

# SOS Signal

## Mise en Abîme: the Stamp Depicted within Itself

By Robert K. Marohn

The SOS Signal is now issued three times per year in February, June and October. Articles and information about stamps on stamps is ardently solicited because it is the lifeblood of the publication. Please contact the editor who can put you in print! Your suggestions and input are always welcome.

Imagine you wet a stamp and press it on the upper right corner of an envelope, and then you check it to make sure you correctly applied it. At that moment you notice your envelope is a picture of the very stamp you just affixed, depicting another stamp with the same image, and so on, a technique and effect known as *mise en abîme*. It is arguably the most extreme example of "stamps on stamps", the *ne plus ultra*. Can you grasp it, can the "hand grasp itself"?



Top, Sc #E20, 1954  
Bottom, Sc #E21, 1957

One of the first *mise en abîme* stamps is the U.S. Special Delivery 20¢ issued October 13, 1954 followed by U.S. Special Delivery 30¢ issued September 3, 1957. Both were designed by Victor S. McCloskey, Jr. and not only reference themselves, but also the 1954 Statue of Liberty stamp (Scott # 1035). McCloskey studied at the Corcoran Gallery School of Art in Washington, D.C., located just

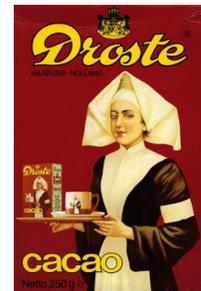
a few blocks north of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP), and joined the staff in 1930. He worked at the BEP when modernistic ideas of anti-ornamentation, simplicity and futurism seemed to take hold and carry through to many postage stamps from the mid-thirties and on. Although not immediately noticeable, *mise en abîme* is an important feature of these Special Delivery stamps and adds another layer of meaning to the deceptively simple design. McCloskey spent his entire career at the BEP, retiring in 1965 as the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee began to commission outside artists to design or modify new stamp concepts.

We find *mise en abîme* throughout the creative arts. You may remember the scene in "Lady from Shanghai" where Orson Wells pauses with Rita Hayworth between two mirrors and is reflected *ad infinitum*. The term is



Wells and Hayworth reflecting

originally from the French and means, "placing into infinity" or "placing into the abyss". *Mise en abîme* is a formal



Prototype of the Droste effect - please see page 2.

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Italy Sc #964 and 966 (1967) at the top;  
below are 965 and 967 (1968)

“A stamp  
within a  
stamp creates  
a world  
within a  
world”



Thailand Sc #1023

technique in which an image contains a smaller copy of itself, the sequence appearing recursive. The concept was initiated in heraldry, showing a coat of arms that appears as a smaller shield in the center of a larger one. It is also known as the Droste effect, a Dutch term for a specific kind of repeating picture. The effect is named after a particular image that appeared, with variations, on the tins and boxes of Droste cocoa powder (pictured on front page). In theory the image goes on forever; perceptively it cannot, continuing only as long as the resolution of the picture allows, which is relatively short, since each iteration exponentially reduces the picture's size.

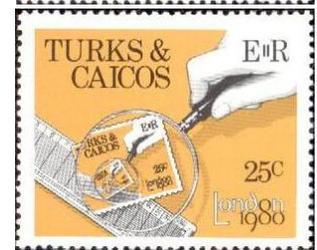
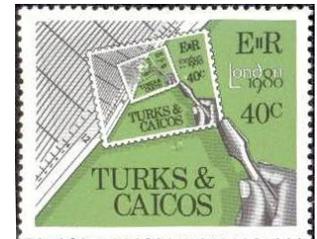
In 1967, Italy issued L20 and L40 stamps and in 1968 issued L25 and L50 as an introduction of postal zone numbers. Designed by Renato Ferrini, the elements are purely graphic and reflect a Swiss design style of

minimalism, typography and grids, an artistic influence which spread around the world in the 1960s and 1970s. The mise en abîme feature is more noticeable in the design of the stamps than in the U.S. Special Delivery set, particularly denoting the self-reflexive nature of representation in general. Ferrini, who graduated from the school of art in Rome and Florence, also designed movie posters including the Italian version for Bullitt (released in 1968) starring Steve McQueen.

