



MINI MAIL

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In another Mini Experience exclusive, we take a look at a new Australian stamp about to be released – featuring a Mini.

One of the most taken-for-granted items in every day use is the humble postage stamp. Yet, around the world, millions of people enjoy stamp collecting for fun and profit. With the imminent release of Australia's latest stamp series, featuring a Mini, I thought it might be interesting to peek into the world of the philatelist.

The next time you go to put a stamp on a letter, perhaps pause for a moment to think what has gone into the design of that stamp, and whether it might ever be worth more than the fifty cents you paid for it.

Stamps have a fascinating history, since the first government-issue stamp, England's Penny Black, was released in May 1840.

Stamps and letters have been linked to some of the great events in history. In 1900, when Boer soldiers surrounded the city of Mafeking, couriers risked their lives at night to carry letters through the lines. When the supply of stamps ran out, new ones were printed featuring the portrait of the town's garrison commander, Major-General Baden-Powell – who later went on to form the Boy Scout movement.

In times of civil war, rebellious states often form their own postal service, such as that of the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War.

Likewise, during the Spanish Civil War, both sides issued their own stamps, while even Biafra had its own stamps for about a year.

Stamps are also released to celebrate special occasions, such as coronations, national anniversaries, or visits by heads-of-state.

Not surprisingly, stamps, and indeed all forms of postal history, including letters, postcards, and even postmarks, have become collectable. The collecting of stamps and postal history is termed philately, and the collectors are called philatelists.

While most people get into collecting as an enjoyable pastime, serious philatelists delve deeply into the technical aspects of stamps. And there is serious money involved.

Three factors contribute to a stamp's value - quality, rarity and demand. The Penny Black is well sought-after because it was the world's first official stamp, and it was only produced for about seven months. But enough survive for it still to be quite common.

At present, the world's most valuable stamp is an "Error of colour" from Sweden. It was bought by a consortium for 3,000,000 Swiss Francs. Incredibly, two entire books have been devoted to its history.

The record price paid for an Australian stamp was set this year, at \$18,400, but Melbourne firm Prestige Philately recently sold two specialist pieces for \$150,000 each.

For the most part, modern stamps are not worth as much as older issues, due simply to the enormous numbers that are produced.

But again, rarity plays a part and misprinted stamps with missing colours or faults in the design which are later rectified, make most stamps worth far more than their face value. Mongolia recently released a series of stamps celebrating successful Formula 1 Ferraris (strange, but true). However, a printing error on the first edition meant that one of the cars appeared twice.

Philately is such big business the world over, that most countries' postal services, including Australia Post, have dedicated philatelic departments. Some states and countries actually derive a major part of their income from philatelic sales.

These departments are responsible for supplying specialised products, such as first-day covers (envelopes with commemorative designs, and the featured stamp, postmarked on the first day of issue) and commemorative booklets.

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This stamp recently sold for \$18,400.



Melinda Coombes with the final design of the Mini stamp - being released this August.