

The Philately of the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games

Objective

The purpose of this one frame traditional exhibit is to present the stamp issues, uses and promotional cancellations issued for the 1920 Olympic games, held at Antwerp, Belgium. The 1920 Olympics were the first to take place after the cessation of World War. The 1916 Olympics had been scheduled to take place in Germany, but the Games were cancelled because of the war. In April 1919, the Olympic Committee, made the late decision to award the games to the city of Antwerp, in recognition of the suffering experienced by Belgium during the war. The Games are interesting philatelically because Belgium was both the second country in Olympic history to issue stamps for the Games & the first to make extensive use of promotional cancellations. Material presented covers the period from May 20, 1920 (the date that the stamps were first on sale) through January 15, 1921 (when they were invalidated for sale) with emphasis on promotional cancellations and their varieties, along with additional ephemera. Original research is shown in blue, mostly from Belgium State Archives documentation. Better items are highlighted with red borders.

Scope

This exhibit spans the period May 20, 1920 - the date they were first offered for sale - through January 15, 1921 - the date that the stamps were invalidated for sale.

Philatelic Importance

The stamps issued for the Antwerp Olympics were only the second series of stamps issued for an Olympic Games. They were originally issued with a 5 centieme surcharge designated to support wounded Belgian soldiers. Over three million stamps were produced cumulatively, but the public did not like the stamp and only 10% of the issue was sold to the public. This makes finding usages of the stamps on cover challenging. The stamps are most often found poorly centred because of the American Bank Note Company's practice of manually positioning sheets on their perforators. The promotional cancellations also range from common to extremely rare.

Challenge

Assembling this exhibit has taken over ten years. Because only 10% of the original three million stamps were sold, finding these stamps on cover is extremely challenging. Similarly, there is an acute lack of production material available to philatelists. No essays, progressive or colour die proofs are known to exist. The die proofs shown in this exhibit are rare. The exhibit contains cancellations, varieties, post cards and ephemera which are also rare.

Original Research

This exhibit contains original research conducted at The Belgian National Archive. Original research in printed in blue.

Condition

The condition of the material in this exhibit ranges from very fine to excellent. Given the relative scarcity of some of the material displayed, it is doubtful whether a similar exhibit could be assembled.



Printing Error – 15 c with partial reversed image on the gum side.

Exhibit Plan

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Antwerp 1920 Olympic Travel Pass issued to American Athlete Joseph Bernard Pearman, Pearman was the Silver Medalist in the 10-kilometre walk. The card is cancelled with an Antwerp Central Station Parcel Post Cancel.



Section I: The History of the Event

The Games were opened on August 14, 1920 and closed on September 12, 1920. Twenty-nine nations took part with a total of 2,626 athletes participating in 22 sports. Three Olympic symbols made their first appearance at the Antwerp Olympic Games. These included the Olympic flag, the administering of the Olympic oath to the gathered athletes and the presentation of medals.

Anti-German sentiment ran very high, and the Belgian Olympic Committee made the decision to exclude all members of the Central Powers. This decision certainly was aimed at increasing their embarrassment at The Spa Diplomatic Conference which was held in Belgium during July of 1920.



Cover to the Spa Diplomatic Conference Commission on Reparations with Bruxelles Nd machine cancel and postman's personal sorting mark '147



The Games were opened by King Albert of Belgium on August 20, 1920 (1919 10Fr. "Tin Hat" King Albert Issue)

To aid in publicizing the Games, the Belgian government issued three commemorative semi-postal stamps, with the surcharge to benefit wounded Belgian veterans. Because the Antwerp printing house was used as a supply depot destroyed during the war it was unable to carry out the order. A competition for the design was held, with the contract awarded to The American Bank Note Company. There is no record of the designer or the engraver of the issue.

5 million copies of each stamp (5c, 10c and 15c) were ordered at a price of \$7,500. This was eventually increased to 10 million stamps, when a 10% discount was offered. The 3 million stamps were delivered by ship during April and May 1919. ABN records provided only the information noted here.



Plate strip of 5c stamps, with plate number (A2), issue number (F-6428) and deposit year (1920)



Die Proof of the 5c stamp (printed on cardstock)
One of ten known



Die Proof of the 15c stamps (printed on cardstock)
One of ten known



5c+5c Discus Thrower
Perf. 12x12 *and* imperforate
After *The Discobolus of Myron* -
The Vatican Museum
Quantity printed: 774,524
Quantity sold: 134,524

10c+5c Charioteer
Perf. 12x12 *and* imperforate
Quantity printed: 1,462,393
Quantity sold: 472,393

15c+5c The Marathon Runner
Perf. 12x12 *and* imperforate
Quantity printed: 1,076,655
Quantity sold: 406,655

They were placed on sale on May 20, 1920 and invalidated for sale on January 15, 1921
450 imperforate sets were produced. 300 were distributed to Belgian dignitaries.
150 were held in the ABN Archives and were released for sale when this was liquidated.

