

2¢ Frank Lloyd Wright Color Shade Illustrated

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Color Shades of the 2¢ Stamps

Almost twenty years ago, *The United States Specialist* carried an article discussing a “steel blue” color shade of the 2¢ Wright stamp in the Prominent Americans series (November, 1989 issue, pp. 603-06). Now that *The Specialist* is printed in color, a recent find allows readers a reasonable idea of what this color looks like.



Figure 1. A Prominent Americans 2¢ Wright precancel block with “steel blue” color shade. An ordinary single stamp is included for comparison (courtesy of Wout Janse).

Netherlands collector Wout Janse recently acquired in Germany the mint block of four 2¢ Wright stamps shown in Figure 1. This block of stamps shows the Bureau of Engraving & Printing (BEP) precancel “PHOENIX / ARIZ.” on each stamp. Next to this block in the same picture is an ordinary mint single of the 2¢ issue that Mr. Janse included for comparison.

The first mention of a 2¢ Wright color variety I found in *The Specialist* is in the “Color Variety Report” by Walter M. Sharman (July, 1975, p. 345). He sought information about a “dark blue” variety of the 2¢ sheet stamp (Scott #1280) he had examined. He stated that it fell between “deep blue” and “indigo” on the Stanley Gibbons Stamp Colour Key.

In a follow-up report (September, 1975 *Specialist*, pp. 439-40), Mr. Sharman wrote that the BEP confirmed an ink formula change in 1971 to explain the color variety, which was then becoming more common. He also revised his description slightly, to appearing as “indigo” on the Gibbons color key “with a slight displacement towards deep blue.” He matched the older color as “blue-black” on that key.

Regarding the Figure 1 stamps’ steel blue shade, an article by Charles S. Goodman in the November, 1989 *Specialist* (pp. 603-06) discusses this topic.

In "Ink and Color Changes on 2¢ and 20¢ Prominent Americans," Mr. Goodman presents an exchange of letters with the BEP about submitted varieties of mint stamps from these two issues. We review the information about the 2¢ stamps below.

Mr. Goodman had submitted stamps in three shade groups. One consisted of a corner block of four stamps with the plate number 32062 in the margin. He labeled this as "dark blue gray," to represent the original color of regular sheet and booklet stamps. A second group contained "lighter steel blue examples" with a Philadelphia precancel, apparently from a re-order sent to press May 3, 1977 (based on the plate numbers and BEP reports.) The third group was a plate block of 37696, sent to press later in 1977, "of a third, darker color more nearly like the original color."

In its response, the BEP reported this chronology in ink formulations for the 2¢ Wright:

- 1971 — A blue and black pigment change was made. "Alkali Blue was substituted for Victoria Blue, and magnetic Black Iron Oxide was substituted for Furnace Black, a form of carbon black. This change resulted in easier processing during ink manufacturing." This is likely the change that Mr. Sharman reported in 1975.

- circa 1975 — Change made in extender. Calcium carbonate replaced polyvinyl chloride "to comply with EPA and OSHA regulations, which addressed the presence of vinyl chloride monomer in polymerized polyvinyl chloride."

The BEP response next explained the likely cause of the lighter steel blue shade (refer again to Figure 1). It is informative because the factors involved can also affect some color shades that might be found on other single-color stamps of the 1980s and earlier. What follows below is quoted from the BEP's May 10, 1989 letter to Mr. Goodman:

The changes in formulations do not necessarily account for the range of color variations exhibited by the submitted stamps. Because Black Iron Oxide was substituted from Furnace Black, it is possible for sedimentation to occur in a stored container of postage stamp ink. Black Iron Oxide, having a high specific gravity / density and tending to agglomerate, settles faster in postage stamp inks which have low viscosity. If this ink is not mixed shortly before use, a portion of the top layer has a high probability of being blue. In the original ink formulation, Furnace Black does not settle rapidly, because of its lower specific gravity / density, and because it has less tendency to agglomerate.

