

# THE 1900-1907 ISSUE OF FRANCE AND ITS TRIBULATIONS.

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For twenty-four years, from 1876 to 1900, France, the nation which for so long has lead in art, in fashion, and many other lines where change and advancement are the order of the day, was content with a single type of postage stamp. To be sure, the allegorical "Peace and Commerce" design was neat, effective, typical, and wholly devoid of political import, so that there was really nothing against it save the desire for a change to something new. Agitation began in 1892 for a public competition, in order to get new and suitable designs. On May 29, 1893, a Commission was named to prepare a program for such competition, authority having been given by vote of Parliament, and on Feb. 4, 1894, the competition was opened. All designs were to be submitted by May 5, were to be by French artists only, and were to bear the words "Postes" and "République Française" as well as provision for indication of value. Three prizes were announced, of 3000, 1500 and 1000 francs respectively.

Over 600 designs were submitted and these were exhibited to the public at the School of Fine Arts; but it hardly speaks well for the contestants that the judges awarded no prizes, altho they gave five "honorable mentions", which carried a gratuity of 500 francs each. Among these we find M. Mouchon, so long identified with stamp production in Paris. Nothing further was done until about a year later, when the Minister of Commerce and Posts, tired at constant enquiries, ordered M. Grasset, an artist of reputation for poster illustrating, to prepare a design. He took eight months about it, and submitted the type which was later used for the Indo-China set of 1904, with slight modifications. The design cost the State 5000 francs.

The approaching exposition of 1900 stirred matters up again in 1898, and the Assistant Secretary of State for Posts took charge of the project. The five prize designs of the former competition were examined, and the one submitted by M. Mouchon was selected for new stamps from 10c to 30c. The artist was asked to modify the design somewhat and to engrave the die, which was then given the Government stamp factory in the Boulevard Brune to prepare the plates from.

A design for the low values, 1c to 5c, was ordered of M. Joseph Blanc, a painter of talent. His composition represents the motto of the Republic: *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. Liberty is typified by the winged goddess, who holds the scales as an emblem of Equality, while the two cherubs dancing in an embrace signify Fraternity. The die was engraved by M. E. Thomas.



The higher values, 40c to 5fr were given a third design, ordered of M. Luc-Olivier Merson, a member of the Institute of France. This was also

symbolic, a seated figure in a rather cramped position typifying the Republic, with her hand resting on a sheathed sword across her lap. The meditative attitude and the olive tree near by are all suggestive of Peace. M. Aug. Thévenin engraved this die.

The small sized stamps are all arranged in the usual sheet form—six blocks of 25 in three horizontal pairs, one above the other. The higher values are also in blocks of 25, but being of double width there are only three, one above the other. These post office sheets are in reality half sheets, double the number of stamps being printed from the plates. The small sized stamp sheets all bear the "millésimes", beginning with 0, but the large sized stamp sheets have none.

The new stamps were issued on Dec. 4, 1900. The Mouchon type values with the exception of the 15c were at first printed from plates with the value tablet blank, the figures being supplied at a second printing. The 15c plate was made complete, because of the immense amount of stamps required for this, the domestic postal rate. The two operations required on the other values resulted in many sheets with the figures not "centered" in the tablet, and some with them very far out of register. Special plates for the 10c and 25c were therefore soon made, but the 20c and 30c were always printed as at first. The 10c and 25c of the double printing may be distinguished by the displacement of the numerals, difference in shade between the stamp and the numerals, a slight raising of the figures on the back of the stamp, or in the case of the 10c by the figure 1 which has a straight foot, the "one print" stamp having the bottom of the figure slightly curved. Of the double print 10c there were 13,350,000 issued and of the 25c 25,080,000. A variety of the 15c exists in which the serif of the 1 is long enough to touch the frame of the tablet. This occurs on five clichés of a printed sheet of 300. A variety of the 25c also exists in which the lower curve of the 5 makes a closed circle.

The orange color of the 15c stamp failed to give satisfaction, and the Assistant Secretary endeavored to find a more suitable one. Criticism of the design also led to M. Mouchon being asked to submit a modification of its details. The result was the redrawn type of 1902, the change being princi-



pally in the upper right corner where the value tablet was rendered more artistic and the word *Postes* placed in the upper frame. This brought the design back almost to its original form as submitted in the competition of 1894. The various values in the redrawn type appeared as follows: 30c in April, 20c in May, 10c in June, 25c in July, and 15c in December, 1902.