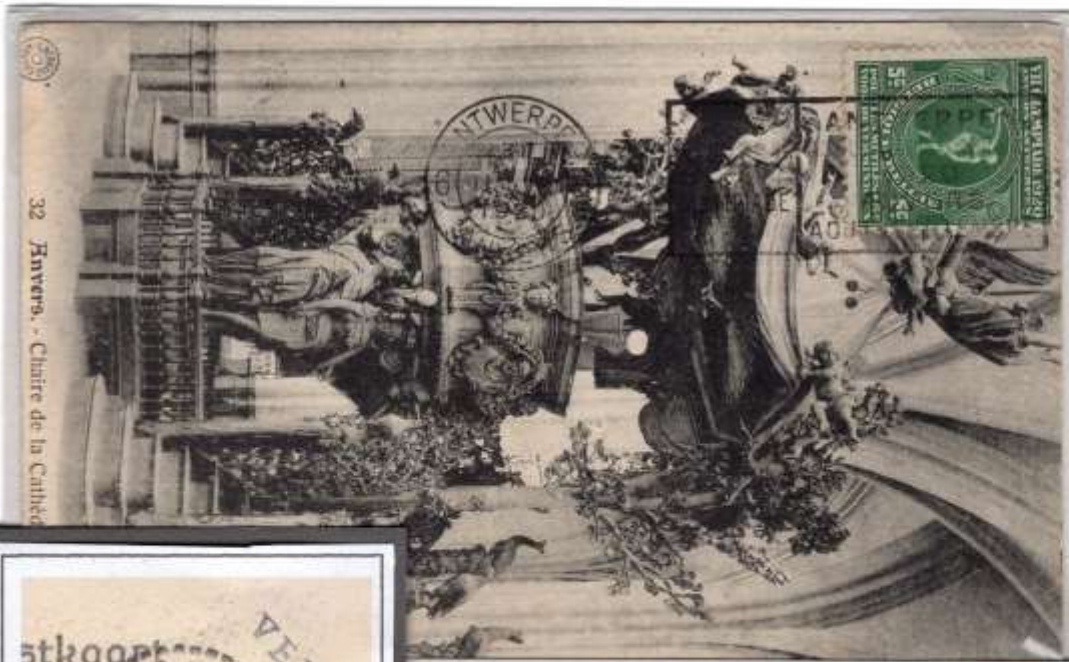
IV. Foreign Usages

a Properly sanctioned UPU Usages

When the stamps were issued on May 20, 1920 they were not valid for use on international mail according to United Postal Union regulations, which forbid the use of commemoratives on international mail. Following the UPU Conference in Madrid, on August 1, 1920, the stamps were authorized for use on mail destined for France, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. On October 16, 1920, the list was expanded to allow use on mail to Italy, Japan, the United States and Australia.



Set of three Olympic issue stamps, stamped SPECIMEN for UPU use following August 1, 1920



August 13, 1920 usage to France, with ANTWERPEN 6 promotional cancel



August 28, 1920 usage to France containing all three Olympic issues.





July 28, 1920 Registered Cover to Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Pre-1920 UPU Conference. Unauthorized use, to an unsanctioned destination. 5c Postage Due mark in red.



November 2, 1920. Illegal usage to Porto Alegre, Brazil. Not a sanctioned destination. One of one known

To make the public more aware of the forthcoming Olympic Games, the Belgian Post Office created a series of machine cancellations to advertise them. These cancellations were introduced at 10 post offices in five major cities – Antwerp, Brussels, Charleroy, Gent and Liege – for use between June and September 1920. The advertising cancels were bilingual, issued in French and Flemish, but the order in which the languages appeared varied depending location of the city.



Cancellations in the Flemish speaking north had Flemish as the top language and French below.
 ANTWERPEN 1
 09/23/1920
 Last day of use.



Cancellations in the French speaking south had French as the top language and Dutch below.
 BRUSSEL (Q.L.)
 06/21/1920
 First day of use.

