

Capturing The Ethos of a Nation Through Philately

V. T. Nathan tracks how stamps document Malaysian history



The 10 sen bistre-brown stamp issued to commemorate the 31st August 1957 proclamation of independence.

It is ironic that the most dispassionate, objective documentation of a nation's history, its development, its ethos is found not in voluminous tomes but on square inches of papers that most people either hardly ever notice or even discard without a moment's thought.

The humble postage stamp can be described as a window to a country's history, its people, culture, heritage, achievements and progress. It is a moment in time, forever froze.

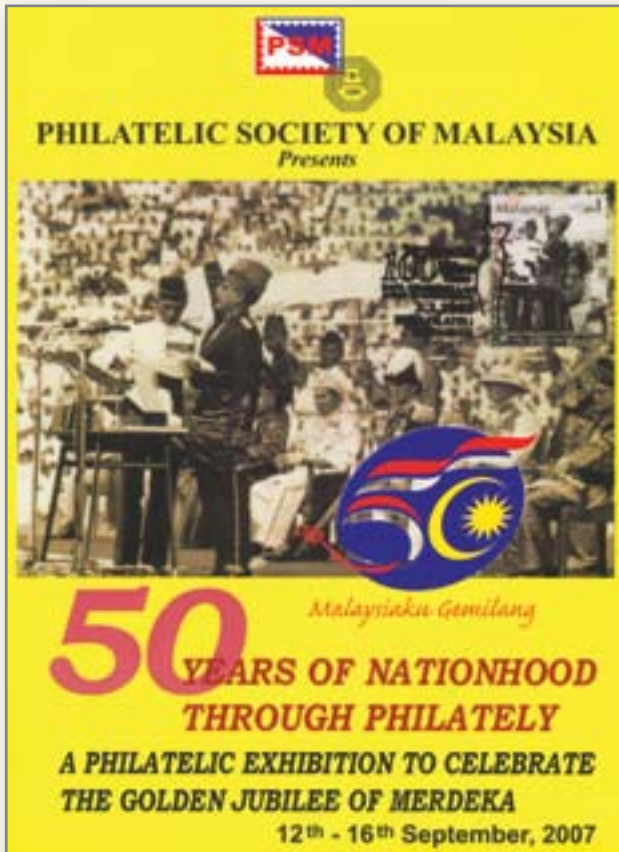
Albertino De Figueiredo of Spain aptly postulated, "postage stamps provide us both culture and inspiration; they give us access to history, art, the customs of different people, we learn about their important characters, we get to know their social and political reality... a stamp is a kind of paper ambassador..."

As Malaysia was celebrating her 50 years of nationhood, her Merdeka on 31st August 2007, the story of her birth, her

struggle for independence, her formative years, her rapid development and her proud achievements as a nation State was all being showcased in a philatelic exhibition organised by the Philatelic Society of Malaysia. It was a philatelic exhibition like no other. Hosted by the forward looking, dynamic Petaling Jaya City Council, it was held at the Petaling Jaya Library Community Hall and supported by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, Pos Malaysia and the Malaya Study Group, London.

Philatelically Speaking

The word philately (from Greek *philo*, which means loving and *ateleia*, meaning 'exemption from payment') refers to the franking mark or postage stamp applied to a postal communication to denote that the recipient is exempt from payment for the service provided. The stamp or postal mark, when introduced represented the receipt for the payment of



inland letters up to certain weights within their own countries. Over time special-use categories were thought necessary by some postal organisations. Different types of stamps for pre-payment of different postal charges came into vogue. Philately has now come to represent a wider field of study and appreciation. It now includes not only the love for stamps but also the study of stamps and all materials related to postal communications.

For a brief overview of what is philately, it can safely be said that it encompasses four basic areas of study:

- Basic or technical philately, is the study of the technical aspects of stamp production and stamp identification. This includes the initial stamp design process, the paper, printing methods (engraving, typography, etc), gum, separation (perforation, rouletting), overprints on existing stamps and philatelic fakes and forgeries, and the identification of forgeries.
- Topical or thematic philately is the study of pictorials depicted on stamps, such as historical or cultural heritage, customs and traditions, the flora and fauna, sports, maps, etc. Interesting aspects of topical philately include design mistakes, design alterations and the stories of how or why particular images came to be used.
- Postal history focuses on the use of stamps on mail including the study of postmarks, post offices, postal

THE MOST EXPENSIVE MALAYSIAN STAMP

From a philatelic point of view, the most expensive Malaysian stamp is the bicoloured 1911, King Edward VII S500.00 Straits Settlements stamp. At the then rate of exchange, this was equivalent to £58.33 sterling, making it the highest denomination of any stamp in the world. Today, this \$500 stamp, in mint condition, is worth more than RM500, 000.

authorities and the process by which letters are moved from sender to recipient, including routes, rates and the choice of conveyance.

- Cinderella philately is the study of objects that look like stamps but aren't stamps. Examples include festive season seals and propaganda labels.

The 1957 – 1963 General Issue stamps for the State of Trengganu



The 10 cents Deep brown issued on 4th August 1957



The 5 cents Carmine – lake issued on 21st August 1957

The 1965 National birds series and the 1970 National Butterflies series general issues



The 50 cents black-eyed Oriole



The RM10.00 Royal Assyrian

How The Humble Postage Stamp Came Into Being...