In 1983 Thailand issued a stamp designed by Charnya Boonyassakdi practically identical in composition and element. Obviously extending the reference to the Italian postage stamps, the Thai stamp also commemorates the first use of postal codes in that country. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and all of these stamps affixed to an envelope or not, illustrate wonderful examples of mise en abîme.

A stamp within a stamp creates a world within a world. As collectors, we love to examine our stamps under a magnifying glass using tongs. In Turks & Caicos Scott #431-2 issued in 1980 for the London International Stamp Exhibition, May 6 -14<sup>th</sup> of that year, the Droste effect is very noticeable and almost Escheresque.<sup>1</sup> Are you the collector in the stamp image holding your specimen up to a perforation gauge forever repeated in a visual loop, a self-

referential system, a philatelist within a philatelist?



Turks & Caicos Sc #431-2,  
1980

The effect is even more dramatic with a Nepal issue on December 27, 1981 designed by K.K. Karmacharya to publicize that year's Kathmandu Stamp Exhibition. In the same manner, grasp the stamp with your tongs and concentrate for a moment on the image within the image and it becomes a mandala, a concentric diagram within a diagram, representing the cosmos and having spiritual and ritual significance in both Buddhism and Hinduism.

In a strange way the stamp may help you access progressively deeper levels of your philatelist unconscious, ultimately assisting to experience a mystical sense of oneness with the world of stamps. I jest, yet psychoanalyst Carl Jung saw the mandala as "a representation of the unconscious self," and believed

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Nepal Sc #396, 1981

paintings of mandalas enabled the individual to better be in touch with our emotional being and work toward wholeness in personality.

Other self referential stamps include Syria issued in 1957 depicting a man sending a letter addressed as “la semaine de la lettre écrite” (Letter Writing Week). The stamp shows a



Syria Sc #412, 1957

double ended arrow suggesting the process of writing and mailing, back and forth. International Letter Writing Week was also established in 1957 at the 14th Universal Postal Union Congress with the aim of contributing to world peace by encouraging cultural exchanges among the people of all nations through letter writing. When Syrians wrote letters for this

purpose and applied this stamp, they were “placing into infinity” a process within a process.

Next, several stamp sets were issued by Jersey, including one four stamp set on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1969 for the inauguration of an independent Jersey postal service (Scott # 22-25). These stamps are fascinating because they show a First Day Cover of the very stamp they are covering. (Is this temporally possible?) Of course, you would want to collect a FDC of these stamps.

In 1974, Jersey released a stamp where the 5 ½ p stamp shows a contemporary pillar box and also a FDC of itself. Finally, a recent set issued from Jersey “Europa Letters” in 2008 (Scott# to come) encourages people to return to letter writing (thank you, to Santa Claus, love, and family), depicting such letters with mise en abîme stamps. Copy the letter portrayed on the stamp, place it into an envelope, apply the stamp and you have “placed into the abyss” a message within a message.

The small mise en abîme subset of SOS collectables within the topical realm may help us understand why we enjoy SOS so much. Self referential systems fascinate because in some way they reflect the nature of thought, cogito, ergo sum. The case of mise en abîme stamps may suggest why we love to place a SOS next to the original and compare them, or why we so carefully track

the metadata on each such stamp. The stamps appearing within stamps not only commemorate earlier stamps, but also serve to remind us of qualities that bind them together, in effect creating a story within a story. When these stamps are self referential they take on some of the same semiotic qualities of language and mystical aspects of fractal mathematics, yet perhaps more on that in another article.

Many thanks to William Critzer and Lou Guadagno who helped identify the stamps appearing in this piece and Ellen S. Peachey, Danilo Bogoni, and Dr. Francesco De Carlo who helped research individual stamps. If you know of other mise en abîme stamps or additional historical details about the stamps that appear in this article, please email me at [rmarohn@usa.net](mailto:rmarohn@usa.net).

1. See Escher and the Droste effect, a website which aims to visualize the mathematical structure behind Escher. [escherdroste.math.leidenuniv.nl](http://escherdroste.math.leidenuniv.nl)

Robert Marohn manages the computer systems for a global clinical trial company and lives in West Hollywood, California. He is a recent SOSCC member and has been collecting stamps since boyhood, but only recently started collecting SOS topicals.