The BEP further described testing the submitted 2¢ stamps with a device that measures the amount of magnetism exhibited by the pigments in the ink. The Black Iron Oxide has magnetic properties. They reported no magnetism for the original ink (represented by plate block 32062), as carbon black is nonmagnetic. The BEP stated the remaining stamps had varying levels of magnetism, with the bluest stamps having the weakest magnetism. (The longer the black iron oxide settled, the less magnetic and bluer an upper-ink layer would become.)

Mr. Goodman concluded that the 1975 change had no noticeable effect on color, while proper mixing of the 1971 reformulated inks also had no effect. It was only when the newer inks were not properly mixed during production that some bluer shades of stamps resulted (such as in the case of the Philadelphia

precancels). He wrote, "Although the black was not mixed in, it was nevertheless not omitted from the ink. Thus, the blues probably do not warrant catalog listing despite their interest to specialists."

For more information on 2¢ Wright precancels, I reviewed Horace Q. Trout's monthly columns "Bureau Precancel New Issues and Shipments" in the 1975-1978 volumes of *The Specialist*. Interestingly, on the same day (May 3, 1977) that the BEP printed a PHILADELPHIA PA precancel re-order, it also printed a CLEVELAND OH re-order and the first 2¢ Wright precancels for PHOENIX AZ using the two-letter state code. All printings used engraved steel plates 32574 and 32576 to form the print cylinder.¹

While the PHOENIX ARIZ. precancel block in Figure 1 lacks a plate number, the BEP last printed them with the "ARIZ." abbreviation on December 21, 1976 using plates 32529 and 32575 for a re-order. Also, on the same day with the same plates, the BEP printed a new order for DALLAS TX precancels.² Thus we know of two separate occasions on which the 2¢ Wright stamp ink was improperly mixed, providing a "steel blue" color shade. Normal unprecanceled 2¢ Wrights required separate print runs, with a phosphor-tagging application replacing the precancel overprinting.

Other 2¢ Wright precancels printed from 1975 onward are: San Diego, Calif.; Miami, Fla.; Chicago, IL; Des Moines, Iowa; Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Detroit, Mich.; Greensboro, NC; Memphis, TN; and Richmond, VA. It would be informative to learn from readers if any other 2¢ Wright precancels or unprecanceled stamps are known similar to the steel blue shade in Figure 1.

The Pitfalls of Color Perception

When discussing the subject of color and stamps, we must keep in mind that this is a subjective area. Among us, we can observe the same colors and yet see variances, based on physiological differences alone. Along the continuum of differences, we even have a name for it: color blindness, which affects some in the population to varying degrees.

If that wasn't enough of a hurdle to "getting on the same page" when discussing a color shade, color representation in print or display screens is also problematic. Only with top-quality equipment and great care in capture, storage and rendition processes will an object's color be accurately reflected on a computer screen or printed page. One practice that helps to overcome these limitations is to have a color "control" example in the same image, such as in Figure 1. Showing a contrast of two shades is usually helpful, since completely accurate representation is rarely achieved.

Apparent color is also affected by the physical conditions under which it is observed, including the type and intensity of light (sunlight, incandescent or fluorescent light, etc.). And when discussing a paper artifact such as stamps, main factors such as age, condition, stamp paper used and previous exposure to light and heat all affect the quality of ink color and appearance.

Beyond touching on these basics, color perception is too involved a subject to address adequately here. For more detailed information about the challenges of color perception, consult any reputable encyclopedia or reference work dealing primarily with the subject of color.

References

1. Horace Q. Trout, "Bureau Precancel New Issues and Shipments," *The United States Specialist*, Vol. 58, No. 10, (October, 1977), pp. 476-77.
2. Horace Q. Trout, "Bureau Precancel New Issues and Shipments," *The United States Specialist*, Vol. 58, No. 5 (May, 1977) pp. 216-17.