

## Chess stamps – What to collect or not? - A Systematic Approach

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### 1. Introduction

In 1947 the first postal stamp with a chess motif was issued in Bulgaria. After several other countries followed this example, this developed into an interesting collection area for stamp collectors and chess enthusiasts (first catalogue: Konrad Bloch, *Schach und Philatelie*, 1964).

#### 1.1 Chess stamp definition

Unfortunately, as to date, there is not an unambiguous definition of a “chess stamp”. A chess stamp could for instance depict chess material motifs (chess board, chess pieces, and others), famous chess people (chess world champions, grandmasters, and others), or provide textual chess references (e.g. “chess” in various languages).

In addition, some grey areas exist:

- 1) Not every chess-like motif (chessboard-like motifs, chess-like pieces) does refer to chess,
- 2) Stamps are sometimes depicting people for other reasons than their chess achievements,
- 3) Some stamps feature certain species from flora and fauna with “chess” in their descriptive names.

#### 1.2 Legality

Another problem that stamp collectors have to face, is to distinguish legal postage stamps from illegal stamps. Examples of illegal (abusive) stamps are:

- 1) forgeries, reprints,
- 2) stamps from non-existing countries,
- 3) stamps not officially issued by the legal postal authority of a country (including local stamps),
- 4) non-official chess overprints on stamps, etc.

Here there are also grey areas. Especially from the 1990's on, commercial companies (agencies) started to issue stamps (often) on behalf of the postal authority of a country, but their only intention was to sell as many stamps as possible to collectors. These stamps meet the following criteria:

- a) The stamps were issued by a commercial company (“agent”) outside of the country,
- b) The stamps were directly sold to collectors or re-sellers by the company,
- c) The stamps were never available (or only in very limited numbers) in postal offices of the country.

Although, strictly speaking, these agency stamps are legal as they were issued on behalf of the country's postal authority, a serious collector should not collect these stamps. We consider these stamps to be semi-legal.

In 1976, the International Federation of Philately (FIP) had defined undesirable postage stamps and would reject such stamps for FIP exhibitions. The definition of undesirable stamps included stamps which either:

- 1) were not likely to be used for postage,
- 2) were issued by commercial agencies who are not officials of the issuing country,
- 3) had concurrent issues in the forms of stamps, souvenir sheets, perforated or imperforated, in different colours, in limiting quantities,
- 4) were also issued with excessive surcharges.

The Universal Postal Union (UPU) tried to develop a database containing all stamps (starting from 2002 on) which were reported to be legal by the postal authorities of the countries. That seemed to be a better option than a list of illegal stamps as proposed by the FIP, because of the obvious reason that when a stamp is not yet on the list, it could still be legal.

But even not all Western-Europe countries participate, and still several countries do not follow the ethics agreed by the UPU members in 2008. Furthermore, the countries have to pay a relatively high fee to get a stamp registered.

At least some illegal and especially semi-legal chess stamps did figure as (collectible) chess stamps in some (chess) stamp catalogues.

### **1.3 Goal**

The purpose of this article is to provide chess stamp collectors with clear definitions on chess stamps, so that he/she can decide for him/herself what to collect or not.

In this article we apply the MoSCoW systematics ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MoSCoW\\_method](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MoSCoW_method)). By using this method, chess stamps can be categorized from “always collect” down to “do not collect”.

## **2. Definitions**

### **2.1 Stamp**

A postage stamp is either a(n):

- stamp
- block (no different stamps, one or more stamps, perforation within block frame)
- issue sheet/counter sheet (no different stamps)
- miniature sheet (different stamps, perforation crosses sheet frame)
- stamp booklet
- imprinted stamp on stationaries (this category is missing in all catalogues for unknown reason)

### **2.2 Legal stamps**

A legal postage stamp MUST have been issued by the legal authorities of a country's postal authorities and MUST have been used within the country for postal purposes (i.e. is postally valid). This excludes semi-legal stamps (by agencies) and illegal stamps. Sometimes (e.g.) imperforated versions of legal chess stamps were not postally valid.

