

The UPU Specimens of the French Colonies

A Study of the Madagascar, Mauritania, Portuguese Colonies, Natal, Bechuanaland, and Rhodesia Archives

Introduction

Since 1878, the Universal Postal Union (UPU) has required its member countries to distribute specimens of newly issued postage stamps to other member postal administrations. These reference collections allowed postal authorities to identify genuine stamps used internationally.

While UPU specimens from the British Commonwealth have been extensively documented—most notably in the catalogs of James Bendon—the corresponding material from the French colonial empire has received comparatively little attention.

This study examines the principal groups of known UPU specimen material relating to the French colonies and the archives in which they have survived. To the best of my knowledge, five distinct categories exist:

1. Madagascar archive specimens
2. Mauritania archive specimens
3. Portuguese Colonies ("COLONIAS") specimens
4. Natal and Bechuanaland specimens
5. Rhodesia specimens

This series summarizes what is currently known about these fascinating archives, their history, and their appearance on the philatelic market.

Part 1 – The Fate of UPU Specimen Collections

An obvious question concerns what became of the stamps sent by the UPU to member countries.

The answers vary considerably. At one extreme, some postal administrations preserved their UPU collections and eventually transferred them to national museums. Notable examples include the British Museum and the Postmuseum in Stockholm.

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At the other extreme, some countries simply discarded the stamps received after they had served their official purpose.

The archives discussed in this study eventually entered the philatelic market. Exactly how these archives left official custody is often impossible to determine, and documentation is frequently lacking.

Many postal archives have also been lost through neglect or deliberate destruction.

Part 2 – The Madagascar Archive

The Madagascar archive is the best known and easiest to document.

During the early 1990s, stamp dealer George Alevizos dispersed a significant portion of the archive through a 40-page sales catalog. Most specimens remained mounted on their original ledger pages,

One of the archive's most distinctive features is the attractive circular red handstamp:

POSTES ET TÉLÉGRAPHES • MADAGASCAR • COLLECTION DE BERNE

measuring approximately 42 mm in diameter.

I have included illustrations of three Italian Madagascar specimens to demonstrate the format. On the fragment I have of the Italian stamps, which was on the right-hand page, annotations referring to Luxembourg issues were written on the back, probably on the next right-hand page. George Alevisos did not mention anything about the left-hand pages

Material from this archive appears periodically on the philatelic market. Prices are generally high because each surviving page is unique, although opportunities occasionally arise because the significance of these items is still not widely appreciated.

I am grateful to Stef Phila and Philippe Richard Mada for providing illustrations of the St. Pierre and Miquelon and Cameroun specimens from the Madagascar archive; they are attached.

Part 3 – The Portuguese Colonies Archive

"Blood Stamps?"

The title of this section comes from a personal experience.

During the 1990s I attended a Harmer's of London auction that included **hundreds of quadrille pages bearing stamps handstamped COLONIAS** and described as specimen material.

At the time I specialized in topical philately, and these specimens would have been valuable additions to the collections of many of my clients. **The estimates were remarkably low considering the enormous quantity of material offered (thousands and thousands of specimens!)**

During the sale, another bidder competed aggressively for every lot, continuing well beyond my bidding limit. Afterward, I asked a British dealer about the identity of the purchaser and why he himself had declined to bid.

He explained that the successful bidder represented a well-known British firm specializing in proofs, essays, and unusual Commonwealth material. More importantly, he believed the archive had been removed improperly from one of the Portuguese colonial postal administrations, possibly Angola.

This conversation immediately reminded me of the term "blood diamonds," referring to diamonds sold to finance armed conflict during the Angolan Civil War (1975–2002). If these specimen archives had indeed been removed from Angolan postal archives during that period, the expression "blood stamps" seemed an appropriate, if provocative, description.

I own examples of these overprinted specimens on 1925 French stamps, and a picture is included. Additional examples of French Colonies material from this archive have also appeared online. See pictures below.

Part 4 – The Mauritania Archive

Among all the archives discussed here, the Mauritania archive is perhaps the most significant for students of French Colonies philately.

I was fortunate to acquire a substantial portion of this material, covering issues released between 1939 and 1942. These specimens are important not only to collectors of French Colonies but also to specialists in World War II postal history.

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The archive includes issues from 1941 and 1942 released during the Vichy administration, including stamps that were distributed to UPU member countries but never placed into normal postal use and cannot be found postally used. Unlike the Madagascar and Portuguese archives, **the Mauritania archive covers this particularly important wartime period.**

These specimens are overall in excellent condition considering that they originate from a tropical climate. This was underlined in a one- page article dated February 13, 2012, by the leading Specimen specialist and author James Brendon. He indicates that they originated from one volume and that the other archive volumes suffered damage.

