PLATING MOLS STAMPS

by B.P.HUDSON

Part 1: General Introduction

In Bulletin 84 our Vice-President expressed the hope that more members may be interested to start reconstructions of the Mols: "many of us find it the most fascinating aspect of Congo collecting".

How true this is. I have been plating and reconstructing Mols stamps for 17 years, and the activity has never palled. Each stamp to be positioned is a fresh challenge, and each identification gives a fresh surge of satisfaction. Each sheet reconstruction is a jigsaw puzzle which slowly progresses towards completion. Some can be completed relatively easily; others take many years of searching. In either case, the search provides absorbing pleasure and recreation.

The paradox of collecting is that the objective is to achieve completion, yet once the objective is reached all interest is lost. The collector who has no more spaces to fill can only put his stamps in a drawer and forget about them. With sheet reconstructing, there is no danger of this happening. Full reconstruction of all the main varieties would be an impossible task however many years were devoted to it. As a hobby, therefore, it can never be exhausted: the collector is always getting closer to his final objective, but will never reach it.

For this rarefied branch of philately the Mols of the Belgian Congo, issued between 1894 and 1925, provide an ideal subject. The stamps are pictorially attractive and are mostly inexpensive to buy. Complete sheets are compact and are not hard to obtain. Taking account of plate combinations, shades, perforations, surcharges and overprints, there are numerous different varieties of the ten basic values, and most of the varieties are easy to identify. Because of the recess printing process, with the plates made manually from steel dies, constant flaws and varieties can be detected on individual stamps, so that it becomes possible to deduce which position in the sheet the stamp came from. This process is possible not just for certain of the Mols issues, but for all sheet positions of every issue; and moreover with sufficient practice, almost every individual stamp can be positioned, even if badly obscured by a postmark or overprint.

The collecting possibilities which this opens up can be illustrated by a typical example. Take the 15c of 1915, a common stamp available for a few pence. By purchasing collections and dealers' stocks one can easily accumulate hundreds of them. To the 'one-of-a-kind' collector this would be a pointless activity, simply creating duplicates. To the plater, a substantial collection can be built up. Ignoring certain sub-states of the plates, there are six main plate combinations of the 1915 15c in sheets of 50 and three printings in booklet panes of 40. There are up to three perforation varieties of each plate combination, giving twelve main varieties of the stamps from sheets and four of the stamps from booklet panes. If reconstructions are attempted of each variety, with unused and used stamps reconstructed separately, a total of 1520 stamps would be needed for a complete collection just of this one stamp. Of course, few platers would aim to go to such extremes as this - most would be content with used reconstructions of the more common varieties plus representative examples of the others, a target which, given sufficient time, should be neither difficult nor expensive to achieve.

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This article is the first of what will be a series of eleven. Its purpose is to encourage members to take a more detailed interest in these attractive stamps, to persuade more of them to take up plating, and generally to communicate my accumulated knowledge of the subject. The first article is an introduction which sets the background and gives advice on general aspects of plating. Later articles will take each of the ten values in turn, 5 centimes to 10 francs, and (a) tabulate the issues of each value, (b) tabulate the varieties of each issue and describe how to identify them, and (c) give a guide to the determination of sheet positions for each plate combination. These guides will not be an exhaustive catalogue of varieties in every position, but will describe the main ones and give advice on how collectors can acquire for themselves the ability to plate and position individual stamps.

Equipment needed for plating

Apart from reasonably acute eyesight, there are three prerequisites for the sheet reconstructor: a plentiful supply of stamps, complete sheets for reference, and a strong illuminated magnifying glass.

The supply of stamps is the least of his problems. Every Congo collector soon acquires duplicates of the more common Mols stamps, and it is these duplicates that can form the basis for his sheet reconstructions. As his reconstructions become more complete, he will find himself relying more and more on the excellent wants list service which Ray Keach has provided for Study Circle members for many years. The Study Circle holds its own small stock of Mols duplicates, and a large volume of material for sale is continuously being supplied to it by members in Belgium, the UK and the USA. All the Mols stamps that come in are positioned and are sent on approval to platers against their wants lists, usually at 33% of catalogue (50% for Princes), and sometimes as low as 20% for common material (eg the offer on page 20 of Bulletin 84).

