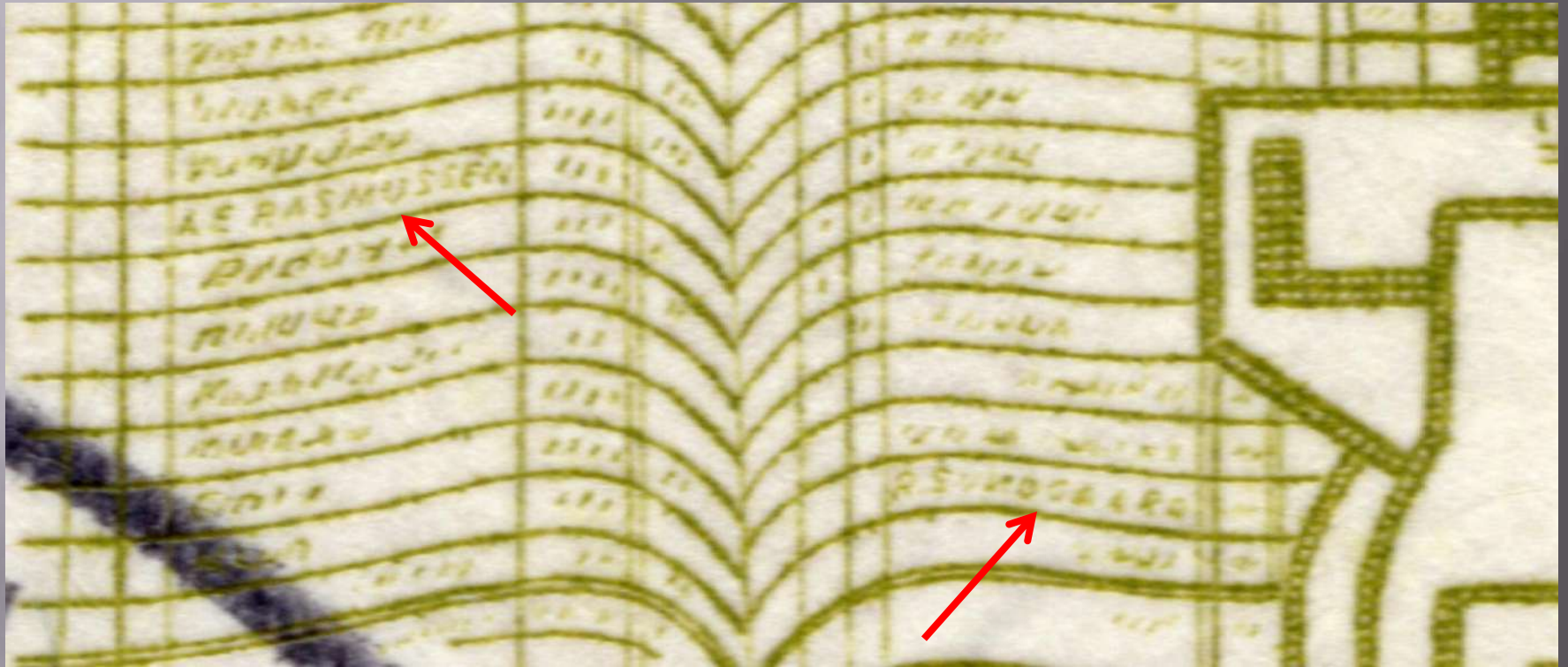
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When Slania started engraving for Denmark, he made friends in Copenhagen with the Director of the printing works, Ricardo Sundgaard and a postal clerk named A. E. Rasmussen. In 1965, he honoured them by adding their names to this stamp .





Slania expected to be asked to redo the engraving but the authorities had a sense of humour and let it pass.





GÖRAN ALGÅRD

VASALOPPET

CZESLAW SLANIA SC

Slania was given a photograph to work from for this stamp but the faces were blurred. Needing more clarity he engraved himself at bottom left plus some of his co-workers whose photographs he had handy.