As we have seen for Madagascar, three copies of the stamps were sent by the UPU in Switzerland to Mauritania. **The Mauritania officials affixed the stamps very meticulously on large archive pages in strips of three or sometimes three individual stamps.** As shown in the illustration featuring Guinea, even stamps that arrived damaged were recorded (with the mention *parvenu déchirés* ("received torn")). “

The archive is distinguished by its elegant red handstamp: **SPÉCIMEN / COLLECTION / MAURITANIE**

Unlike Madagascar, where the word “Telegraph” is often chopped, the handstamp was very carefully affixed, usually covering two stamps. **Each strip of three is unique and a great addition to a specialized collection.**

Observations

Study of numerous surviving fragments suggests several characteristics:

The stamps were mounted on plain paper rather than quadrille pages. Surviving fragments were later cut from the original sheets; the largest I have (see photos below) is from Togo, measuring approximately 380 × 274 mm. The original ledger sheets were probably about 425 × 300 mm; therefore somewhat bigger than the “ledger sheets” used in Madagascar, which are 360 mm x 275 mm.

- Blue manuscript numbers appear frequently at the upper right and indicate chronological organization within the archive. On one of the illustrations below, we see number 6 for stamps issued in 1939; on another illustration, we see number 132 for stamps issued in 1941.
- Many fragments include references to the relevant UPU circulars or bulletins; the same handwriting is used, for example:
 - *No. 7149/404 du 7 décembre 1939*
 - *Circulaire No. 7657 du 20 décembre 1940*
 - *Bulletin No. 1 du 19 janvier 1942*
- The words “Bulletin” and “Circulaire” are sometimes abbreviated.

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Numerous pages contain audit markings recording the number of stamps present, together with signatures dated **10 January 1951 at Saint-Louis, located in northern Senegal, on the border with Mauritania.**

The archive covers only the years 1939–1942. The arrangement follows the original issue dates rather than later catalog numbering systems. I have made a list with Yvert catalogue numbers. **The specialized 2010-2011 Maury catalogue gives more precise information. Yvert often groups the 1939 with the 1940 issues, whereas Maury lists them separately.** The Mauritania archives follow the issue date; for example, Sudan issued 3 stamps on December 4, 1939: Maury 110-2 (Yvert 115, 117, 120) and are therefore grouped in the archive together. The balance of the Sudan set of 8 stamps was issued in 1940: Maury 113-121 and were pasted on 3 separate pages: Yvert 110-2, Yvert 113, 114, 116, and Yvert 118, 119, 121.

The Vichy-period issues—*Défense de l'Empire*, *Secours National*, and the *Maréchal Pétain* series—are generally grouped together and correspond to UPU Bulletin No. 1 dated January 19, 1942. See for example, Mauritania stamps in the picture below: Yvert 116-8 (Maury 121-3), Yvert 119-22 (Maury 124-7) and Yvert 123-4 (Maury 128-9). Their distribution during wartime demonstrates the remarkable continuity of UPU operations despite the difficult international circumstances. It must have been challenging even for neutral Switzerland to send samples to member countries during World War II.

Part 5 – Market Values and Availability

Madagascar Archive

The earliest significant offering was George Alevizos's 36-page catalogue, and prices can be found on pages 5 to 36.

Not surprisingly, prices varied considerably according to country.

Examples included:

- The most expensive SPECIMEN offered is a group of 28 stamps, Specimen of the United States (some with faults) at \$6250, **therefore \$223 per Specimen** United States (28 specimens): \$6,250
- A set from Germany, Michel #68-77, 78A-81A, is priced at \$6500.

The least expensive specimens were priced between \$15 and \$25 per Specimen, while very desirable countries are priced between \$70 and \$80 per Specimen.

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French and Colonies material occupied pages 8 to 14, starting with a group of France plus French Indochina (Scott J1-5), 78 stamps (some faults or light foxing) \$5000. Interestingly, there is no listing for Monaco.

Scans of two pages are attached, pages 9 and 11. Page 9 features the French and Indochinese Offices in China; the mark “sold” on the page indicates that they were probably sold before the catalogue went to print. **A total of 1122 specimens for \$40,000.** This is not surprising as we know the popularity of these offices in China, and this was before the Chinese boom of the early 21st century. One can wonder how much this would feature today at one auction in Hong Kong! Page 11 is a good representation of the **French Colonies, with prices varying from \$17 to \$120 per specimen.**

The archive also included postal stationery.