If good reference literature is available it is possible to position stamps without a complete sheet of the relevant plate combination at hand, but generally this is not advisable. Many flaws can be confidently identified only by comparing stamp with stamp. Fortunately, complete sheets of many issues are quite common, especially of the lower values of the definitive issues of 1900, 1910 and 1915. These sheets can be used to position not only the stamps of those issues but subsequent issues with overprints or surcharges. The sheets are compact: a typical sheet of 50, five horizontal by ten vertical, measures 200 by 260 cms including margins. They can be mounted on album leaves or enclosed in transparent cover protectors.

Of course, good reference literature is an invaluable aid to positioning whether or not sheets are available. In this respect Congo collectors have been well served over the years. From relatively early times books like the Balasse catalogues and writers like Du Four illustrated the main plate varieties with great clarity. Others like Crustin in 1944 (the 1fr and 5fr of 1894) and Joncker in 1947 (the 10fr of 1898) published photographic guides showing varieties in each position of the sheet. Better guides have been published more recently through the auspices of the Study Circle. I would commend particularly the illustrated articles on the 1fr, 3½fr, 5fr and 10fr in Bulletins 38, 33, 35 and 39 respectively, and the excellent series of studies which is being produced by J M Frenay and which has so far covered all values between 15c and 10fr of the issues from 1894 to the Princes stamps of 1909.

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The plater's final requirement is a good magnifying glass. Most plate varieties are invisible to the naked eye or through an ordinary hand-held glass. A strongly illuminated glass like the 'Magniray', with at least 10x magnification, is required. A philatelic microscope, on the other hand, which typically gives 30x magnification, is probably unsuitable since these instruments illuminate only a small portion of the stamp and do not give the wider view which is needed when surveying for varieties. In addition they often confuse matters by inverting the image.

I should add a word about eye-strain. This is the bugbear of the positioner and I would offer newcomers the following hints on how to minimise it. First, learn to use the magnifier in a relaxed fashion without screwing up or closing either eye. Second, alternate between the eyes and take a short break whenever they start to tire. Third, always use fresh batteries (or a mains adaptor) and replace the batteries as soon as they start to fade; rechargeable batteries are a useful economy. Fourth, use torch bulbs designed for a lower voltage than the batteries provide: for example, I uses a 2.2 volt bulb with two 1½ volt batteries. The bulbs are more quickly burnt out but in return one gets a brighter light which facilitates positioning and reduces strain on the eyes.

Different types of variety

So our new plater has his single stamps, his sheet and his magnifier. He examines the former through the latter and sees the beautiful Mols and van Engelen design in vivid close-up. Among the design he can detect a few small dots, lines, signs of doubling and other marks, some significant and some not. How does he interpret these marks and embark on the detective work which will lead him to ascertain with confidence both the combination of plates used to print the stamp and its position in the sheet?

Before describing the main categories of plate variety, I should say a brief word about the way these stamps were printed, although this will already be familiar to most readers. The stamps were printed in London by Waterlow and Sons, except for the 3½/3fr and 10fr values which were printed by the separate firm of Waterlow Bros & Layton, possibly as a result of a printing order from Brussels being misdirected in the post.

They were recess-printed in two colours, which means that two printing plates were prepared for each stamp, one for the frames (printed in colour) and one for the centres (printed in black). First, the design was engraved by hand on a steel die which was then hardened. (This work was of the highest quality and of a fineness which allowed up to twelve lines to be engraved to the millimetre.) Second, the impression on the die was transferred onto a cylindrical transfer roller which in turn was hardened. Since the design was recessed on the die it was raised on the transfer roller. Finally, the transfer roller was rocked by hand onto the flat steel plate, creating a matrix of 50 closely packed impressions of the stamp, 10 high by 5 wide (or four panes of 2x5 in the case of the booklet stamps of 1915). As on the original die the design on the final plate was recessed and printing was achieved by passing an ink roller over it so that the ink was caught in the recesses and impressed on the paper as raised lines of the design.

As time passed the plates became worn and, in some cases, corroded by moisture. They were regularly cleaned with a cloth. If parts of the design were

faint they were often retouched by hand, position by position, using a tool called a burin. When the plates became too worn, rather than incur the expense of making a new plate they were usually re-entered using the original transfer roller, or a new transfer roller made from the original or a retouched die.