Jersey Sc #25, 1969



Jersey Sc #101, 1974



Jersey, Sc # to come, 2008

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### Australians Select Favorites for SOS Designs

By Bill Critzer

Australians recently were asked to vote for their favorite stamps, and the designs of the top five stamps were reproduced on a set of commemoratives issued June 26, 2009.

This popularity poll was conducted in honor of the 200th anniversary of Australia Post.

From the more than 2,500 Australian stamps issued so far, a list of 150 stamps representing Australian culture, heritage, major events and significant achievements was created from which voters could choose their favorite. The poll was included in daily newspapers and online starting in March.

The winner was the £2 Kangaroo and Map stamp

issued in 1913 (Sc 15).

Originally this stamp drew a lot of criticism. Critics mocked the Kangaroo and Map stamp design with vigor. The absence of the king's head angered monarchists and the choice of a kangaroo as a national symbol then seemed ridiculous to some people. The stark simplicity of the design was at odds with the much embellished stamps typical of the era.

The design of this 1913 stamp is reproduced on a new 55¢ stamp. "Australia's Favourite Stamps" read vertically down the left side.

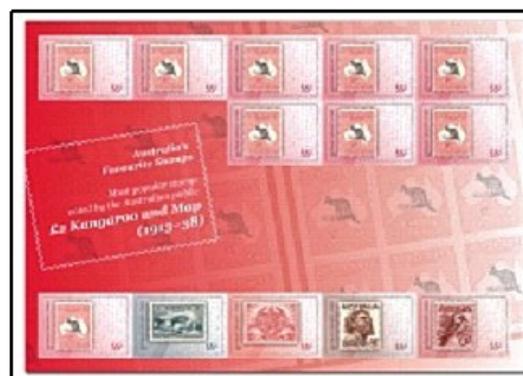
The other four winners in the poll, starting with second place, were the 1932 5 shilling Sydney Harbour Bridge (Sc 132); the 1946

2½ penny Peace and Victory issue (Sc 200) marking the end of World War II; the 1950 8½d Aborigine stamp showing Gwoya Jungarai, nicknamed "One Pound Jimmy" (Sc 226); and the 1914 6d Kookabura stamp (Sc 18).

The stamps include a simulated watermark of the bicentenary logo that reads "Celebrating 200 years."



Set of five 55¢ stamps issued June 26, 2009



Special souvenir stamp sheet

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### 150th Anniversary of the First Stamps of Sicily

By Bill Critzer and Plinio Richelmi

Stamps had been issued in Naples, the mainland portion of the dominions of King Ferdinand II in January 1858. Exactly a year later separate issues for the island of Sicily (also under his rule) were released. Whereas the Neapolitan stamps had featured the coat of arms of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, those of Sicily itself bore the bearded profile of the king. Ferdinand, nicknamed 'Bomba' from his disconcerting habit of bombarding his unruly subjects into submission, is said to have been so vain that he could not bear to see his features obliterated on the stamps. As a result, an ornamental device like a picture frame was concocted to cancel the stamp without marring his countenance. It is unlikely that the king expressed any personal wish in this matter; a similar device had, in fact, been adopted in Spain in 1850 for the same purpose of avoiding unnecessary lese-majesty.

The stamps became known as the 'Bomba Heads'. Bomba died in 1859 and was succeeded by Francis II whose throne was rapidly taken from him the following year as a result of the War of Independence. Sardinian, and subsequently Italian stamps were substituted in 1861.<sup>1</sup>

The postcard and cover

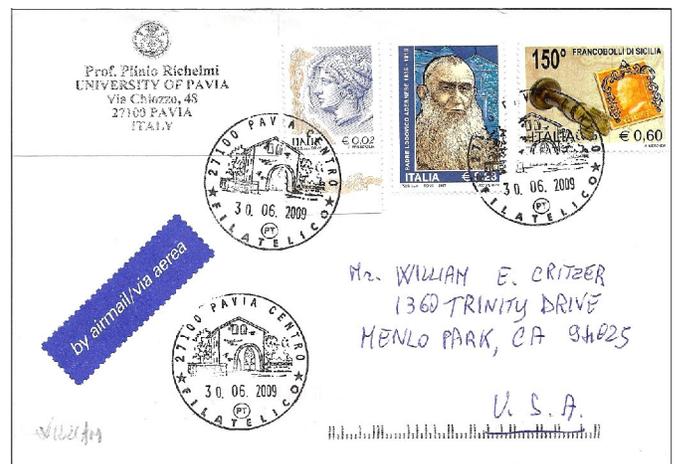
shown have been provided by Plinio Richelmi, SOSCC's European Representative.