In spite of the improvement effected by the change just noted, the Mouchon

type failed to please both the administration and the public. The women particularly made all manner of fun of the "Man's Rights" motto, and even went so far as to have a label printed bearing a man's figure with "Woman's Rights" as the legend. The result was that steps were taken by the Minister of Commerce and the Assistant Secretary of State for Posts to replace the design and their choice finally fell on Roty's "Sower," which already ornamented the silver coinage. The news of the proposed change became known in October, 1902, and was hailed with satisfaction by the press. The figure in female form typifies France or the "Republic sowing ideas," as it was dubbed. No sooner had the new stamps appeared than it was noticed that the lady was sowing against the wind, which is blowing her hair and skirt out behind; also that she is well lighted on her left side, toward the observer, while her right side, away from the observer and toward the sun, is in shadow! The placing of the inscriptions and their smallness were also criticised, and to sum up, in spite of undeniable artistic merits, the new stamp did not prove to be what had been hoped for.

M. Mouchon prepared the new die, and imperative instructions were given the manufactory in the Boulevard Brune to hasten the preparation of the new stamps. Sheets printed in the morning were gummed in the afternoon and perforated next day, whereas a fortnight usually elapses from start to finish. During the last days of March, 1903, the workshop delivered 1000 sheets a day or 300,000 stamps. It is curious to note that on the same press were being printed at the same time and in their respective colors the 15c rose of the redrawn Mouchon type and the 15c green of the Sower type. The latter were put on sale on April 2 at the postoffices of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies. At the latter office there were sold more than 20,000 on the day of issue, and the employees were obliged, in order to satisfy all, to limit the number purchased by each individual to five.

It is stated that M. Roty, whose design was used, after numerous color trials wished the 15c to be printed in "Indian yellow," but it was pointed out that this was a very expensive color and would necessitate an increased cost of some \$29,000 per year! It was therefore given up for the sage green in which the issue took place. After the appearance of the 15c the other values followed as stocks of the previous type ran out. The dates are as follows: 25c on April 28, 10c on May 6, 20c and 30c on June 29, 1903.

Scarcely three months after the appearance of the Sower design, it began to be noised around that still further changes were contemplated. The Administration denied the rumors, but nevertheless occupied itself in experimenting to improve the effect of the design, while retaining the chief feature—the figure of the Sower.

The agitation for the reduction of domestic postage from 15c to 10c, which had been constantly growing, resulted in the Minister of Finances introducing into the Chamber of Deputies in April, 1905, a bill providing for the proposed change. This was not passed, however, until March 6, 1906, when the reduced

rate was scheduled to take effect on April 16, following. The approaching change spurred the postal authorities to renewed activity, for it was realized that it meant an immense demand for the 10c stamp, hitherto relatively little used and that a large stock must be prepared in anticipation.

Meanwhile several essays of the Sower type had been made; in one, the lines of the groundwork beneath the "horizon line" were made heavier and closer together; in another the whole groundwork was treated the same way and the horizon line and sun omitted; in a third the portion below the horizon line was made solid color; and in a fourth the whole background was made solid, without the sun, and from this the figure of the Sower stood out with a cameo-like effect. The choice of essays fell upon this last cameo type, though it was slightly modified by having a foothold for the figure placed at the bottom of the stamp. The rose color of the then current 10c stamp was considered too pale to be effective in the solid background, and color trials were made for the choice of a better. The bright red of the 5kr of Austria, 1867 issue, was finally selected, and the attempt made to match that as nearly as possible.

The production of the new plates was done rapidly in the government workshops by the engravers in the following manner: having taken an impression on lead from an ordinary electro of the first Sower type, a workman removes the ridges which correspond to the cuts in the lined background of the electro. The lead impression thus "planed off" is put in the plating bath and a new electro obtained with a plain background, on which M. Mouchon engraved the little plat beneath the feet of the figure. This electrotype was then used to make the moulds for the "clichés" which serve to make up the printing plate.

In view of the short time which the Administration finally found it had to get out the new stamps, to be in season for the change in rates, they constructed plates of only 50 clichés, in two blocks of 25 (5x5) side by side, and without the millésime. Once printed, however, three of these, small sheets would be stuck together by their margins in a vertical strip so as to represent the normal post-office sheet of 150 stamps. In this way there were printed, from April 10 to April 25, about two million stamps. Meanwhile two other small plates of 50 each were prepared, having the millésime (6), and from April 26 were used with the first one to print at one operation sheets of 150 stamps.

