



# Flag Imagery on Philatelic Covers

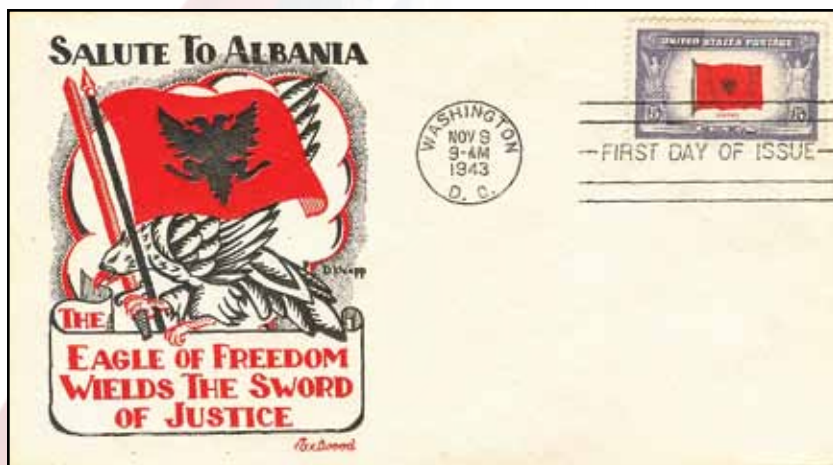
by David F. Phillips

In my youth I collected British Empire stamps. Over the years my collecting interests moved away from stamps into heraldic books, and I became a scholar of heraldry, flags, insignia, symbols, and related material. In the course of exploring this field I found that philatelic covers are a valuable and neglected source of heraldic art. Indeed, nowadays (apart from the Army) they are about the only source left of original heraldic art intended for mass consumption (as distinct from single works commissioned for individuals or for institutions to print on their souvenirs). They also are a rich source of images of official seals, medals, military insignia, and similar devices, all of which in my view form a single branch of art. For many heraldic images (for example, arms of cities outside North America and Europe), a cachet on a first day or event cover is the only practical source available.

So I went back to stamp shows and stamp stores, this time looking not for stamps but for covers with heraldic imagery. I bought mostly first-day and event covers, but also commercial covers when they had designs satisfying to my eye. While “flags on stamps” is a recognized topical collect-

ing specialty, with its own literature and marketing apparatus, flags and heraldic themes on covers are not, so to collect them I need to go to stamp shows where dealers put out covers in boxes for customers to flip through, looking for what they like.

I always head for the bargain bins and dollar boxes first. The elements that give philatelic value to covers, principally the stamp and the postal markings, are of little interest to me for this collection. First day and event covers generally are not of much postal history value, and the stamps are usually common ones. I am only after the cachet, and don't greatly care if the cover has no stamp at all, although heraldic motifs are sometimes echoed on the cover's stamps, postmarks and secondary markings, and the differences among them can be interesting artistically. There is no point in paying for philatelic value if your real interest is in heraldic art. I favor the dollar bins, but will now occasionally pay two or (rarely) even three dollars for a cover, because I already have a large proportion of the common covers that interest me, and I can recognize something exceptional when I see it. But I never go higher than that.



Salute to occupied Albania, Washington, November 9, 1943.

I have thousands of them now, sorted by cachet image. This article shows some of the flag-related covers and cachets in my collection. Dates and places are those of the postmarks, which even for first day covers are not always those of first issue.

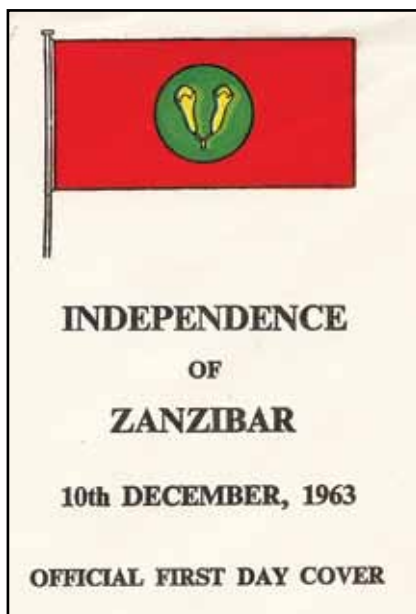
### Single National Flag

Predictably, the most common flag-related cachet image is a single national flag, either by itself or as an element in a larger composition. The stamps in the American "Overrun Countries" series of 1943–44, which featured the flags of countries conquered by the Axis, are good examples. In United States Scott 918, note the absence of the star in the pre-Communist flag of Albania. The Fleetwood cachets for this series emphasized the theme that help was coming and freedom would be restored after the war — not true, unfortunately, in the sad case of Albania.