Since the plates were not very hard-wearing, but were used for many years, the quality of the printed stamps ranges from very good to very bad. The resulting flaws could offend a professional printer but are what makes these stamps interesting to the philatelist. The worse the flaws, the easier it is to position the stamps. On the other hand, as later articles will show, even with cleanly printed issues where there are few obvious flaws, it is still possible to differentiate all sheet positions if they are studied closely enough.

The imperfections visible under the magnifier divide first into the following broad categories:

(i) Die varieties. These are quite numerous and are small dots etc which do not seem to be an obvious part of the design. They served, for example, as centres of inscribed circles on the die. However they are of no use for positioning purposes since they are identical in each position of the sheet. On the other hand, they can sometimes be of use in determining the plate combination of the stamp, eg in the later issues of 1915 when new plates of the several lower values were made using retouched dies.

(ii) Transfer roller varieties. These occurred typically when a small foreign body attached itself to the transfer roller as it was being rocked onto to the plate. As a result, a distinctively shaped mark was indented onto the plate and was therefore printed on one or more successive positions of the stamp. If all 50 positions were thus affected, as (eg) with the spot on the hill in frame plate F of the 5c, the flaw is no aid to positioning. But in other cases transfer roller varieties are very helpful indeed since while not identifying the individual position, they narrow the possibilities to a defined group of positions from which the individual position can be determined readily from other flaws. There are many examples of transfer roller varieties, most of which will be described in the plating guides in subsequent articles.

(iii) Permanent constant plate varieties. These are flaws on the plate which are present and visible in all the printings made from it. They are the main basis for identifying the sheet positions of single stamps. The flaws are of many different types and characteristics which are listed below.

(iv) Temporary constant plate varieties. These are the same as (iii), except that they appeared or disappeared during the course of the plate's usage. They are therefore of use in identifying sheet positions, but not as useful as the permanent varieties since they appear on some but not all of the stamps printed from the position in question. For example, a scratch may appear on the plate in the middle of printing, or a faint mark visible in the early printings may later disappear through wear. The different types of these varieties are included in the list in the next section.

(v) Transient varieties. These are typically small dots of ink, smudge marks etc deposited on the paper as each sheet was printed. They are not constant from sheet to sheet and are therefore of no use in determining either plate combinations or positions. They can be a distraction since they can look much

like the varieties in (iii) and (iv), but with practice the experienced plater develops a feel for which of the flaws visible under the magnifier are transient and should therefore be ignored.

Constant plate varieties

There are many different types of these. The following paragraphs describe most of the types that the plater will encounter.

Lay marks. Known in French as 'traits de repère', these are lines and dots inscribed between certain positions after the application of the transfer roller. Their purpose was to create marks on the printed sheet to aid the registration of frames and centres. There is usually one dot on the mid-point between two adjoining pairs of stamps and one vertical line similarly positioned in another part of the sheet. (In the stamps of vertical format, the 15c and 5fr, the line is horizontal.) Lay marks are normally found on the frame plate, since the frames were usually printed first, but some 1910 issues are found with centre plate lay marks as well when Waterlows experimented with printing the centres first. Sometimes lay marks did not appear until after the first printings of a stamp, in which case their addition, being a deliberate act, created a new state of the plate (see the section below on the nomenclature of plate combinations). In other cases there is more than one dot or line.

The lay marks are conspicuous features, and if part of one is visible on a stamp it can be positioned immediately. However most sheet positions are not adjacent to one of these marks, and those that are do not necessarily show them if the perforation is close to the frame of the design on the side where the mark is printed. Lay marks are therefore mostly of limited use in positioning.

Guidelines. Guidelines are like lay marks in that they are vertical or horizontal lines deliberately engraved on the plate. The similarity ends there, however. Guidelines are much finer and fainter and are usually visible only over short sections of their length. They were put down in a grid pattern before the transfer roller was applied, their purpose being to guide the application of the roller and to get the 50 impressions lined up as accurately as possible. On frame plates, the guidelines coincide more or less closely with one of the outer edges of the frame. On centre plates, where they are found, they usually coincide with a feature of the design - eg the line is horizontal and matches the horizon of the picture - but on some stamps (notably the 10c) they are found in vertical positions midway between impressions.

