

A RARE ARCHIVE OF STAMP DESIGNS ACQUIRED BY THE MALTA POSTAL MUSEUM

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In 2005, two sisters were clearing out a house in Essex following the passing of their aunt. In the back of a wardrobe in a spare bedroom they discovered what could only be described as nothing less than a philatelic treasure trove.

Unbeknownst to them, they had stumbled upon a rare archive of stamp and bank note designs executed by their grandfather. The archive included sketches and essays¹ for 40 bank notes as well as some 270 original stamp artworks. The majority related to designs for foreign countries (Spain, Turkey, Uruguay, Lebanon, Honduras, etc.) as well as some countries of the Commonwealth (Ceylon, Nigeria, Cyprus, Jamaica, Antigua, St. Lucia, Southern Rhodesia, etc.). Thirty of these pertained to stamps intended for Malta – specifically the King George V 1926-7, 1928 (Overprinted) and 1930 and the King George VI 1938-43 Definitive issues, as well as some essays for unadopted designs.

In 2019, these miniature designs were divided into 127 separate lots and sold at auction for an astonishing six-figure sum. This is their story and that of their designer – the late Leonard Fryer.

Leonard Douglas Fryer (b.1891) worked for the London-based *Waterlow and Sons*² – initially printers of lithographic copies of legal documents and subsequently engravers of postage stamps, currency, stocks and bond certificates. He joined Waterlow's in 1906, when just a teenager and appears to have followed in his father Augustus' footsteps who had worked there as a steel engraver.

In 2019, part of this archive found its way to the Malta Postal Museum. An initial look at the newly acquired designs revealed an interesting approach to stamp design of the first half of the 20th century. In the broader context of other stamps in the archive, it emerges that designs for countries falling under the Commonwealth 'umbrella', conformed to a set of predetermined rules: there had to be a portrait of the monarch, an iconic image of the nation in question and the stamp's denomination – all depicted quite simply and clearly. This was a tall order for anyone working on a design measuring no more than 3 x 2.5cms. It soon became apparent that designs

¹ For *essays* read also *designs*. In philately these terms are used interchangeably.

² *Waterlow and Sons* was acquired in 1961 by De La Rue.



Fig. 1

for British colonial stamps³ tended to follow a template – probably one designed by Fryer and / or his contemporaries. Either way, these stamps are immediately recognizable – almost comforting in their predictability.

Stamp designs for non-Commonwealth countries⁴ share common ground in that clearly none contain a portrait of the English monarch and from a design point of view, are perhaps more interesting. There are some striking, if a little avant-garde, triangular essays for Costa Rica stamps (late 1930s) as well as a set of four Brazilian stamps showing bold design and strong colour (all of which were unadopted). Perhaps they were too advanced for their time? However, they remind me of our innovatively shaped Cremona-designed stamps that made their appearance in Christmas issues of the late 1960s.

But let me not digress. The Malta essays are especially accomplished and here I speak of the King George V 1926-7, 1928 (Overprinted) and 1930 issues. There are 12 essays in total which loosely correspond to the 7 stamps illustrating Malta scenes [Fig. 1].

Indeed, they conform to the standard template (with a few exceptions here and there). Fryer's artwork is a joy to behold - his hand is assured as he paints scenes typical of Malta's urban and rural landscape with confidence. He evidently draws inspiration from photographs and images seen in contemporary publications⁵ sometimes repeating a design *in toto* like that of the 3/- stamp [Fig.2]. His style, although quite sketchy (pencil markings and watercolor washes) at times, clearly conveys a true sense of place in its treatment of depth and expert use of perspective.

The miniatures are a feast for the eyes – full of a freshness and spontaneity – notwithstanding (or perhaps due in part to) their unfinished state. Fryer's watercolors move from delicate washes to bold concentrated areas of paint. Note also how the construction of the design is a two-part affair - the vignette painted separately and subsequently inserted into the more formal structure of the 'architectural border' drawing upon the prevalent artistic climate of the art deco style. The ornamentation, in this case the border, is sleek and stylized in keeping with a yearning for modernism

³ Antigua, Ascension, Barbados, Bechuanaland, British Guiana, British Honduras, Cayman Islands, Ceylon, Cyprus, Dominica, Falkland Islands, Gilbert and Ellis Islands, Gold Coast, Grenada, Jamaica, Malaya, Malta, Nigeria, Pitcairn Island, St Lucia, St. Helena, Southern Rhodesia and Turks and Caicos Islands

⁴ Belgian Congo, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Cuba, Guatemala, Lebanon, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, El Salvador and Saudi Arabia.