GÖRAN ALGÅRD

VASALOPPET

65  
SVERIGE

CZESLAW SLANIA SC

Slania

Unidentified

Lars-Eric Ewert,  
head of Swedish  
stamp printing

Sven Andersson,  
printing technician



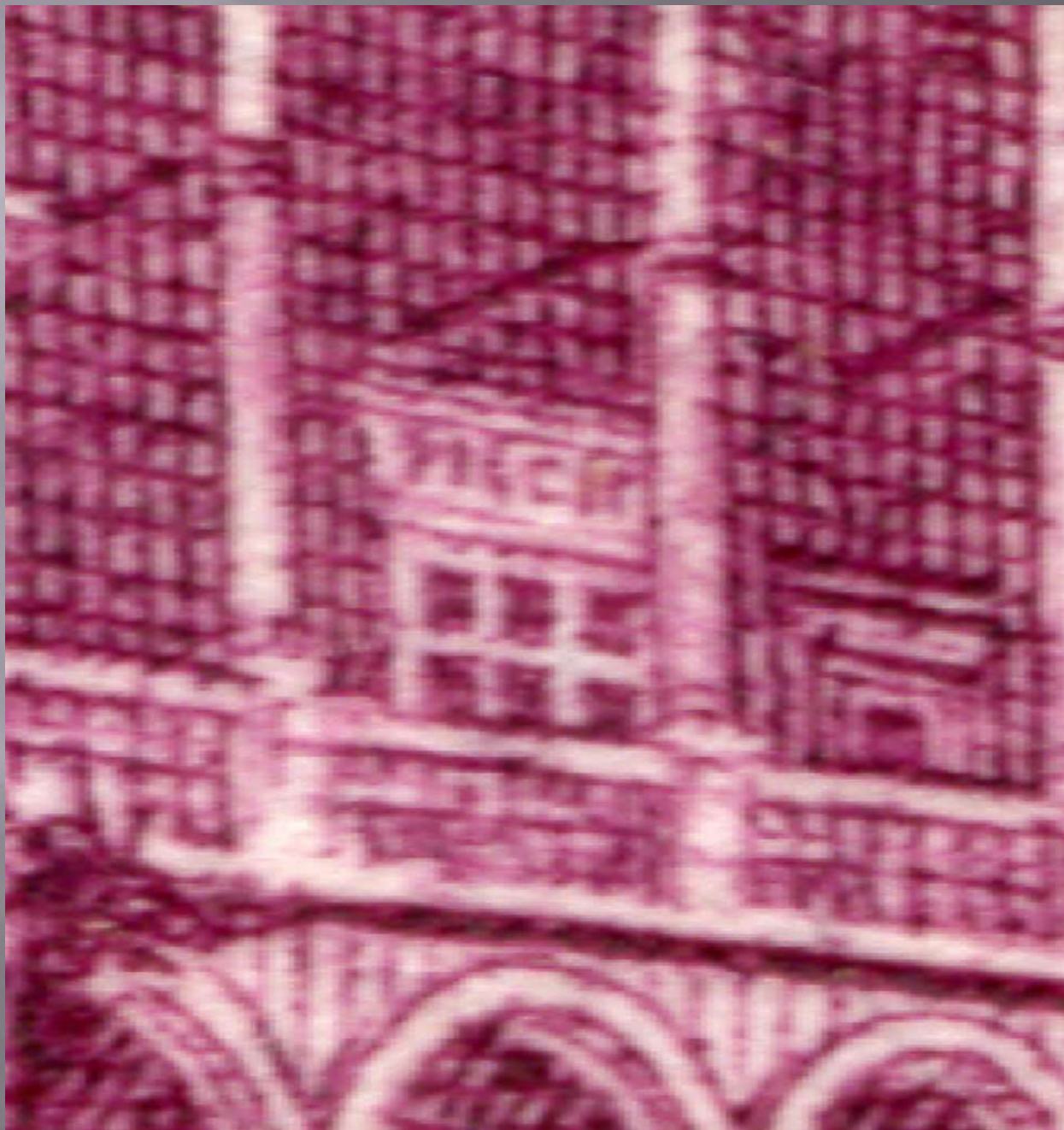


The Austrian, Adalbert Pilch was possibly the greatest designer of engraved stamps. Engravers loved working with him as his designs showed them exactly what was needed and they were often challenged to produce their best work. As far as I know, he and Slania never worked together but they were friends and early in his career, in 1953, Slania added his name above a window in this stamp.





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Right from the beginning of his career, Slania would hide the names of friends and family on his stamps. His friend, Lala, was a great fan of the writer, Gogol. When he got the job of engraving a Gogol stamp, he added his friend's name.





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Slania really went to town with his bookshop stamp from 1954, using real names on the framed certificates in the background.



