

Security Features of United States Postage Stamps: 1974 - 2009

1. Objective

This exhibit details the United States Postal Service's ("USPS") introduction, use and development of security features on its postage stamps from 1974 through 2009. During this period, the USPS utilized various forms of microprinting, different forms of hidden images, special adhesives, exotic perforations and shapes, holographics and a combination of the above to thwart counterfeiters and those who might seek to defraud the government by soaking and reusing stamps.



photogravure, November 15, 1974

To prevent reuse of the stamp, USPS selected an adhesive that would not dissolve in water and sliced the stamp with a + shaped die cut that would cause the stamp to tear if it were peeled off a cover. The stamps were printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

Exhibit Plan:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1. Objective (page 1) | 5. Adhesives and Soaking (page 11) |
| 2. Introduction (page 1) | 6. Perforations and Irregular Shapes (page 12-14) |
| 3. Microprinting (page 1-6) | 7. Holographics (page 14-15) |
| 4. Hidden Images (page 7-10) | 8. Future of Security Features? (page 16) |

2. Introduction

Postage stamps are a form of security paper, similar to currency. Postage stamps prepay the government for a service - the delivery of the mail. Any counterfeiting or reuse of postage stamps defrauds the government of revenue for services rendered. Consequently, the United States government designs and produces its postage stamps under tightly controlled conditions using printing and design features intended to thwart counterfeiters. While security features designed to prevent reuse of a postage stamp help achieve anti-counterfeiting goals, anti-counterfeiting features do not necessarily prevent reuse.

3. Microprinting

Microprinting is the use of tiny printed letters, numbers and symbols on currency, postage stamps and other security paper. Generally, the text cannot be seen with the naked eye, but becomes visible under magnification. USPS introduced microprinting in 1992 with the American Wildflower series, the first U.S. commemorative stamp issue to be produced wholly by offset lithography. Over time, USPS refined its use of microprinting to introduce dates, words, abbreviations such as "USPS" and even entire stamp designs composed of microprinted letters.



lithographed, July 24, 1992



In 1992, USPS issued a pane of fifty different stamps featuring American wildflowers. Each stamp has small black dots printed in the top part of the white "29" noting the denomination of the stamp. This is the first instance of dot form microprinting on U.S. stamps. The stamps were printed by Ashton-Potter America Inc.