The chart below details the number of post offices in each city which issued promotional cancellations

Index	First day of use	Last day of use	Total # days recorded	Rarity
ANTWERPEN 1	June 10, 1920	September 23, 1920	86	2.5
ANTWERPEN 6	June 17, 1920	September 23, 1920	98	1
BRUXELLES 1	June 22, 1920	September 20, 1920	90	2.5
BRUXELLES (Q.L.)	June 21, 1920	September 18, 1920	89	1
BRUXELLES (MIDI)	June 22, 1920	September 24, 1920	94	1.5
BRUXELLES (ND)	June 21, 1920	September 16, 1920	87	1
CHARLEROY	June 22, 1920	September 27, 1920	97	5
GENT 1	June 26, 1920	September 22, 1920	78	20
GENT 3	June 23, 1920	September 23, 1920	92	3.5
LIEGE	June 11, 1920	September 23, 1920	104	2.5

The rarity numbers shown above come from a census conducted in 2016 by Laurentz Jonker. The rarity numbers shown indicate the average of the total number of cancels known divided by those known from individual post offices. There has been much written about the reason for the wide range in scarcity of the ten cancellations. It has been conjectured that the rarity stems from the small number of Olympic events located in Gent (one event) and Charleroy (no events). Research that I have conducted in the Belgian Archives proves that the scarcity is a result of the importance of the various post offices in each city. GENT 1 was the head administrative office while GENT 3 was more centrally located at the South Railway Station. The amount of mail posted through Gent 1 was 38.7% less than that posted through Gent 3. Similar statistics can be found for the administrative offices in BRUXELLES 1 and ANTWERPEN 1.



Postal card to Gent with 10c and 15 c issues
06/09/1920
With Gent 3 cancel and Gent 1 receiving mark



Variety: 'SEPTEMB.' mis-abbreviated as SEPTEMS.'



08/12/1920 ANTWERPEN 1

Day 45 of 86 in use.

ANTWERPEN 6:



06/17/1920 ANTWERPEN 6

Day 1 of 98 in use.
First day of use.

IV. - BRUXELLES (Q.L.):



BRUXELLES (Q.L.) Cancel with Antwerp Olympic Advertising Vignette (Rare on piece).

07/27/1920 BRUXELLES (Q.L.) Day 37 of 89 in use.

BRUXELLES (Q.L.): Rare use of an Olympic Advertising cancel on a lettercard - Less than 100 known



06/30/1920 BRUXELLES (Q.L.) Day 10 of 89 in use.

V. - BRUXELLES (MIDI):



06/22/ 1920 BRUXELLES (MIDI) Day 1 of 94 in use
First day of use..

V. - BRUXELLES (Nd):



Variety: Roman numeral for the day, rather than an Arabic numeral.

06/11?/1920 BRUXELLES (Nd) Day 52(?) of 87 in use.

IV. - BRUXELLES 1:



Variety: BRUSSEL misspelled as BRUSLL



08/ 25/1920 BRUXELLES 1 Day 61 of 90 in use.

V. - CHARLEROY 1: Used as a receiving mark



06/21/1920 CHARLEROY 1 Day 0 of 97 in use.

Earliest known use.

V - GENT 1 - One of thirteen known



07/29/1920 GENT 1 Day 34 of 78 in use.

V - GENT 3



09/10/1920 GENT 3 Day 80 of 92 in use.

LIEGE 1 - Opening Day of the Olympics Cancellation. One of ten known.



08/14/1920 LIEGE 1 Day 65 of 104 in use.

LIEGE 1: Cover to Bruxelles with roller cancel and Olympic Vignette (Rare used on cover)



09/04/1920 LIEGE 1 Day 86 of 104 in use.

VI. The Circular Date Stamp

VI. – The Circular Date Stamp – One of fifteen known

Of all the cancellations issued for the Antwerp Olympics, the scarcest of all is the circular date stamp available only at the temporary post office opened in the Olympic Stadium. This office was open only from August 14 to September 15, 1920, for a total of 33 days. Only fifteen of these CDS's are known to exist.



09/09/1920 Day 27 of 33 in use

Postal Card with Circular Date Stamp available only at the Olympic Stadium during the Games.



10c issue with the Olympic Stadium CDS

VII. Epilogue: The 1921 overprints

The Olympic Issue stamps were invalidated for sale on January 15, 1921. They were overprinted at 20c and placed on sale offered for sale beginning March 5, 1921. They were invalidated for sale on January 5, 1931.



Plate strip of 5c stamps overprinted at 20c, with plate number (A2), issue number (F-6248) and deposit year (1920)



5c issue overprinted at 20c

10c issue overprinted at 20c

15c issue overprinted at 20c



03/02/31 Cover to Germany with misplaced overprint on four 20c issues. Cancelled 56 days after the stamps were invalidated.