The stamp features, on the left, the horseshoe-shaped postal marking used to cancel stamps in the Kingdom of Sicily, and on the right, the ½-grana stamp issued on 1 January 1859, with the effigy of King Ferdinand II, which bears the impressed cancellation. In the background is a section of the customs map of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The words "150° FRANCOBOLLI DI SICILIA" (150th anniversary stamps of Sicily), "ITALIA", and the denomination "€ 0,60" complete the stamp. The stamp was issued on June 18, 2009.

**Designer** Angelo Merenda **Printer** Officina Carte Valori – Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato S.p.A., rotogravure **Colors** four **Paper** fluorescent, non-watermarked **Paper size** 40mm x 30mm **Print size** 36mm x 26mm **Perforation** 13 x 13¼ **Sheet** fifty stamps, denomination – "€ 30,00".<sup>2</sup>

#### Sources

1. The World of Classic Stamps 1840-1870 by James A. Mackay. Putnam's Sons NY 1972 .
2. Italian Post website — philately section.



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### New Issues By Gaston Barrette

<u>Year</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>Dy</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Values</u>	<u>Reason for Issue</u>	<u>Stamp Reproduced</u>	<u>Scott #</u>
2009	06	25	Australia	5x 55c	Australia's Favorite Stamps	Australia #15,132,200,226,18	To come
2009	07	23	Australia	4x 55c	Melbourne Stamp Show (s/s 4v-2sos)	Australia #15 and #18 of above issue	To come
2009	05	26	Bahamas	4x 15c	Bahamas Stamps 150th Ann.	Bahamas #1(block of 4)	To come
2009	05	26	Bahamas	4x 15c	(s/s 4v-4sos) same as above	same as above	To come
2009	00	00	Chile	\$3000	Expo Antarctica Chile 2009 (s/s)	Chile design of #1521	1522
2009	00	00	China-Taiwan	\$5, 25	Modern Taiwanese Paintings	China-Taiwan on label tbi	To come
2009	05	06	Ecuador	75c	Int'l Day of Philately	Ecuador #1403	To come
2009	00	00	Germany	55c+25c	Post Day	Bavaria #1(block of 4)	B1019
2009	00	00	Guinea	3000 FG	The First Polish Stamp	Poland #1	To come
2009	00	00	Guinea Bissau	3500 FCFA	Great Inventors/ Rowland Hill (s/s-1sos)	Great Britain #1	To come
2009	07	03	Guinea Bissau	350-800FCFA	Chess on Stamps (sheetlet 5v-5sos)	Viet Nam #1291,1293, Malawi 510-11, 1147,Yugoslavia #301 304, Virg.Isl.#463-4	To come
2009	07	03	Guinea Bissau	3400FCFA	Chess on Stamps (s/s 1v-1sos)	Germany #B491	To come
2009	06	10	Italy	0.60c	150th Ann. Stamps of Sicily	Italy-Sicily #10	To come
2009	00	00	Italy	0.60c-1.00€	Int'l Festival of Philately (2v-2sos)	Italy #2858-59,2901	2915-16
2009	07	30	Korea (South)	2x 25w	Philately Week (2v-2sos)	Korea (South) #19,640	To come
2009	09	07	Liechtenstein	130c	75th Ann. Liech. Phil. Society	Liechtenstein #115	To come
2009	06	17	Monaco	0.51€	7th Grande Bourse 2009	Monaco #2073,3460,2436,1925	To come
2009	04	28	Netherlands	7.00€	3 Generations of Queens	Netherlands designs of #126,479,789	To come
2009	08	06	New Caledonia	4x110f	150th Ann. Postal Service (s/s-1sos in	New Caledonia #C238	To come
2009	08	06	New Caledonia	4x 20f	150 anniversary de la Poste	New Caledonia on margin tbi	To come
2009	09	07	New Zealand	2x50c+10c,	80th Ann. Children's Health Stamps (3v-	New Zealand #B23,B151,135	To come
2009	00	00	Peru	\$2.00	60th Ann. Peruvian Phil. Soc.	Peru #19,613,984,1204	To come
2009	09	03	Switzerland	1.00 CHF	100th Ann. Swiss Stamp Dealers Assoc.	Design of Switzerland type A26	To come

