National Postal Museum to Display Rare Philatelic Gem

“Genesis of Philately” Arrives in the U.S. for the First Time

The Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum will display an extremely rare philatelic item, referred to by stamp experts as the “genesis of philately.” On temporary loan to the museum, the extraordinary and historic postal document will be on display—for nine days only—in the museum’s new William H. Gross Stamp Gallery May 3–11. The May 2, 1840, cover shows the earliest known use of two different philatelic elements: the Penny Black, the world’s first adhesive postage stamp, and the Mulready One Penny letter sheet.

On May 1, 1840, Great Britain issued the world’s first postage stamp: the Penny Black. It revolutionized postal services worldwide. Mulready postal stationery lettersheets were also officially issued on that day. Neither the stamps nor the stationery were valid to prepay postage before that date; however, a few Penny Blacks and Mulready “covers” are known to have passed through the post office before the official date of issuance. The May 2, 1840, cover being displayed at the museum is the only known item carrying both the Penny Black and Mulready One Penny letter sheet.

“The May 2, 1840, cover connects us to the very beginnings of philately and the modern postal system,” said Allen Kane, director of the museum. “We are excited to bring this rare item to the United States for the very first time.”

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. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). For more information about the Smithsonian, call (202) 633-1000 or visit the museum website at www.postalmuseum.si.edu.

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