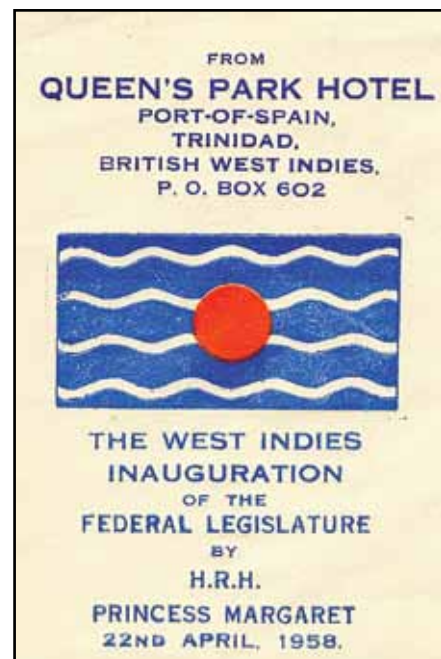
Of special interest to flag fanciers are cachets with national flags that are no longer in use. For instance, a cover franked by Ceylon Scott 307–310, a definitive issue marking the second anniversary of independence, shows the first national flag of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), without the stripes later added at the hoist. Similarly, Trinidad & Tobago Scott 86–88 were part of a uniform issue to mark the inauguration of the legislature of the West Indies Federation. The beautiful flag of that short-lived polity appears on the cover, pri-



Ceylon independence commemoration, Kaluwella, February 4, 1950.



Independence of Zanzibar, December 10, 1963.



Inauguration of West Indies legislature, Port of Spain, April 22, 1958.

vately printed by a hotel. Even shorter-lived was the clove flag of the Republic of Zanzibar and Pemba, shown on the official cachet for the Independence issue, Zanzibar Scott 281–284. Zanzibar was annexed by Tanganyika a few months later to form the United Republic of Tanzania.

### Two Crossed Flags

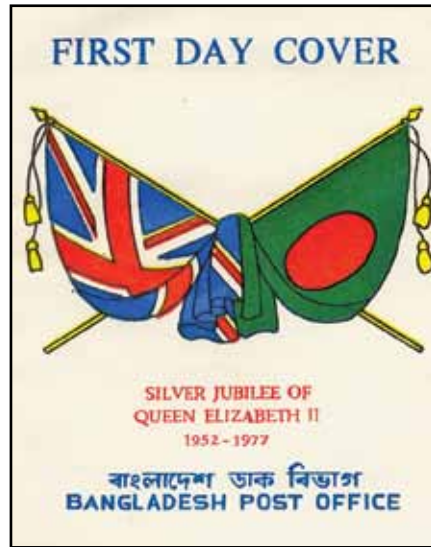
The next most common flag design is of two crossed flags. These covers were often issued to mark some bi-national event, for example a treaty or a state visit. See, for instance, the opulent cachet on the 1957 first day cover for Iran Scott 1081, marking the visit of King Faisal II of Iraq. The next year Iraq's king was murdered, its monarchy was extinguished (with what unfortunate consequences everyone now knows), and its flag was changed.

Two-flag cachets sometimes link flags seldom seen together, such as those in the graceful composition of the national flags of the United Kingdom and Bangladesh made for a Commonwealth-wide series marking Queen Elizabeth II's silver jubilee in 1977. Each cover in the series was franked with the jubilee stamp of an issuing country, with a cachet showing that country's flag crossed with

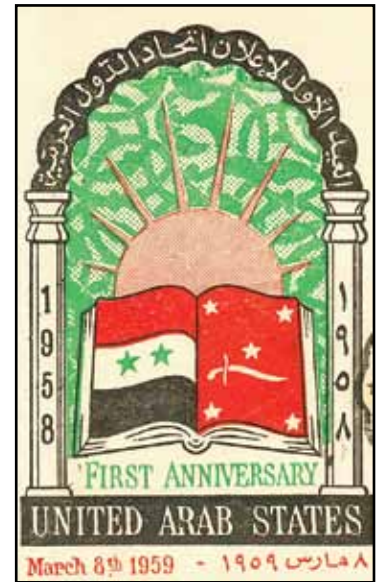




Iraqi royal visit to Iran, Teheran, October 18, 1957.



Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee, Dhaka, February 7, 1977.



First anniversary of United Arab States, March 8, 1959.



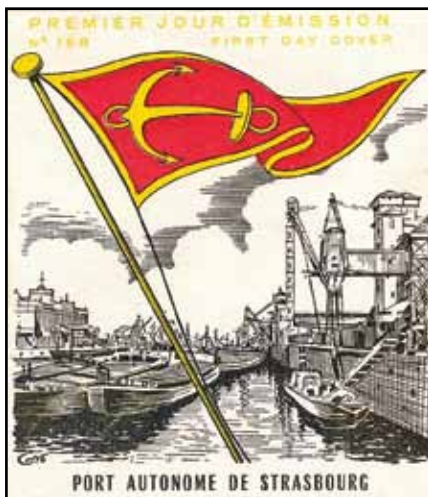
Anniversary of the Battle of Gangut, Moscow, July 24, 1829.



House flag of the British Phosphate Commission, Christmas Island, July 13, 1981.

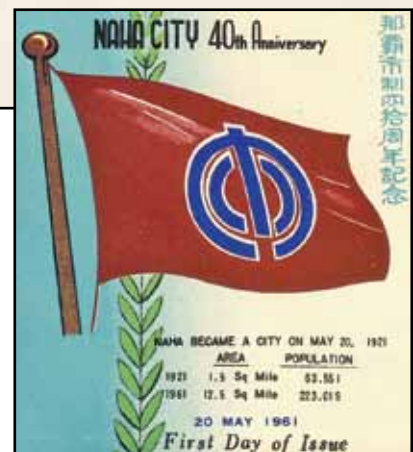


Gibraltar tourism cover with Gibraltar Scott 187.



Autonomous Port of Strasbourg, October 6, 1956.

Incorporation of Naha City (Okinawa), May 20, 1961.



the British flag, and was mailed from that country to subscribers or dealers in Britain and elsewhere. The Royal Commonwealth Society provided the covers for most of the countries, but the one illustrated, carrying Bangladesh Scott 123–125, is an official issue.

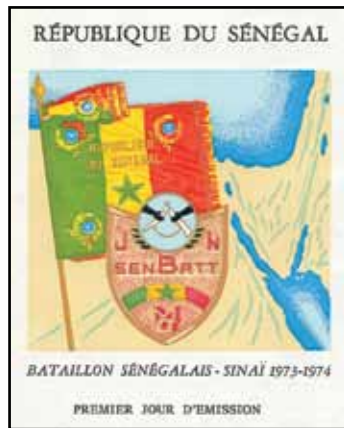
Some cachets offer artistic variants on the two-flag motif. A good example is a handsome design with the now-obsolete flags of the United Arab Republic and Yemen displayed as pages of a book. The frame surrounding the book suggests a *mihrab*, the niche in the wall of a mosque that orients worshipers toward Mecca. The cover marked the first day of issue for Egypt Scott 465, commemorating the first year of the United Arab Republic's federation with Yemen. The U.A.R., itself formed of Egypt and Syria, joined with Yemen in the "United Arab States" in 1958.

The flags mentioned above, although historic now, were current when the cachets appeared. Other covers show flags that were already "historic" when the image was designed. For instance, Russia Scott 5797, a souvenir sheet, was issued for the 175th anniversary of the Russian victory over Sweden at the Battle of Gangut in 1714, during the Great Northern War. The cachet composition includes a Russian red naval ensign of the eighteenth century. During the period roughly 1700–1865 the Russian fleet was divided into three formations: the main battle fleet (white ensign), the vanguard (blue ensign), and the rear guard (red ensign). Although it was not a rear-guard action, Admiral Apraksin's rowing fleet won this battle under the red ensign.

