OUT OF THE VAULT  BY  CHERYL GANZ AND DANIEL PIAZZA

Production processes revealed in Postmaster General’s Collection

By Daniel Piazza

The Postmaster General’s Collection of the United States Postal Service began in the 1860s and has become a one-of-a-kind philatelic resource with unusual, rare and unique holdings. It contains original artwork for rejected and approved stamp designs, stamps in full panes dating from the 19th century, color proofs, uncut press sheets, and historic artifacts like the mail pouch the Apollo 15 astronauts carried to the moon.

Since 2010, it has been on long-term loan to the Smithsonian National Postal Museum. In particular, the FPM Collection is rich in die proofs. Some are color trials: impressions of the same engraving in different colors.

Others are progressives, showing the vignette without lettering, and vice versa.

These proofs demonstrate how different colors and the presence or absence of text can convey different meanings.

The practice of preparing a die proof for the postmaster general’s approval continued long after engraving ceased to be the dominant method of stamp production. It survived the transition to private printers, and continues to this day. Many of these die proofs are for stamps printed by photographic processes, for which no engraved die ever existed. They have been cut and mounted on a card counter.

This trial color proof from the Postmaster General’s Collection shows the 25¢ Frederick Douglass stamp from the 1965-78 Prominent Americans series in a handsome purple shade; the stamp was issued in magenta instead.

tersunk to resemble a true large die proof.

Since few die proofs later than the early 1960s are in private hands, this is all never-before-seen material.

A proof of the “Amedeo” spelling error on the 21¢ Amadeo P. Giannini stamp from the Prominent Americans series. The error made it all the way to the postmaster general—who approved it for printing—before it was discovered and the design re-engraved.

Twenty-five frames of material drawn from the Postmaster General’s Collection will be exhibited in the National Stamp Salon of the National Postal Museum.

This 1993 Elvis commemorative “die proof” is one for which no engraved die ever existed.

U.S. stamps since the mid-20th century, will be shown in various stages of development. Here, and in a neighboring gallery called Connect with U.S. Stamps, the curators hope to demystify modern stamp production methods for collectors.

Daniel Piazza is a Smithsonian curator of philately.

The National Postal Museum is devoted to presenting the colorful and engaging history of the nation’s mail service and showcasing one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of stamps and philatelic material in the world. It is located at 2 Massachusetts Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C., across from Union Station.

For more information, visit the museum website at www.postalmuseum.si.edu.