Today, Madagascar specimens occasionally appear online. I did not have any success in finding any UPU Specimen on Delcampe. **On eBay, there are quite a few results.** George Alevizos, still active, offers some Madagascar specimens on the original pages. The illustration below shows 18 stamps from Salonica priced at \$1000 (\$55 per specimen). A total of 9 lots are offered, priced from \$500 to \$1000, including France Sower issues priced at \$800 for 18 stamps on 2 pages.

A few other sellers offer Madagascar UPU specimens; I noted:

- 1- 39 Latvia specimens offered by a British dealer for \$899.
- 2- 21 Norway specimens offered by the same dealer for \$842.
- 3- Several Newfoundland specimens were offered singly by a US dealer at prices varying from \$57 to \$72.
- 4- The most expensive offering is from an Italian dealer, 6 specimens from Tripolinia for \$495 (see illustration).

Prices remain strong, particularly for popular collecting areas.

Auction Results

Notable auction realizations include:

- The **SIEGEL New York auction house** sold in their Fall 2003 auction 3 stamps (2c. Hudson-Fulton) sold for \$475 plus buyer's premium, therefore \$560 (\$186 per specimen).
- **Cherrystone auctions in New York**
 - British Guiana 10 specimen (with facial abrasions) in March 2009: \$460 including buyer's premium.
 - in September 2007, the magnificent John Larson Collection of Postage Dues, included a collection of French Colonies of Postage Dues, with Proofs, covers, and specimens. It sold for \$18,400 with the buyer's premium

Mauritania Archive

Because the archive entered the market much more recently, comparatively few public sales have occurred. Again, nothing on Delcampe. Not much either on eBay in current or completed items.

1. **Swiss auction:** Prices ranging from approximately \$45 to over \$100 per specimen depending upon the country. Two Sudan strips of 3 were offered in December 2016, one sold for 95 Pounds and the other for 220 Pounds. Therefore, in dollars, with buyer premium \$140 (\$45 per specimen) and \$324 (\$108 per specimen). See illustration below. A Saudi Arabia strip of 3 was offered in June 2019 with an estimate of 250-400 Euros, and an Egypt strip of 3 with an estimate of 300-350 CHF in June 2024. Both are popular countries.

2. Cherrystone auctions in NY, several results

- German Occupation of Ukraine, 108 (small-sized) stamps sold for \$2875 (\$26 per stamp,
- Ireland 45 (small-sized stamps) sold for \$718 (\$16 per specimen)
- , 24 stamps from Romania sold for \$431 (\$18 per specimen)

Portuguese Colonies Archive

Material from the Harmer's sale continues to appear periodically.

The British dealer who bought the archive at the Harmer's London auction continues to offer them periodically.

- Mauritania strip of three: \$125
- Gabon strip of three: \$148
- Dahomey (with faults), three stamps: \$130

This dealer is offering quite a few other sets, for example, Bavaria (1920), 14 Specimen for \$384. See also his website for more offers (including 15 stamps from Tunisia, faint overprints, for 65 Pounds)

A US dealer offers a 1925 Bolivia set of 13 stamps for \$350 (\$27 per specimen)

The John Larson Collection of Postage Dues mentioned in the Madagascar section also features some COLONIAS specimens.

It is important to distinguish these **COLONIAS** overprints from the earlier **ULTRAMAR** handstamps applied in Lisbon between approximately 1895 and 1901. The latter are generally scarcer and command significantly higher prices.

Conclusion

Prices for UPU specimens vary enormously according to the popularity of the issuing country,

United States material generally commands the highest prices.

French Colonies specimens typically range from approximately \$15 to \$120 per stamp, although exceptional items and complete archive pages can realize substantially more.

Despite increasing interest, these archives remain relatively understudied compared with those of the British Commonwealth. Their combination of rarity, historical significance, and archival context makes them an important field for future research.

Part 6 – Natal, Bechuanaland, and Rhodesia

The remaining archives—Natal, Bechuanaland, and Rhodesia—will be examined in the concluding part of this study. These collections provide additional evidence of how UPU specimen material was preserved outside Europe and further illustrate the diversity of archival practices among member postal administrations.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Colin Fraser, Jean-Jacques Tillard, Stef Phila, and Philippe Richard Mada for generously providing information, illustrations, and helpful comments that contributed to this study.

References

- George Alevizos, *The UPU Specimen of Madagascar*.
- James Bendon, article on the Mauritania specimen archive (February 13, 2012).
- Additional auction records and market observations cited throughout the text.