### Rare Flags

One of the attractions of covers as a source of flag images is the chance to see rare flags not illustrated elsewhere in accessible sources. For instance, from 1949 to 1981 the British Phosphate Commission administered the territory of Christmas Island jointly with the British Colonial Office. Christmas Island Scott 103, acknowledging the historic role of the Commission, was issued in 1981 as part of a larger set on phosphate production. That year the administration of Christmas Island was transferred to an Australian company. The cachet shows the BPC house flag, used on its ships.

Other examples include the unusual flag of the Autonomous Port of Strasbourg (accompanying France Scott 809, part of a set honoring French technical achievements) and the city flag of Naha, the capital of Okinawa (Ryukyu Islands Scott 89). This cover was designed for a stamp issued to mark Naha's incorporation as a city. The Ryukyu Islands postal administration operated in Okinawa and nearby islands, which remained under United States occupation until 1972, twenty years after the occupation ended in the rest of Japan.



Honoring the Senegalese battalion on U.N. service in Sinai, postmarked Dakar, July 10, 1975.



Flags of the Trinidad & Tobago Defence Force, February 29, 1988.

A curious cachet appears on a cover franked by Gibraltar Scott 187. It appears to be a not-quite-accurate rendition of the flag of the Governor of Gibraltar (the British union flag with the colony's flag badge in the center). The castle-and-key shield are the arms of Gibraltar, signifying that the fortress is the key to control of the Mediterranean Sea. But it does not follow the British Admiralty pattern for the Gibraltar flag badge, nor is it on a white background within a circular green wreath, as prescribed for the Governor's flag. Also, the stamp (part of a 1967 series on famous ships) has nothing to do with the stated purpose of the cover, which was obviously to encourage tourism. My guess is that this design was not really intended to show the governor's flag, but just to publicize to prospective tourists that Gibraltar was British territory. The trademark ART COVERS on the cover's back flap identifies a private manufacturer whose covers were an enterprise for profit. The cover bears no postal markings, and while addressed was probably not actually posted. The same Art Covers cachet, with two of the same stamps, is found on a postally used cover dated 16 July 1968, issued by the same company to mark the opening of the Gibraltar Constitutional Conference and the introduction of a new postmark.

### Military Flags

Military flags not illustrated in books (except in official regulations or gazettes) sometimes appear on covers, again often the only practical source for images of them. Senegal Scott 414, the stamp design echoed by the cachet, illustrates the battalion color of the Senegalese unit that had been on U.N. service in Sinai, complete with ornamental cravat at the top where the flag joins the staff. Note the United Nations emblem in the corners of the flag — the tradition of putting a sovereign's emblem in these corner spots goes back centuries in European military flags. Note also the battalion's enameled metal emblem, shown in the cachet — on the stamp it can be seen hanging from the left breast pocket of the soldier's uniform.

Trinidad & Tobago Scott 467–470 were issued to honor the Trinidad & Tobago Defence Force. The cachet on the





First Anniversary "Revolution": Burma Scott 172 on cover, postmarked Rangoon, March 2, 1963.

mese party flag. The stamp was issued March 2, 1963 — its purpose is declared by the cancellation banner, which reads, in English, *First Anniversary Revolution*.

This cover would be an interesting subject for research. The flag with a red field and white star was used by Aung Sun's Anti-Fascist Organization, later the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, which opposed the Japanese occupation and later British colonialism. It was the main party in Burmese government up to 1962, when Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party took power in the *coup d'état* commemorated by the stamp. In 1963 Ne Win banned all parties except his own, but his organization used a red flag with *two overlapping* white stars. So why was the single-star flag used for this stamp?



"Hole" flags from the Romanian revolution: Bucharest, January 10, 1990.

first day cover shows its flags. The ensign of the Coast Guard (left), the country's main maritime force, is modeled on the British white ensign, the war flag of the British Royal Navy — note the white fimbriation around the national flag in the canton, which separates it visually from the red of the cross. The other flags are the Queen's color (center) and regimental color (right) of the First (and so far only) Trinidad & Tobago Regiment, the country's land-based military force. The Queen's color is the national flag with a military badge added — this is the pattern for Commonwealth countries including Britain. The headquarters badge appears at the bottom of the cachet. The cover is postmarked Trinidad & Tobago, presumably at the main post office or philatelic unit in the capital Port of Spain.