Herwich, head of printing office at the Postal Ministry

Jozefa Slania, his mother

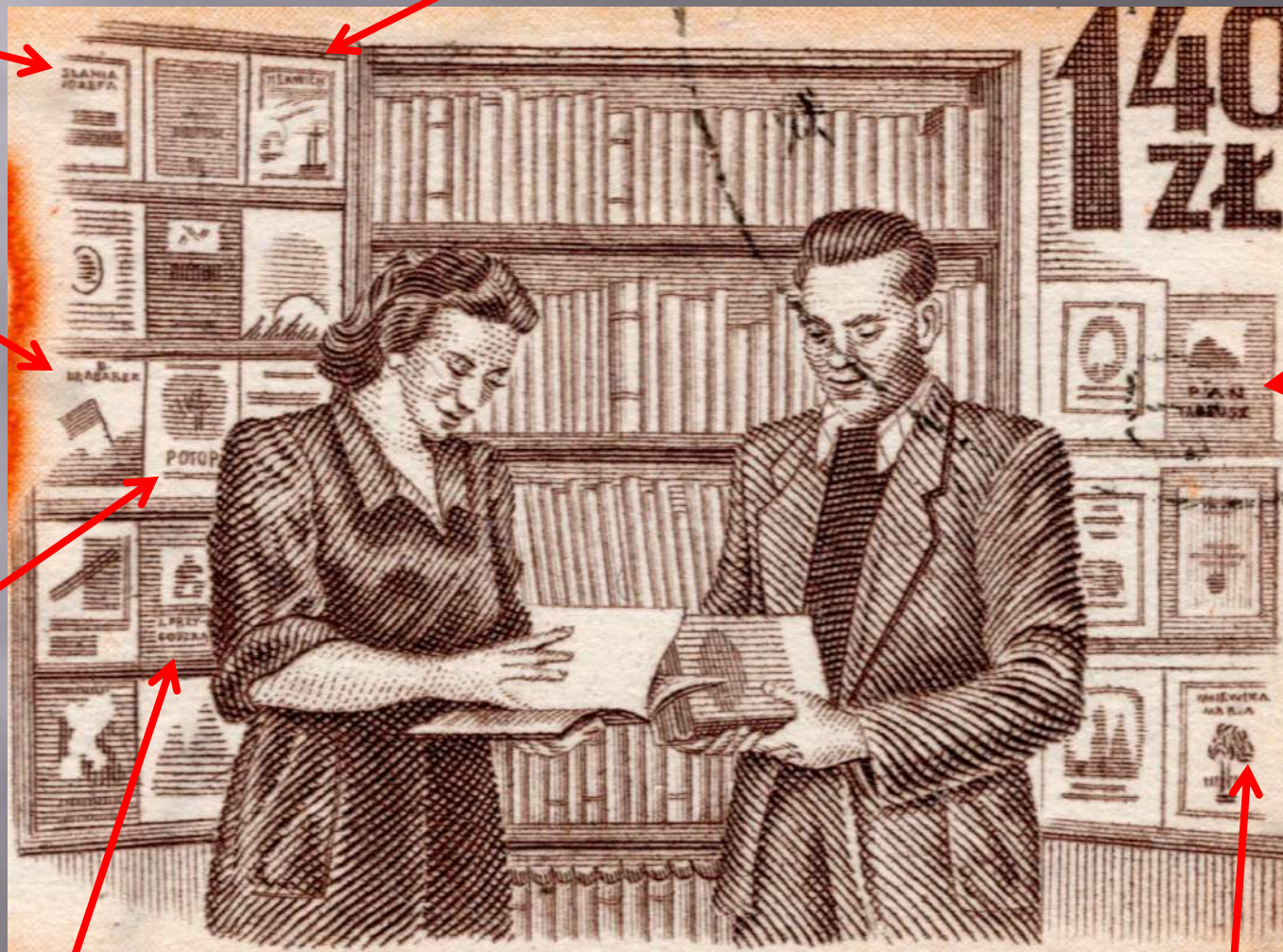
Danuta Drabarek, his cousin and girlfriend

Potop, a famous Polish book

Jadwiga Przygodzka, a family member

Maria Majewska, his cousin

Pan Tadeusz, a famous Polish novel







On this stamp, Slania engraved the name of his sister, Lodzia (short for Leokadija) but it is so well hidden, you would struggle to find it if you didn't know where to look.