As the story goes, in 1836 Rowland Hill was walking through a Scottish village when he saw the postman offer a letter to a young countrywoman who refused to accept it on the grounds that the postage was too much to pay. Hill being a gentleman offered to pay it for her but the young woman declined the offer with her thanks. The postman continued on his way, carrying the letter which, since it had not been delivered, would be returned to the sender.

Hill watched the play of events most attentively, suspecting that the girl's refusal concealed a secret. Intrigued, he gained her confidence enough for her to explain that her fiancé lived in London and that they had arranged to correspond by means of signs on the back of the folded sheet of paper which took the place of a letter. Through these signs they were able to pass messages to each other without paying the postage, the correspondence being naturally limited to essentials.

A year later Hill published a pamphlet entitled *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability*. As soon as it appeared, this pamphlet became the talk of the town. Hill proposed that inland letters should be subject to a prepaid postage.

The results of this reform was that on 6 May 1840, small pieces of paper with gum on one side and an effigy of the Queen Victoria on the other, were sold at post office counters for the very first time for the prepayment of post. The public response was most favourable. These are the now famous, penny blacks and two-penny blues.

A Look at the Ordinary

Definitive postage stamps are the regular or general issue stamps. Unlike commemorative stamps, definitive stamp designs usually do not honour a specific time-dated event but reflect the people, their culture, the tradition, the flora, the fauna, the history, etc. These are the 'common' stamps intended for normal everyday use as prepayment for postal transmission, issued in larger quantities than commemorative or special issue stamps and are generally valid for a decade and five years or more or until demonetised. Because of their use over extended periods of time they are often perceived to be too common and are discarded after use. To a true philatelist these stamps offer tremendous scope for study particularly as their inevitable multiple reprints, often have unintended consequences, such variations in

colour, watermarks, perforations and the like making them far more interesting.

Presently, the definitive series - Birds of Malaysia - which was issued in 2005 replaced the Malaysian Fruit series that ran for about two decades. And before that, we had the Butterflies series, the Flowers series and the Animal series. It is interesting to note that the States butterflies definitive reprints were of philatelic importance as they were considered a provisional / intermediate issue and a modern rarity as these stamps were used for a very short period only.

Using the ordinary to showcase the magnificence of a country is not only good public relations but on a deeper level, but also in a subtle way showcases the uniqueness of the country all in a neat package of ordinariness.

Commemorative stamp issues mark a nation's progress. It records for posterity events of significance and the achievements of the nation and of its citizens. These stamp issues are often limited in quantity and period of use. However, they may continue in use for long enough to become recognized as definitive and the distinction becomes artificial and blurred. Commemorative issues represent a permanent record of a nation's achievements.

A Record of Achievements

The first and most important commemorative stamp of the nation is the stamp that was issued on 31st August 1957 to mark Independence Day.



The 10 cents bistre-brown stamp issued to commemorate the 31st August 1957 proclamation of independence.

When Malaysia first won independence in 1957, foreign dignitaries and VIPs who attended the declaration of Independence were welcomed with as much pomp and grandeur it could muster at a small military airstrip in Kuala Lumpur.

Within eight years of independence, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport at Subang was proudly unveiled as the modern landmark more befitting a developing nation. And to commemorate the occasion, the Post Office issued a stamp depicting the new airport.

The 2 stamps issued to commemorate the opening of the International Airport, Kuala Lumpur on 30th August 1965



The 15 cents Black, green and blue

The 30 cents Black, green and magenta

The 2 stamps issued to commemorate the Official opening of the new state-of-the-art, environmentally friendly KL International Airport on 27th June 1998



The 50 sen Blue, Airport Terminals

The 30 sen Rail system / Plane



The Petronas Twin Towers were featured in a special issue of commemorative stamps on the 30th August 1999. The 30 sen stamp issue shows a daytime view of the twin towers, the 50 sen stamp shows construction sketches and the RM1.00 shows a view of the towers at night. A miniature sheet completes the set with the twin towers against a backdrop of the Kuala Lumpur skyline and the Jalur Gemilang (Malaysian Flag).

By 1998, unable to cope with the ever increasing demand for air transportation, the International Airport at Subang was replaced by the more state-of-the-art, environmentally friendly KL International Airport (KLIA), at Sepang as the new international gateway to Malaysia. Again the Post Office issued a stamp to commemorate this achievement.

As one of the most successful rapidly industrialising, developing economies, the signposts of our progress and successes visibly dot the landscape of the country. From the majestic Petronas Twin Towers and the hundreds of skyscrapers that fill the city's skyline, to the ultra modern transport and other facilities, all bear testimony to the country's rapid infrastructural growth, and the Post Office has meticulously maintained a philatelic record.

If indeed a picture paints a thousand words, not only are we eyewitnesses to historical events after the fact, frozen in time like the now familiar image of Tunku Abdul Rahman and his enthusiastic 31st August 1957 proclamation, "Merdeka!" to an equally vibrant but voluminous public response, but also to the nations achievements in the last 50 years.

And as we venture into the next stages of our development, there is one thing we can be assured of. Whatever the achievement or event that will next put us on the map or raise our heads in pride, our story will be told as it has countless of times on a little square inch of paper. [.my](http://www.philatelicsociety.com.my)

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