### Flag-Related Scenes

Cachets also sometimes present interesting or symbolic flag-related scenes. A favorite subject is a flag carried in a parade or military ceremony. A cover officially issued by the Burmese Post Office to accompany Burma Scott 172 shows determined workers and peasants (note the factory smokestacks and field of grain) following a soldier beneath a Bur-



Centenary of the German post office on Jaluit: Marshall Islands Scott 231 souvenir sheet used on first day cover, postmarked Jaluit, July 7, 1989.

I have another cachet with the same flag, issued by a Rangoon stamp club for May Day. The stamp (Burma Scott 146, from 1954) is postmarked April 30, 1968, but the date in the cachet was hand-altered to read 1963. It seems unlikely that anyone would have printed or circulated a cachet in 1968, or during most of 1963 or at any time in between, with an unapproved flag, and equally unlikely that there was an accident or mistake. There is a story behind these anomalies that patient research could reveal.

An affecting scene is that of the Romanian demonstrators against the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. They carry the famous "hole" flags, national tricolors with the Communist-pattern national arms cut out.

Similar flags appeared in Hungary during the 1956 uprising. The cover I have, postmarked in January 1990, three weeks after the flight of the dictator, carries Romania Scott B449, B450 and B456, part of a larger semipostal set. The image on the cachet echoes that on Romania Scott B455, based on a photograph of a demonstration in Sibiu.

Marshall Islands Scott 231, a souvenir sheet, shows a scene of postal history interest: the German Imperial post flag flying over the post office on Jaluit. The stamp and cover commemorate the centenary of the German post office there. Note the armorial postboard hanging outside the post office building, just as similar boards did in nineteenth-century Germany. The Marshall Islands were a German possession from 1884 to 1914, with headquarters on Jaluit. German postal service began on October 1, 1888, using German stamps with a local postmark — the *Marschall-Inseln* overprint was not used until 1899. The 1989 Marshall Islands stamp shows Germany Scott 32, featuring the German imperial eagle, tied with a Jaluit postmark. Unusually for my collection, the stamp rather than the cachet is the main item of interest.



Contemporary Norwegian architecture: Oslo, April 3, 1987.



Championship road race in Norway: Oslo, February 20, 1989.

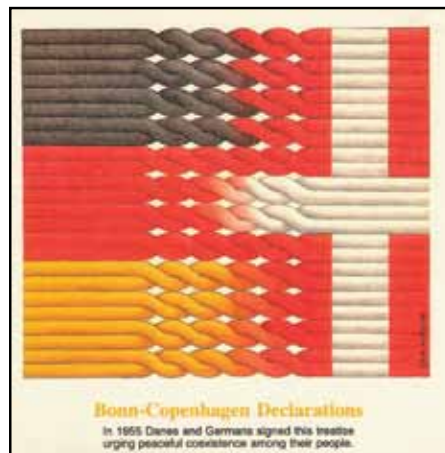


German census: Bonn, October 15, 1987.

## Flag Fantasias

Some of the most appealing cachets show not flags themselves but fantasias on flag motifs. Unlike images of flags, which usually follow official or historical models, these are original artistic creations, many of them very subtle and clever. One of my favorites is a first-day cover for a set (Norway Scott 906–907) recognizing contemporary Norwegian architecture. The cachet combines the elements of the Norwegian flag with an architect's drafting instruments. Another ingenious Norwegian design is a cover for a cross-country road racing event, sponsored (as was the event) by the International Amateur Athletics Federation. Here the stripe from the Norwegian flag becomes a road, or the image could be read as a Norwegian flag billowing in the breeze. The cover accompanies Norway Scott 937, issued for the event and inscribed *Verdensmesterkapet* (world championships).

Germany has produced many beautiful heraldic and flag-related fantasia covers. Germany Scott 1499, issued for the 1987 West German census, features an abacus on which the beads form a German eagle in the colors of the national flag. The cachet and postmark echo the stamp design. Notice that a few of the beads are not yet in place, which gives the composition a dynamic quality. Germany Scott 1437 marked the 30th anniversary of the Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations (*Bonn-Kopenhagener Erklärungen*), which finally resolved the difficult problem of national minorities



Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations: Bonn, February 21, 1985.