Although they are usually faint, the guidelines are useful aids to positioning. They are found on most stamps, and on a few - for instance the 10fr Red Cross - are almost the only way of distinguishing one position from another. Their usefulness as distinguishing marks stems from two features. First, their location relative to the stamp design varies slightly from position to position, since they were laid down separately from the transfer roller. Second, after the lines were engraved sections of them (particularly those away from the stamp designs) were burnished out so as to make them less conspicuous on the finished sheet. The lengths and exact locations of the sections that remained vary noticeably according to the sheet position.

Finally, despite their faintness the guidelines were resistant to wear. In one or two cases (eg the 25c frame plate III) they eventually disappeared through

long usage, but on most of the stamps where they are found they are visible from the earliest to the latest printings.

Guide dots. These are less common than guidelines, but like them were deliberately applied to the plate separately from the transfer roller. They were caused by a pointer attached to the shaft of the transfer roller to guide its application. They were normally burnished out, but on some values the printers omitted to do so, notably on 5c frame plate V where they are present on all stamps in the second to fifth columns and in the right hand selvedge, and 3fr frame plate II where they are in the top selvedge and just under the bottom left corner of all stamps in the top to ninth rows. They are another useful guide to positioning because of the small variations in the location of each dot relative to the stamp design.

Retouches. This is a common constant plate variety and also a most useful one. If part of the design on the plate was found to be too weak, either at the start or in the course of printing, it would be retouched by hand to strengthen it. Since each impression had to be retouched separately, variations in the retouching give a guide to position. A good example is the dark triangle in the top left corner of the frames of the 1898 10fr, which was judged before printing began to be too weak and was therefore scored in by hand in most positions, in some cases with horizontal lines and in others with lines sloping to the left, to the right, or criss-cross. Almost all positions of this stamp can be quickly identified from this one feature alone, provided of course that a complete sheet is available for reference.

Sometimes the retouching was done carefully and is hard to notice. In other cases it was surprisingly crude. The best example of the latter is the 5c of 1910, frame plate III2, where the horizontal lines at the top throughout the plate were filled in by an engraver who did not use a ruler and had a remarkably unsteady hand, for reasons at which one can only guess.

Burin escapes. These are retouches gone wrong: places where a line of the design was being retouched, but the engraving tool slipped and created a short scratch branching out from the design. Burin escapes are found in a number of places where it is not otherwise obvious, because of the neatness of the work, that retouching took place.

Re-entries. Re-entries are doubling marks caused by a slight displacement of the transfer roller while it was being rocked back and forth to create the impression on the plate. This could happen when the plate was first laid down (in which case they are strictly 'fresh entries' rather than 're-entries') or when it was later re-entered to strengthen the design after it had become worn with use. In the former case the doubling is usually quite slight but in the latter it can be marked, eg in 5c centre plate B5 and 25c centre plate A4 where one or two positions, well known as so-called Balasse plate varieties, show displacement of a full millimetre or more. In other examples not only doubling but clear trebling can be seen.

Doubling marks are of variable usefulness in positioning. In some stamps such as the 1fr of 1915, frame plates II3 to II6, so many positions are similarly doubled that the doubling is not a great help to identification. In others it can be a useful and prominent identifying mark.

Parasitic entries. This is a curious form of plate variety which while not unique to stamps of the Congo, is only rarely found elsewhere. It is present on certain positions of the 10c, 25c, 50c and 5fr of 1894 to 1900, and consists of partially visible curved lines superimposed on the frame plate design. For many years no-one could work out what caused these marks. Then it came to someone in a flash of inspiration: the marks on the 10c were from the 50c design and vice versa, while the marks on the 25c were from the 5fr design and vice versa.

What happened was that no doubt to save money, two of the cylindrical transfer rollers made by Waterlows in 1894 were used to carry not one but two die impressions each. As the roller was rocked onto the plate, it was occasionally rocked too far so that the edge of the adjoining die was partly impressed on the adjoining stamp. For good pictorial illustrations of this process I refer the reader to pages 117, 158 and 173 of General Du Four's 'Congo - Cinquante Ans D'Histoire Postale'.