The new stamp was issued on April 13, 1906, the printing having begun but three days previously and only 600,000 stamps being ready. These were supplied to the postoffices of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies and the principal

Receiving Office. The total printing of this stamp was about 30 millions.

But scarcely had this improved design made its appearance when further modifications were deemed necessary. It was learned on the day following its issue that the foothold upon which the Sower rested was to be removed, as well as the small line that appeared in white in front of the left arm, between the elbow and shoulder, which was presumably nothing but the top of the sack. In view of these changes, six electros intended for the 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 and 35c stamps in the new type, were sent early in May to M. Mouchon. When the retouched dies were ready, twelve small plates of 50 clichés each were hastily constructed of the 10c, from which two full sheets of 300 stamps each could be printed. The printing began on July 5, and when put on sale about noon of July 28, at the office in the Rue de Grenelle, the quantity ready for issue had reached about 55 millions. The printing of the 35c, representing the full charge for a domestic registered letter, took place at the same time. It lasted scarcely two days and only a million and a half were struck off. They were not issued until November.

"The plot now deepens." As soon as the new 10c stamps were examined at the Under-Secretary of State's office they were deemed unsuitable, and the order was at once given to stop their manufacture and to withdraw them from sale! Their issue had lasted exactly one hour and three-quarters!! At the same time instructions were given for still further retouches!!! The poor Sower was certainly being made the victim of relentless persecution. The criticism this time was that the figure seemed too flat—did not stand out clearly enough from the background, particularly at the back where the contour lines were too indistinct. M. Mouchon was asked once more to retouch his stamp, which he did in August upon the dies of the 10c and 35c, these being the electros obtained as previously described. This retouch is very slight: a single line, scarcely noticeable, defines the right side of the figure, following down the outline of the hips; a little more relief has been given to the right arm, and the sack stands out a little better from the background. But the heavy inking of the plates, necessitated by the ground of solid color, practically obliterates these slight modifications and renders the retouched stamp often very difficult of detection.

While waiting for the new plates of the retouched type, for fear of running out of 10c stamps the plates of the first Sower type, with lined background, were put to press. But the new plates were ready on Sept. 15 and printing was carried on from that date until Feb. 2, 1907, the total output of this variety being some 500 millions. The retouched

10c stamp was issued in October, 1906, and at the same time the stock of its predecessor, which had been retired, was again placed on sale. The retouched 35c appeared in November, in company with the original 35c stamp; of the former there were printed 11,300,000. A new value, 45c, was also added in the same month, in the Merson design.

Once again, however, the doctoring process was resorted to. The fault complained of in the original "Sower without foothold" had not been successfully corrected in the first retouch, and now the inscriptions were deemed too light; so on October 24, 1906, the order was given to better define the contour of the figure and to make the inscriptions heavier. It was at first attempted to retouch the plates, but this necessitated separate work on the 600 clichés composing the two printing plates of the 10c stamp, with the consequent lack of uniformity in the work. A series of electros was therefore prepared, as previously described, from the dies of the 1903 type, lined background, and these were retouched in the workshop on the Boulevard Brune in such manner as to better define the Sower and make the letters and figures of the inscriptions heavier and more legible.

At last a fairly satisfactory design seems to have been reached. The manufacture of the new 10c began on Jan. 22, 1907, but the stock already on hand was so large that this second retouch did not appear until September. Meanwhile the 5c in the final Sower type had been prepared and was issued in March. The new 30c followed in May, the 25c in June, the 35c in November, and the 20c in December. Of the 15c, now relatively little used, there is still a large stock in the 1903 type, so that nothing has yet been done toward printing any of this value in the current type. The 25c appeared first in a very fine dark blue with a metallic cast, giving an extremely handsome effect, but it was deemed too dark to show a black cancellation well and later supplies have been in a lighter shade.

Thus ends the story of the permutations of this interesting set of stamps, and the tribulations of the "Sower Girl." Two years having elapsed without further changes, we may be reasonably certain that the present series is in the main satisfactory, and that no further upheaval will come until there is another "concourse" demanded or some good reason for a radical change. In closing, the author must express his deep obligation to that magnificent work on the stamps of France by the late Arthur Maury, a treasure house of all that pertains to French philately, in which he has taken keen delight in browsing, and from which most of the data contained in the preceding article has been culled.