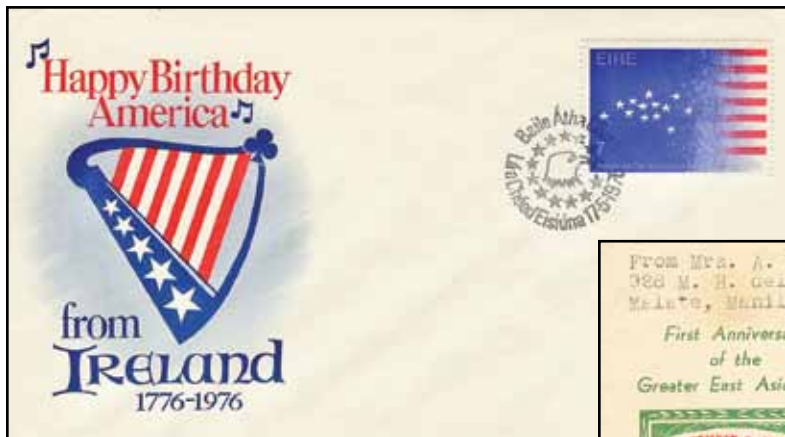
Algerian agriculture: Algiers, July 1, 1964..

on either side of the German-Danish border. Denmark Scott 770, issued the same day, has an identical design. The cachet for the German issue shows the German and Danish national flags woven together. The 1955 Declarations settled a complex dispute, going back to the Schleswig-Holstein Question of the nineteenth century and the cause of two wars, with the simple principle that “he who wants to be a German is a German; he who wants to be a Dane is a Dane.” That really wasn't so hard after all.

Algeria issued a set of stamps in 1964, honoring different occupations. A French company produced a series of first-day covers for them, the cachets combining the stamp designs with elements of the Algerian flag. The especially charming design for Algeria Scott 319 features a tractor driver, also seen on the stamp in a less surreal view. Another pleasing fantasia appears on an Irish cover honoring the American bicentennial. It was franked by Ireland's American Bicentennial commemorative (Scott 389), itself a fantasia on the American flag — the stars are arranged in a pattern reminiscent of the Big Dipper (or Starry Plough as the constellation is sometimes called in Britain and Ireland). Several Irish independence and party flags used a simpler plough-and-stars Big Dipper device — simpler because they did not have to use thirteen stars. The postmark has a bald eagle's head within a ring of thirteen stars.

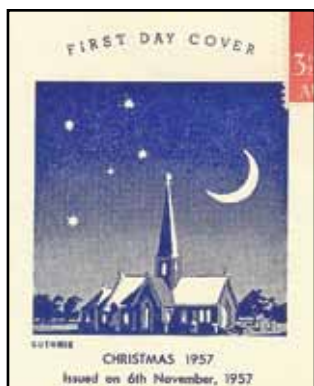
One of the most interesting covers in my collection, culturally and philatelically, carries an occupation issue, Philippines Scott N9. It was sent within Manila on





Irish salute to American Independence: Ireland Scott 389 on cover, postmarked Dublin, May 17, 1976.

Greater East Asia War First Anniversary Commemoration: Philippines Scott N9 on cover, postmarked Manila, December 8, 1942.



Christmas in Australia: Perth, November 6, 1957.

December 8, 1942. On the cachet, the Japanese war flag fills the sky above a crowd of welcoming Filipinos. In addition to the cachet, the cover has a purple hand-stamped propaganda image, labeled in Tagalog, showing a map of East Asia and the adjacent ocean with the Japanese flag planted in the water just east of the Philippines. Another purple hand-stamp says (in English and Japanese) PASSED BY CENSOR / JAPANESE MILITARY POLICE.

The stamp was originally Philippines Scott 384, which said (as was customary when the Philippines were an American possession) UNITED STATES OF AMERICA / PHILIPPINE ISLANDS. The Japanese overprinted the stamp, obliterating the words UNITED STATES OF AMERICA with a solid black bar and adding the words GREATER EAST ASIA WAR FIRST ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATION in Katagana, a Japanese phonetic script, plus numerals for a new value and for the date (on the Japanese/Filipino side of the International Date Line, December 8 was the opening day of the Pacific war). The stamp is cancelled in English with a round American-style dial postmark.