⁵ Such as that from the front cover of *Malta, The Colour and Life of Malta from Original Paintings by Chev. Edw. Caruana Dingli* which shows precisely this scene of Neptune towering over the Grand Harbour. A scene imagined by Caruana Dingli and copied by Fryer.



Fig. 2

and sophistication and dare I say, “anti-traditional elegance”. A closer look at the designs, reveals exquisite detail – the kind of detail that requires both patience and time. There is a photograph of Fryer as he paints with a magnifying glass [Fig. 3].

I have found no records of his education and assume that Fryer was self-taught, honing his skills as he matured.

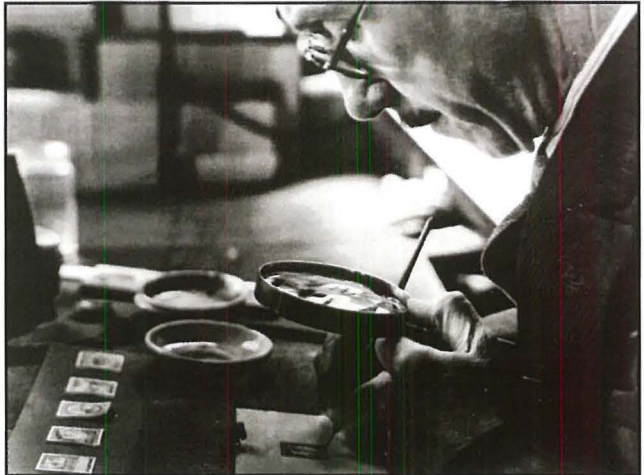


Fig. 3

In those pre-digital days, competition was stiff, and designers would often submit several re-workings of a single design. Sometimes just a single element of someone’s work would make it to the final concept of a given stamp. It was indeed a laborious and painstaking process.

In 1938, just over a year after the new King George acceded to the throne, a new set of Definitive stamps was issued by the Maltese postal authorities. Like their predecessors they made use of the medallion portrait, this time of George VI, and included local scenes from Malta and Gozo. The 10 essays shown here [Fig. 4] belong to that set of stamps issued between 1938-43.

Once more, we admire Fryer’s artistry. In this collection he has included, albeit somewhat tentatively the 8-pointed cross (see the 1½d, 6d and 2/- values). He has also toyed with the orientation of the King’s portrait – is it to be full frontal staring directly out at the viewer? Or will it be a three-quarter view, more in keeping with



Fig. 4

the shy king? Subsequent Definitives were to follow a similar format, including that of his daughter Queen Elizabeth in 1956.

The handsome visage of George VI is conveyed with a few expert brush strokes and appropriate shading in a space the size of one's little fingernail! Fryer is clearly a natural at portraiture. Twin



Fig. 5

portraits [Fig. 5]⁶ painted of his parents Augustus and Emma are almost photographic in execution, using light and shade to expertly capture the very essence of his sitters.

Five essays acquired from the same archive include three preliminary

⁶ Image from <https://hansonsauctioneers.co.uk>



Fig. 6

sketches listed as King George V - Revenue stamps (2 in purple and 1 in blue) and two striking designs listed as King George V – Revenue stamps: Essays for Workmen’s Compensation Revenue [Fig. 6]. These are the 1d in red and 2d in blue. Notwithstanding their fine design, none of these made it to stamp status.

In 1956 Fryer had completed 50 years of service with *Waterlow and Sons*. A typewritten letter from the Chairman P A Waterlow congratulates him and seeks to commemorate this momentous occasion by offering to engrave a souvenir of his choosing. He is asked to notify the company Secretary of the name and address of a shop from which his souvenir (to a value of £25) can be bought. He appears to have continued working for Waterlow’s a few years longer and retired around 1960, eventually passing away in 1965.

The discovery of this archive is hugely significant in that not only does it yield a fine cache of philatelic essays, but also helps identify the often faceless and forgotten designers of some of our most elegant stamps. We are now privy to the design process of these ‘early’ stamps which helps further our appreciation and understanding of what many of us have come to take for granted.