### **2.3 Thematic chess reference**

A chess stamp MUST have a chess reference. The chess references appear as:

- the stamp's motif
- an official overprint (not a cancellation)
- a motif on the edge of block, issue sheet or miniature sheet
- a motif on the covers or contents of a stamp booklet

Surprisingly, there are only six different types of chess references:

- a. the word “chess” (in various languages)
- b. a chess piece
- c. a chess figurine
- d. a chess board [or a recognizable part of it]
- e. a picture of a well-known chess player or well-known chess official
- f. a reference for a chess event (e.g. Olympiad, WC-match)

A chess reference is either a(n):

- Unambiguous chess reference  
A stamp has at least two different clear chess references.
- Clear chess reference  
The stamp only has a single chess reference, but there is no doubt at all that it refers to chess. For example: (often) the word “chess” or “FIDE”, a chess piece without any doubt (e.g. Bulgaria 1947), a chess board with the context provided by the postal authority (e.g. Netherlands 1973), or e.g. with a chess-FDC cancellation/image (e.g. DDR 1968).
- Doubtful/no chess reference  
Other types that could refer to chess or not – there is not always consensus. Some examples are:
  - the word “chess” (in various languages) does not (necessarily) refer to the classical game of chess, but to something else (e.g. Chinese chess, name of chess flower or chess butterfly).
  - the symbol looks like a chess piece, but (might) depict(s) something else (e.g. a knight’s head referring to equestrian sports, a rook depicting a tower, a crown of a king or queen).
  - the symbol looks like a chess figurine, but (might) depict(s) something else (e.g. a knight or rook symbol as part of a scutcheon).
  - a chessboard-like pattern which (might) be not referring to chess (e.g. a floor, a flag, another game like draughts).
  - people playing a board game, but it might be or is not chess but another board game (e.g. Chinese chess, shogi, go, draughts, checkers).
  - a (famous) person who also has a connection with chess, but the stamp has no other chess reference (e.g. a stamp with only the image of Stefan Zweig).

### 3. Categories

Based on our definitions, we define four categories of (chess) stamps. This categorization may guide (new?) chess stamp collectors to decide what to collect or not. We also distinguish sub-categories.

#### 3.1 Category A

A serious chess stamp collector should collect category A chess stamps. There are only two sub-categories:

- A **category A1 chess stamp** MUST be a legal postage stamp and MUST UNAMBIGUOUSLY refer to chess.
- A **category A2 chess stamp** MUST be a legal postage stamp and SHOULD have a CLEAR reference to chess.

### 3.2 Category B

Purist (serious) chess stamp collectors omit category B chess stamps from their collection (or separate it from their main collection).

A **category B chess stamp** MUST be a legal postage stamp and COULD refer to chess, i.e. the chess reference is DOUBTFUL.

There are three sub-categories:

- **category B1:** a chess piece is not clearly recognizable as such
- **category B2:** a chess-like pattern is not clearly relating to chess (e. g. coat of arms, flag, ground, up to 8 fields in row)
- **category B3:** the word “chess” as part of a saying is not related to the game of chess (e.g. “ECHEC aux stupefiants”, meaning control narcotics)

### 3.3 Category C

Some people WOULD want to collect category C (chess) stamps. These stamps have chess-like motifs but there is consensus that these are not chess references as defined in category A. There are several subcategories (and more could be defined):

- **category C1:** other board games (Chinese chess, go, shogi, draughts, checkers) or people playing a board game but it cannot be proven it is chess (see Hungary 1953).
- **category C2:** stamps depicting people for other reasons than chess, but who are also known in one or the other way connected to chess.
- **category C3:** stamps depicting species from flora and fauna with the name “chess” in their descriptive names (chess flower, chess butterfly).
- **category C4:** personal stamps with a chess reference.
- **category C5:** local area stamps (city, province, sub-republic).

Of course, it could well be that new information could change the category. For instance, an article might turn up which makes clear that the players on the Hungary 1953 stamp indeed were playing chess (and as a result it becomes A2 instead of C1).

### 3.4 Category D

There are two categories of stamps that a serious collector MUST NOT collect:

- **category D1:** illegal stamps and forgeries. These MUST NOT be collected.
- **Category D2:** semi-legal and abusive stamps. Quite some collectors are now collecting stamps of this category, and perhaps WOULD want to continue with it. Our advice is that this category MUST NOT be collected.

## 4. Conclusion

In recent decades, thematic stamp collectors were discouraged by illegal stamps flooding the market. Apart from this, it is not always clear if a stamp is thematic or not.

We believe that this approach could also work for other thematic fields of stamp collection. In this paper we attempted to provide a guide to chess stamp collectors for the 64,000-dollar question: "What to collect or not?". The answers we provide are: Category A: YES, Category B: NO. Category D: NO. At the same time, we leave room for specialists (certain categories C).

Collectors are always interested to know if their collection is (almost) complete. For this purpose, thematic catalogues are invaluable. We think that it would be a major step ahead if catalogues would adapt our categorization.

That means that a thematic chess catalogue MUST list the (sub)category of a stamp. However, it also SHOULD include stamps of category C (for thematic related genres) and SHOULD include stamps of category B and D (so that a collector knows that a stamp is known but SHOULD not be included in his thematic collection). Of course, there could be separate sections for the different categories.

## **5. Perspective**

We would be delighted if we could initiate a discussion among collectors of chess motifs with our article. Please share your opinion.

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