

Australia in Depth (Article #78)

By Simon Dunkerley © (27th Sept 2003; updated 9th Jan 2004)

Aspects of Philatelic Expertising - Part I

Introduction

The overriding interest in this topic should be that of *philately* as a whole and not any *one* of the interested parties in particular. This necessitates that your views on expertising and the issues involved, if they are to be balanced, should really be part of and consistent with a wider *vision, mission statement*, and your set of *values* that relate to philately generally – and what role you see yourself fulfilling in that.

As we will see, expertising implies both expertise and experience. In that context, it is worthwhile to ponder the concept of *experience*, an area that we can *all* benefit by actively growing in.

It is important to consider the preconceptions and philosophy that we bring into this discussion. C. S. Lewis expressed it well when he noted that ‘Experience by itself proves nothing; is colored by the preconceptions we bring to it’. He also noted that ‘What we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy that we bring to it’. Both of these statements provide much food for thought. In exploring these issues, we all need to consider what preconceptions and philosophy we bring with us. What is your overriding *motivation* and where do you stand on *key issues*? What *principles* are important to you?

The comments made in this paper are made in accordance with what the writer believes as an individual, and are made in good faith. They should not be interpreted as representing the views of any expertising body, dealer body or other entity. You are therefore urged to consider them in this light, and you are encouraged to make your own judgments on how to interpret them.

Whilst *where* you get your items expertised *is* an important issue, one of the aims of this discussion is to focus on a number of the wider issues of expertisation that are seen as important. This is not intended to be an exhaustive paper, rather, an introduction to a discussion of some of the issues relating to the expertising of philatelic items. Your questions, comments or other feedback are most welcome as always.

Interested parties

- (1) Philately as a whole
- (2) Dealers – retailers, wholesalers and auction houses, both public and postal
- (3) Collectors and investors

(4) Expertising bodies – both individuals and committees

It is important to acknowledge that the short term interests of the different parties can clash or conflict if seen in isolation. In the longer term, the effect of various outcomes will merge. For example, if a proliferation of *incorrect certificates* are issued, that can have negative ramifications for *all* parties. On the other hand, if items of dubious status are identified and weeded out, the 'original' owner might not like the result in the first instance, however, it will be in the market's long term interest. All of those in the market for the long haul will benefit from such action.

Code of Ethics

Most philatelic trade bodies, including the Australasian Philatelic Traders Association (APTA) have endorsed a strong *code of ethics*. Accordingly, their members have an ongoing responsibility to weed out and correctly describe items that are either not genuine, or have 'hidden' faults of some kind. As a result of this, more and more items that '*demand it*' are being offered with a certificate, or subject to expertisation ('on extension'). This has been noticeable both at auction and for many private sales.

It is interesting to note that *eBay* appear to have had many problems with '*dud*' items over a long period of time. As a result, they have introduced a strong statement of genuineness that sellers must agree to before listing an item. This places a more explicit onus on sellers that was previously the case. The changes are being 'managed' with the assistance of the *American Philatelic Society* (APS), although I am not sure that they have the resources to monitor upwards of 100,000 philatelic items at any one time; particularly when they are on offer for such a short period of time. However, it should be seen is a step in the right direction.

In a recent conversation with well known Melbourne dealer and regular *Stamp News* advertiser Richard Juzwin, he advised that the next edition of his respected price list will include a statement that certain items will only be sold with a recognised certificate of authenticity. These items will include the popular Kingsford Smith 'OS' overprints, the £1 Robes 'SPECIMEN' overprint and the Papua New Guinea 'D1' overprint together with certain other major varieties where fakes are known. In these cases, such a certificate generally enhances the value of the item and protects the long term interests of both the buyer and the seller. This is an extension of what Richard has been practicing for some time, and is believed to be the first time that such a statement has appeared in a major price list in Australia.

The writer's policy has been to only sell the above items with certificates for some time and an increasing number of sellers are following this important trend. The other side of this is that a number of the items that really should carry certificates are still being sold without them. Hopefully over time the latter will diminish further.

Background to Expertising

The Oxford dictionary defines an expert as 'having special knowledge of or skill in a subject'. Expertise implies having expert *skill, knowledge* and *judgement*.

Expertising then is the giving of an opinion or judgement on the status and condition of a particular item. As we will see, it might also result in abstaining from giving an opinion when the circumstances warrant.

Expertising is an area that:

- (1) There has been an important need for – for over a century!
(The first APS certificate was dated 14 April 1903 – for a Siam Scott #6)
- (2) Should be taken seriously and given the respect that it deserves
- (3) Can present difficulties that are not always readily apparent
- (4) Has some 'arm chair' critics (although this is certainly not a new thing)

Why a need to get certificates for certain items?

- (1) Correct classification or categorization of printings, shades, watermarks, perforations and the like
- (2) Detection of fakes, forgeries or reprints
- (3) Clarification of condition, including the status of gum, repairs, re-perforating, or other faults that might not be readily apparent

Sometimes people *don't know* exactly what their item is. Other times they might think or *hope* they know what it is and wish to have it confirmed one way or another. On other occasions, they know exactly what it is, and desire to have it confirmed in order to give them piece of mind or as an aid in the marketing of it.

The aim of this is to improve the level of confidence in an increasingly wide range of items. *Many* items have always benefited from correct certification. With changes in the market, including substantially increased prices in a number of areas, and a significant proliferation of certain items that are either not genuine, or are incorrectly offered, this range of items has expanded further in recent times.

Sometimes certificates give a statement as to the rarity of the item. The writers view is that a certificate is not the place for this. Rather, it should limit itself to classifying, stating the genuineness of and clarifying the condition of the item. In addition, the writer's belief is that a certificate should always state what the item actually is, rather than stating what it is not, as is seen from time to time when the conclusion of the expertiser is different to that of the description of the submitter.