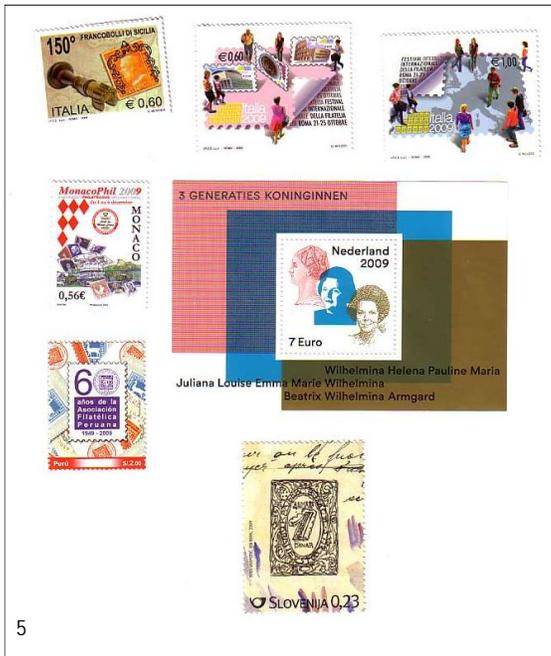


Liechtenstein



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## New Issues By Gaston Barrette



By pane number

1. St. Thomas & Prince
2. Bahamas, Chile
3. Guinea Bissau
4. Chile
5. Italy, Monaco, Netherlands, Peru, Slovenia
6. Czech Rep., Ecuador, Germany, Guinea, Guinea Bissau,



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**S**OSCC was founded in 1954. It is a non-profit philatelic organization serving a worldwide membership and is open to persons interested in stamp on stamp designs, stamp anniversaries and related topics. Dues are \$15 per year for members residing in North America and \$18 elsewhere. Its full color newsletter is laser printed on acid free paper and mailed to members three times a year in February, June and October.

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## San Marino Europa 2008 By Martin Hirschbühl



San Marino Sc # to come  
 issued 06.13.08



**F**or all you SOS sleuths, here is an interesting item from San Marino issued for Europa 2008. The 0.60 stamp on the ship letter on the left bears an Italian stamp design of 1877, showing King Victor Emanuel II. This 20c orange stamp has been overprinted **ESTERO** in a semi-circle in the lower portion and was first issued in 1878 for the general use of Italian Offices Abroad. It is Scott #7. The particular ship letter illustrated has the postmark **BAIA DI ASSAB** (Eritrea). The stamp on the ship on the right is a "Vanuatu Postage Paid" meter stamp of far more recent vintage, so a little artistic license has been exercised.

The 0.65 stamp below has on the wing of the right side dove what looks like a USA letter of around 1920 with

a common Washington(?) stamp, but precise identification has not been made. Get out your magnifier, take a look, and let me know if you can identify more stamps.

I was assisted in my lone identification by the designer of the stamps, Nicoletta Cecolli of San Marino, who doesn't know anything philatelic about stamps and covers, but who is a pleasant, gracious and helpful artist.

The Republic of San Marino is tiny and landlocked, with a size of 24 square miles and 22,000 inhabitants, totally surrounded by Italian territory. San Marino's postage stamps, which are only valid for mail posted within the country, are mostly sold to philatelists and also form a source of income; it is estimated that 10% of its national revenue comes from the sale of philatelic items.

## 2010 Annual Dues – Stamps on Stamps Collectors Club

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<b>City</b>	_____
<b>State</b>	_____
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