

# Vatican Philately

## *a brief introduction*

In the heart of the Italian peninsula, nestled within the city of Rome, lies the world's smallest nation. Vatican City, one-eighth the size of New York City's Central Park, became politically independent from Italy under the Lateran Pacts of 11 February 1929. Two days later, the Vatican post office began operating with donated supplies and equipment; the first stamps were issued on 1 August 1929. Since then, the Vatican has acquired a reputation for producing handsome and attractive stamp issues in limited quantities (even today, the average production run for most issues is only between 300,000 and 500,000 stamps).

These postage stamps, however beautiful and few in number, are not merely "pretty pictures" designed to raise revenue. According to the Universal Postal Union, the Vatican post office is "one of the best postal systems in the world." A recent *New York Times* article stated that "more letters are sent each year, per inhabitant, from the Vatican's 00120 postal code than from anywhere else in the world."

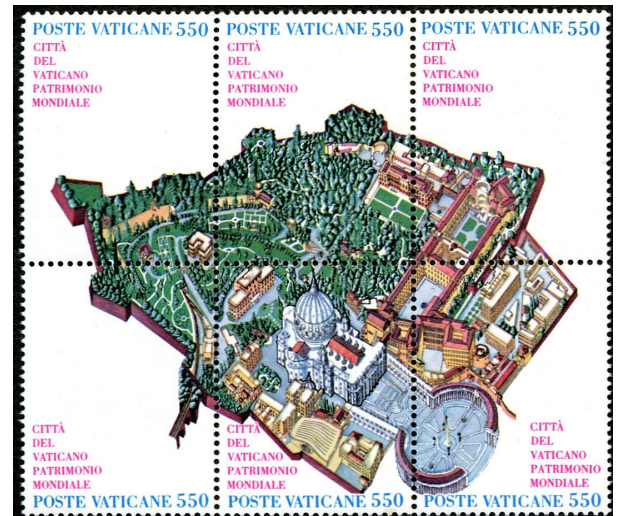
### **Roman States: Real or Reprint?**

Many collectors of Vatican City stamps also seek out their forerunners, the postal emissions of the Roman State. These 150-year-old stamps have been neglected for so long in this country that they represent a brand new area of expansion for those interested in Vatican stamps or in religious topicals; moreover, it would be hard to find a richer or more fascinating field for the student of political and philatelic history than this country, which spans the most important years in the unification of the Italian peninsula.

The stamps of the Roman State were reprinted numerous times around the turn of the twentieth century and telling the genuine from the fake seems to be an impossible task. The four scans at right, however, demonstrate a simple test that will allow the collector to detect ninety percent of the reprints.

### **Key dates**

- 1852: First imperforate issue of the Roman State
- 1867: Second imperforate issue of the Roman State
- 1868: Perforated edition of the 1867 issue released
- 1870: Fall of Rome to an Italian army
- 1870-1929 is the period of the "Roman Question"; postage stamps of Italy are used on Vatican mail
- 1929: Establishment of an independent Vatican City State; first Vatican postal issue
- 1938: First special-purpose airmail stamps
- 1963: Vatican City joins CEPT
- 1966: "Works of Man" issue; last classic definitives
- 1992: Last special-purpose airmail stamps
- 1998: First joint issue, with San Marino, for Italia '98



This se-tenant block of six, issued on 14 April 1986 to honor the UNESCO World Heritage Campaign, features an unusual and attractive birds' eye view of Vatican City's 108.7 acres. At the time of its release, it was the Vatican's fastest-selling issue.



At top left is a genuine stamp from the imperforate series of 1867. At top right is a reprint, crudely perforated in an attempt to mimic the series of 1868. How can collectors tell the genuine stamps from the reprints? One easy way is to examine the horizontal and vertical dividing rules. On genuine stamps, the horizontal rules are always interrupted by the vertical as at bottom left; the opposite is true of most—but not all—reprints, as at bottom right.

*compliments of the*

**Vatican Philatelic Society**  
[www.vaticanphilately.org](http://www.vaticanphilately.org)

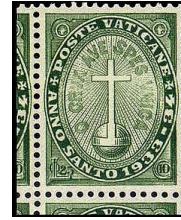
# Types of Definitives



**Regular**  
1929-  
Pictured: Scott 22  
(1933)



**Airmail**  
1938-1992  
Pictured: Scott C59  
(1974)



**Semipostal**  
1933  
Pictured: Scott B4  
  
The surtax defrayed the expenses of the Holy Year 1933.



**Express**  
1929-1966  
Pictured: Scott E18  
(1966)  
  
Assured prompt delivery by the destination post office.



**Parcel Post**  
1931  
Pictured: Scott Q12  
  
Created by overprinting the regular issue of 1929.



**Postage Due**  
1931-1968  
Pictured: Scott J15  
(1954)  
  
Used to indicate mail sent with insufficient postage.

## a few types of commemoratives



**Airmail**  
Pictured: Scott C19 (1949)  
  
The Vatican occasionally issues commemorative airmail series and this is the high value

of one of them, the Universal Postal Union series of 1949. Only 100,000 complete sets were printed; today it is among the most valuable of all Vatican airmail series when in unhinged condition.



**Holy Years**  
Pictured: Scott #724 (1983)

Since 1933, the Vatican has released special stamps in celebration of papally decreed Holy Years. This stamp shows the Holy Ghost, represented as a dove, entering St. Peter's Basilica through the Holy Door.



**Sede Vacante**  
Pictured: 2005  
  
Special stamps are issued for use during the period between the death of one pope and the election of his successor. Shown here is an example from the set issued at the death of John Paul II. *Sede Vacante* is Latin for "the chair [of St. Peter] is vacant."



**Journeys of the Pope**  
Pictured: 2004

Apostolic Voyages abroad are often commemorated with a special stamp issue. Shown at right is a 45 euro cent stamp depicting John Paul II at Bern, Switzerland in June 2004; it was one of his last foreign trips.

### For more information:

Jenkins, Rev. Floyd A., *Roman States Essays and Reprints: The Issues of 1867-1870*

Kehr, Ernest A., *Vatican* (1954 Marian Year Philatelic Exhibition Bulletin)

Kelen, Emery., *Stamps Tell the Story of the Vatican*

Levitsky, Frederick J., *Roman States Forgeries: The Issue of 1852*

*Vatican Notes*, Journal of the Vatican Philatelic Society

*COROS Chronicle*, Journal of the Collectors of Religion on Stamps

*VatiStamps online discussion forum*: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/vaticanstamps/>