An Australian cover uses the same graphic idea as the Philippine cachet, but more peacefully. It was made for the 1957 Christmas issue, Australia Scott 306–307, with the Southern Cross in the night sky following the pattern on the flag. The scene on the cachet, with the constellation over a church, is no doubt intended to suggest the Nativity scene,



Flag-bearing heraldic seahorse: Edinburgh, January 15, 1969.

and indeed the Star of Bethlehem is featured on the stamp design. The word GUTHRIE below the image indicates the company that issued the cover — the name on the gummed label in the address block is also Guthrie. Peelable labels used in commercial distribution of first-day covers account for the high proportion of covers found with postal markings but no address. They are placed on the covers by the company preparing them, then peeled off by the recipients, or by the company from covers it sent to itself for later sale.

And who can resist a seahorse holding the British red ensign? The red ensign is the British merchant flag, worn by private ships registered in the United Kingdom. The image of an animal holding a flag has a long history in English heraldry and was a popular figure in Tudor times. The composition is ensigned with a naval crown, formed of the sails and sterns of ships. The seahorse has a

similar crown around its neck (in heraldic terms is *gorged* with it). From this detail, and also by the fins, we can tell it is a heraldic seahorse. This cachet appeared on a first-day cover for Great Britain Scott 975–980, a set picturing British ships.

## Europa Issues

For many years (beginning in 1956 with the original six members of the Coal and Steel Community), European countries have issued stamps with common designs (or later, common themes) that change every year. This is called the *Europa issue*, and in past years was usually released at the annual meeting of European postal ministers, called CEPT

(*Conférence européen des administrations des postes et télécommunications*). The first-day covers typically developed an element of the stamp design and incorporated the flags of the participating countries. These colorful CEPT cachets are a fruitful source of imaginative flag imagery. The West German cover from 1961, franked by Germany Scott 844–845, is one of the most beautiful. The dove echoes the design of the stamps, where the dove was made not of flags but of other doves.

### Add-on Cachets

Although most cacheted covers are official, sponsored or commercial, and are printed before use, sometimes a cachet is hand-painted or hand-drawn. These are known as add-ons, and are of course individually crafted works of art rather than printed editions. Sometimes printed stickers substitute for the hand-made image. Unless the overlay pattern of the postal markings discloses it, there is usually no way to tell whether an add-on cachet was created before or after mailing. I have a lovely example from Malta, showing the national flag in watercolor. The stamps (Malta Scott 269–271) are from the second George Cross issue of 1958, commemorating the gallantry award to the island fortress in 1942. The first day of issue was April 18, 1958; the postmark is indistinct on my example, but it is clear that the cover was posted in May.

### Commercial Covers

In addition to first day and event covers, commercial covers often offer pleasing flag imagery. Shipping companies, airlines and even non-transport organizations often displayed their house flags on their stationery. One cover in my collection (not strictly speaking commercial) has the flag of the *Compagnie Générale Transatlantique*, called in America the French Line. It says *Paquebot "Paris"* — which identifies it as stationery of the steamship *Paris*, a French ocean liner of stupendous luxury. *Paquebot* on a letter means it was posted at sea, franked by stamps of the country of registry (or last port of call); this special stationery was used by *Paris* passengers for this purpose.

The postmark is very faint — the date is clear enough (16 June 1924), but the place can barely be made out as New York. The letter probably was handed in to the steward's office on board the *Paris* and then turned in by the company to the post office when it arrived in New York, where it was postmarked and sent on to North Dakota. Although it is customary for paquebot mail to receive a ship's stamp as well as a shore postmark, in this case the printed legend *Paquebot "Paris"* seems to have been sufficient. A similar letter written in 1961 aboard the Norwegian-American Line ship *Bergensfjord* could not be posted as



Europa issue from Germany: Bonn, September 18, 1961.



Watercolor add-on cachet from Malta, 1958.

a paquebot letter because it was marked "Air Mail." Instead it was franked with a Hong Kong block of four (Scott 192) and posted in Kowloon.

