



THE YOUNG COLLECTOR

by Joseph Perrone | josephperrone@rpsc.org

WORKING AT THE VGG

This past summer I was fortunate enough to get a job offer to work at the Vincent Graves Greene Philatelic Research Foundation.

The VGG, or Greene as it is called for short, is a foundation primarily functioning as an expertization committee and philatelic library. The Greene has a well-rounded library, naturally specializing in Canadian philately, but it also has a large collection of foreign country reference books as well. The library is very useful for collectors because we tend to be a stingy bunch who do not wish to buy something when we can get a great deal on it. Philatelic literature is not cheap, much to my chagrin, and thus I have a hard time buying it. Instead of purchasing the books, the Greene's library generously allows collectors to borrow its volumes.

I worked mainly with Willow, the librarian, and Lee Ann, my boss, secretary, and jack of all trades. My job title was assistant curator, but I did most of my work entering old auction catalogues into library files. I was given a little office all to myself where I could work away at the old auction catalogues and filing new magazines as they came in.

My favourite day of the week was Wednesday when all the boys, as Lee Ann calls them, like Garfield Portch, Lawrence Pinkney, Mark Stelmacovich and Ted Nixon, would come and work on expertizing stamps for the Greene.

Garfield showed me the ropes of using the Greene's wonder machine, the VSC 6000. It has all kinds of amazing gizmos and gadgets such as ultraviolet lights and magnifying capabilities. I helped Garfield and the boys identify and give certificates to all kinds of interesting items.

I learned so much about detecting fakes and forgeries. My favourite stamps to work with were the 5-hole OHMS (On His/Her Majesty's Service)

perfins. There is a foolproof way to detect fakes or prove the authenticity and even die position of a real example.

The Greene has acquired a set of die proofs for the 5-hole die. There were five sets of pins on a perforating machine that all make distinct perforations. When the original perforated proofs are matched on top of the image of the specimen using the VSC 6000, they will match or not match one of the dies. This simple process leaves very little room for error because if it does not match, it is not genuine. Although some genuine examples will not match up perfectly, it is rather easy to tell if it has been forged or not.

I took my one and only example of an OHMS 5-hole perforation, an OA144 1927 Sir Wilfred Laurier stamp of the Confederation Issue, in to



work one Wednesday to test to see whether it was genuine or not. I was pretty sure that it was a fake, but low and behold it was a real die 1.

I have never seen such a multitude of amazing and bizarre material. I remember that on one particular Wednesday, I handled approximately \$40,000 worth of material in about the space of two minutes.

I dealt with Canadian laid paper and rare stamps from Vancouver Island. These kinds of items I cannot afford and likely will never be able to afford. Nowhere else could I have seen such a huge amount of jaw-dropping material in such a short

amount of time. Sure, if I went to a stamp show there would be some good specimens, but I would not be able to examine them so closely.

Also, being in the company of the experts when dealing with stamps was a lot of fun. They would show me an item, and then tell me about why it was so rare or unusual.

We looked for re-gumming and removed cancellations on one extremely expensive and rare mint item. Re-gumming is when new gum is put on a stamp to make it appear that it has original gum. It is detected in a few different ways. One of these ways is to examine the perforation teeth looking for glued-over paper fibers. When perforated stamps are separated, the perforation tips naturally fray and there are visible paper fibers. If there is gum on these little loose fibres, it will lay them flat. When re-gummed, the perforations will also feel rigid, inflexible, and almost sharp.

Removed cancellations can sometimes be seen faintly under a light, but usually they are harder to detect. Shining light directly through the paper is also a good method of detecting washed-out cancellations. Another method is to use ultraviolet light to see if anything stands out. Often the removed ink cancellation will read differently on the ultraviolet spectrum.

Repaired stamps are easily detected in the same way. If a stamp had a tear and new paper was woven into its place, the new paper will have a different fluorescent colour that will stand out strongly



against the old paper.

Working at the Greene was a real pleasure. Almost every day I would go to the post office and pick up the mail. I was always excited to get back to the office to open the mail and see the contents. We received all kinds of parcels from major stamp auction houses and dealers including Eastern Auctions and Robert Cooperman of City Stamp Montreal.

One of the best parts of working there was when one of the guys would bring me a stamp to look



at and ask if I could spot the flaw or repair. It was very informative and entertaining.

I do not think I will even look at a stamp the same way again. Whenever

I am browsing eBay, I always look for the telltale signs of tampering before I purchase something. I have found myself looking through items in my own collection for flaws and repairs even though I really do not own things which would be repaired or re-gummed due to my collection's current insignificance.

As much as it might sting to learn that an item is faked or repaired, it is better that a fraudulent item come off the market or be labeled as faulty, so future collectors are not defrauded. This is not to say that stamps with faults or repairs cannot be used to fill spaces in one's own collection.

I know I am certainly not an expert, with many years of experience behind me, but now I am a novice with a few months in my pocket. I hope to keep learning this trade because it is useful for myself and for other collectors. ☒

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