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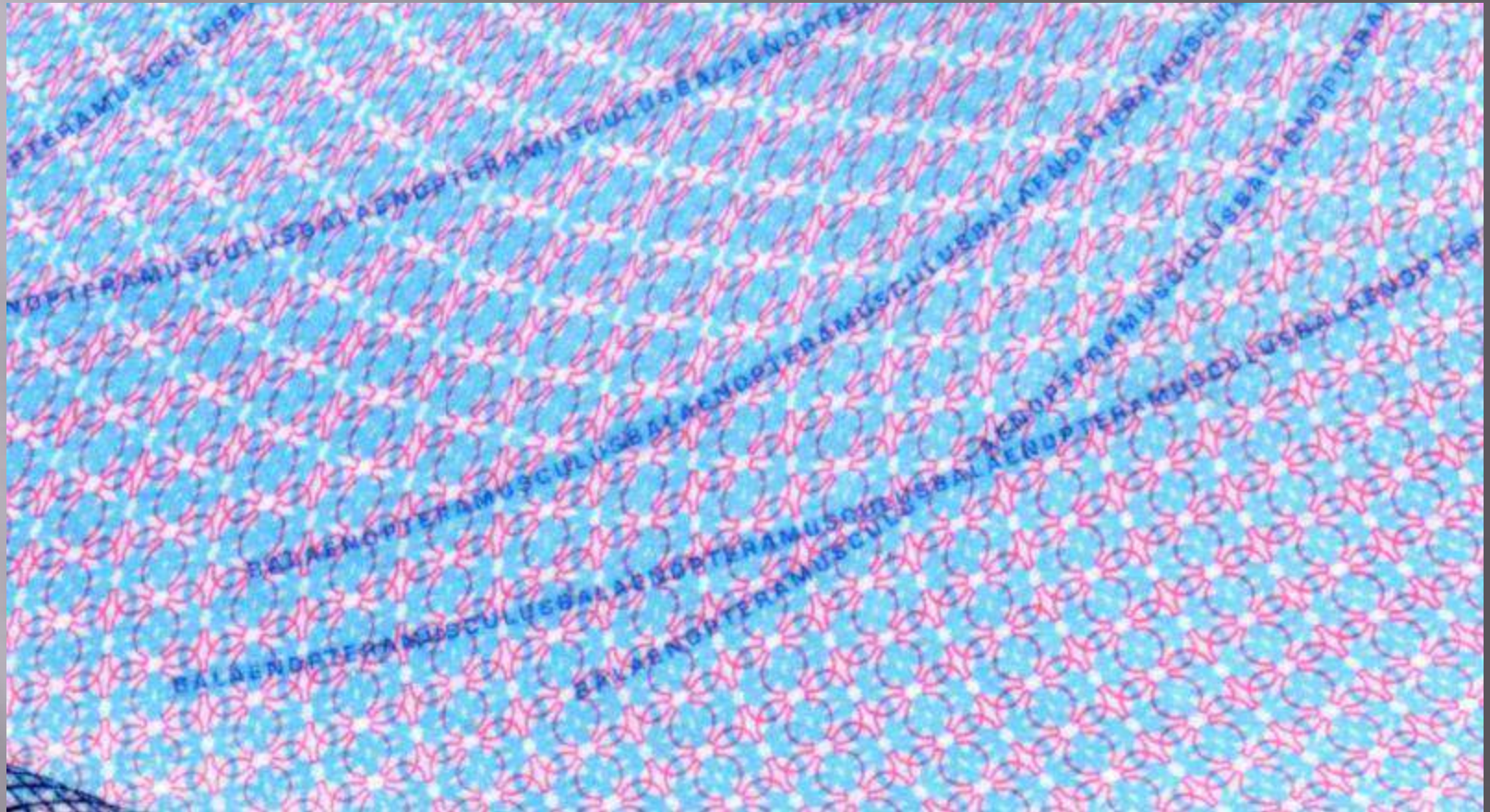
The name is hidden in the folds of this woman's gown.







With the growth of computer engraving and microprinting, it has become very easy for countries to add secret marks to stamps as an extra security measure. This stamp for Canada is a good example. The artist, Jorge Peral, used computer engraving for the body of the whale but the wavy lines behind it are lithographic microprinting. You need a lens to learn the secret.



The lines are actually letters spelling out the Latin name for the whale. *Balaenoptera musculus*, the Blue Whale, the largest animal ever known on earth.



I suppose you could say that all this means that engravers are a deceitful lot though in reality it is only a bit of fun to relieve what can be a stressful and boring job. One slip and the job has to start again.

However, there is one noted example where an engraver, namely Slania, did not tell the truth, possibly because he had forgotten.



Interviewed about the 1973 Vasa Ski Race stamp, he said, "I was sitting home on a Christmas Eve and had to finish the stamp after a photograph. None of the faces on the photo appeared clearly, so I couldn't engrave them clearly either. For at least having some clear faces on the stamp I put ours in, and chose my co-workers because I had their photographs at home. *It was the first time my face appeared on a stamp that I have engraved myself.*"



Slania engraved this stamp in 1952, using himself as the mechanic.  
And on that bombshell, as they used to say on Top Gear, I'll finish!