Other colorful items in my collection in the commercial category include a company envelope used in 1940 to send a letter, probably a business letter, from the Rio de Janeiro representative of the American freight forwarder D.C. Andrews & Co., back to the home office in Chicago. Note the endorsement *Via "Panair"*, meaning aboard a Pan American flight. Equally evocative is a cover with the house flag of the *Union Aéromaritime de Transport*, a French airline now long since merged out of existence, specially marked for the first jet service (in 1953) from Brazzaville to Paris (via Kano and Tripoli). Also shown are house flag logos on commercial stationery from the International Longshoremen's Association, a labor union (with United States Scott 720, postmarked Tampa, March 27, 1936), and Canada's famous Hudson's Bay Company (with Canada Scott 282, postmarked Edmonton, May 13, 1949). Last in this group is an official envelope of the



Paquebot letter posted at sea aboard the French Line steamer *Paris*, franked with France Scott 144 and 168, and deposited in the mailstream in New York, June 16, 1924.





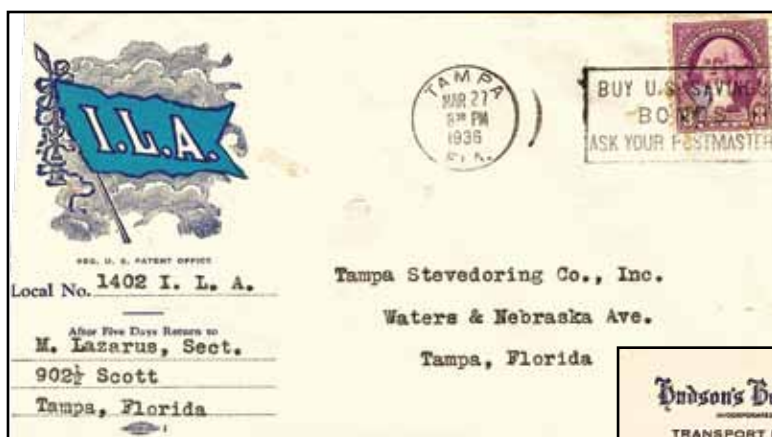
Cover from the Norwegian-American liner *Bergensfjord*, franked with a block of four Hong Kong Scott 192: Kowloon, February 16, 1961.



Commercial cover bearing Brazil Scott 459a, postmarked Rio de Janeiro, September 20, 1940.



Flight cover, with French Equatorial Africa Scott 182, postmarked Brazzaville, July 4, 1953.



Commercial cover from American labor union, March 27, 1936.

Commercial cover from Hudson's Bay Company, 1949.



Botswana Postal Service, showing its seldom-seen postal flag. There is no stamp on the envelope, which is franked *On Botswana Postal Service*, but it was hand-stamped at the government's Philatelic Bureau in the capital Gaborone in 1991.

### Patriotic Postcards

Postcards of special design sometimes served the same purpose as covers, or were used (especially in wartime) to convey patriotic sentiments. The United States has a particularly rich tradition of patriotic postcards, usually with flag and eagle motifs. Shown is a German patriotic postcard from World War I, with an eagle of the type found on German Army parade helmets, and flags in the national colors (*Landesfarben*) of Germany and Austria. Note the Iron Cross on the finial of the German flagstaff. I assume from the placement of German symbols in the foreground, and its German postmark, that the card is German



Official cover, Botswana Postal Service, sent from Gaborone, January 18, 1991.

rather than Austrian, although there is nothing printed on the card saying so. The card is postmarked Stambach (Bavaria), February 22, 1917. There is no stamp, but even in the old-style German writing I can make out the word *Feldpost*, indicating that the card was sent free as soldier's mail — this makes it almost certain that the card is German. The motto *Durch Kampf zur Sieg* means *Through Struggle to Victory* — not, as it happens, the way it turned out.

### Tailpiece

As a tailpiece I include a cleverly designed 1946 commercial cover from Pedro Bruno in Buenos Aires. Contrails behind the wings of the airplane, in the form of American, Argentine and British merchant flags, track its motion as it doubles back and swoops across the envelope. I cannot trace Pedro Bruno, but this vivid and dynamic 1940s image epitomizes the pleasure these designs can offer those who look for them.

### The Author

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World War I German patriotic postcard, sent without postage.



Commercial cover bearing Argentina Scott 446 (the notoriously redesigned map stamp) and 549, postmarked Buenos Aires, November 30, 1946.

Ad Here