What should be expertised?

I believe that recognised certificates are a must for many items, and would not recommend buying or selling them without certificates. Examples of these include:

- (1) Outstanding items in their own right, such as very rare *normal* stamps, booklets, proofs or important covers
- (2) Frequently faked overprints – such as:
 - Kingsford Smith 'OS' overprints, particularly in mint or mint unhinged condition
 - £1 Robes 'SPECIMEN' overprint
 - £2 Arms with the very rare 3mm 'SPECIMEN' overprint
 - New Guinea 'GRI' overprints
 - PNG D1 and D1a, plus all of the other double overprints in this series
 - Any other rare overprint and *all* overprint errors
- (3) Very rare variations such as:
 - Important shades – like the KGV 1d Salmon eosin, Large multiple watermark Cooke rose-red and deep red groups and the 1/4d deep turquoise shades
 - Double prints, watermark errors and certain very rare plate varieties
 - Perforations, including rare types, errors and compound perms
 - Certain missing colours in mint condition, including some of the missing red, pale blue, yellow or gold errors – discussed in detail later
 - *All* used missing colours

When such items are offered without a certificate, the first thing the writer thinks of is 'why does this item not have a certificate?' It is quite surprising to see some of the rare overprint errors in particular offered without certificates, as these are perhaps the group most prone to faking. From a *selling* point of view, it is obvious time and time again that affirmative certificates represent money well spent and will almost certainly be recouped plus more when selling. From a *buying* point of view, it should give you and other buyers more confidence in what is being offered.

It is also worth mentioning that some *collectors* have the idea that *everything*

must have a certificate. That is a trap that is not recommended, particularly with items of insufficient value to warrant a certificate. There is no real value in getting a £2 Navigator or a *mint* 5/- Bridge expertised; although if an *unmounted mint* example of the latter was correctly expertised as such on the certificate, then that would be of some value. The aspect of gum will also be further examined later. In addition, the vast majority of mint missing colours are quite 'safe', however, as we will see later, certain colours are more dangerous and require particular caution.

Are all certificates correct?

What are the main kind of mistakes that an Expertising body can make?

- (1) Issuing a positive certificate for an incorrect item
- (2) Issuing a negative certificate for a correct item
- (3) Misclassifying or misdescribing a genuine item
- (4) Abstaining from issuing a certificate when the status of the item is clear

As some of you might have experienced, each of these categories are represented by certificates issued from a number of recognised bodies over the years. Does this mean that all certificates are useless? Certainly not! The reality is that the vast majority of certificates issued are correct.

In the writers experience, it is important to recognise that the '*difficult decisions*' arising from time to time relate to a small percentage (*well under 5%*) of the items put up for expertisation or a private opinion. Most are clear cut – they are either right or wrong, and a decision in this regard is generally relatively easy.

The *controversies* that might arise from time to time are even less frequent.

On the other hand, it has been and will continue to be true that some items do present genuine difficulties in expressing *certainty* about their status. This is not just a problem with the expertising of Australian items. There are many articles on expertising controversies in *America* and it is understood that there are also some problems in *Europe*.

A matter of opinion or a statement of fact?

Most expertising bodies specify that the certificate issued is an opinion and not to be taken as a statement of fact. It is interesting to note that some auction houses do the same with their descriptions. Some do otherwise, and that is their choice.

It is worth remembering that no one is infallible.

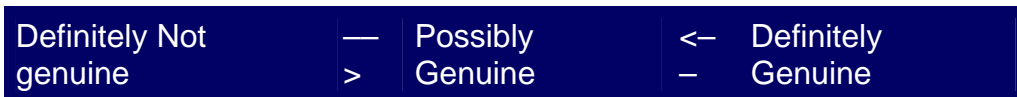
- (1) Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and should recognise these
- (2) Everyone one should operate in their main areas of expertise,

and should not attempt to do everything

- (3) Everyone should have a teachable attitude and be willing to continue to learn

Proof and certainty (v. 'Balance of probability' – for some items?)

The status of the vast majority of items is clear cut and these do not present any great difficulties. However, the tension occurs in a relatively small number of items in the middle area, where there might be some issues in establishing their exact status.



Where do you draw the line? A number of the USA difficulties relate to *rare coils* that apparently cannot always be *proven* to be genuine. Obviously many fakes can be eliminated as they are made on the wrong printings of common stamps, as evidenced by the watermark, perforation or shade, or indeed they are just poor fakes regardless of that. However, some expertiser's and commentators appear to be satisfied with accepting what might be termed 'genuine on the balance of probability'. Is that enough, or should such items be rejected in every case?

An example closer to home: The Robson Lowe Encyclopedia (Volume IV), published in 1962 raises issues with the New South Wales 1855-62 Diadem 8d. For this stamp, the first four shades (golden-yellow in two intensities; lemon-yellow and orange-yellow) were issued imperforate only. However, the yellow to red-orange shade (fifth printing) is the shade group that was issued imperforate (about 2,000 stamps) and perf 12 (about 23,000 stamps). Even though some examples might possibly be verified based on the known dates of postmark usage, Robson Lowe recommends only collecting this shade in *pairs*, which are possibly unknown! This is because it is difficult (should that read impossible?) to prove the imperforate status of a single stamp. That makes it difficult for the expertiser, dealer, and collector alike!

The reality, however, is that the vast majority of items do not present such difficulties.

In the next issue of *Stamp News*, 'Aspects of Philatelic Expertising Part II' will include a discussion of facets including gum, perfins, re-perforating and missing colours.