Parasitic entries are visible in up to nine positions for each of the stamps in question. They provide a good guide to positioning and are classified as Balasse plate varieties.

Scratches. This is a broad category of accidental flaw which is found extensively. Scratch marks range from deep scores which are highly visible to faint marks which quickly disappeared with wear. The former are obviously better for identification but the latter can also be useful if other flaws are not visible. Scratch marks are unique to the position where they are found, and vary greatly in size and shape. Some were caused by engraving tools, others (eg 'curlicue' scratches, and faint but long scratches in parallel lines) by cleaning; others no doubt by the general rough and tumble of the printing shop floor. Some of the worst scratches were noticed by the printers and burnished out, so that they no longer appear in later printings. Earliest printings are usually relatively free of scratches, but this is not always true.

Blotches. These are large irregularly shaped marks, often roughly oval in shape, found between adjacent stamps. There are good examples on the frame plates of the 1900 25c (I2) and 1915 50c (III3). Sometimes they have a deep colour, sometimes rather faint. They are caused by shallow indentations in the flat surface of the plate which caught ink from the roller and therefore caused a mark on the printed sheet. They do not appear in many positions, but are useful when they do.

Missing design. Occasionally a small part of the design, typically part of the frame line, is missing, no doubt because it was inadequately impressed by the transfer roller. This is a relatively uncommon variety because such defects were usually made good by retouching. Moreover it should not be confused with missing design caused by inadequate inking, a transient variety which is of no help to positioning.

Corrosion dots. Corrosion dots resulted normally from moisture on the plate causing pits in its surface which in turn caused small dots to appear on the printed stamp. They are found frequently on both frame and centre plates, but are more visible on the latter because of the darker colour of the ink. On some issues they are more or less absent in the earliest printings but appear in great numbers later on, no doubt because the plate was allowed to get wet or was not properly wiped down between printings. Although the dots are often very tiny,

and can only just be seen even under a strong magnifier, they are a good aid to positioning because they seldom disappeared with wear and their random locations are always unique to the sheet positions where they are found. Where a plate combination has corrosion dots, confirmation of a stamp's position is always unambiguous.

Where plates became thickly corroded, the printers often tried to minimise the damage by burnishing the dots out. However they could do so only in areas away from the stamp design, since otherwise the design itself would be affected. Thus on some plates there is a sharp dividing line between thick corrosion close to the design and clear space beyond. Good examples of this are found in 1fr centre plate A5 and later printings of the 25c booklet centres, panes β and δ.

Cracks. I end with this because there are only a few examples of it, but one of them is a famous one. During the late printings of the 1910 15c, frame plate III3, a long jagged crack known as the 'lézard' appeared in the plate between positions 41 and 42. It was still there in plate III4 which was used for the first printings of the 1915 issue. The crack was then noticed, and to prevent it spreading to the edge of the plate a large hole was drilled in it, creating frame plate III5. Both the crack and the hole make a prominent feature which is classified as one of the Balasse plate varieties. Similar cracks are also found in the 40c frame plate I, position 6, and frame plate III (the 'Campagnes Coloniales' issue), position 64.

Writing plating notes

As the new plater surveys single stamps against his complete sheet, and identifies their positions, he will usually notice not one but several identifying flaws in each position. It is essential that he makes his own written notes of them. It may be tempting to rely on reference material written by others, but this is a false economy. He will frequently find flaws which others have not noticed, and when he meets the same position again, as he surely will, he can confirm it much more quickly by referring to his own notes.

As a rule of thumb, I aim to record at least three or four different flaws for each position. There are two reasons for this. First, some flaws are rather similar from position to position so that relying on only one can lead to mistaken identification. Second, many stamps are partly obscured by cancels or overprints (or both) so that if only one plate variety on the position is known, the chances are that it will be covered up. If three or four are recorded, it is most unlikely that the position cannot be identified.

In case this is of interest to new platers, I will describe how I set out my own plating notes. With small handwriting which is illegible to anyone but myself, I can get all the notes for a plate combination on one side of a sheet of paper, using one line per position. At the bottom I list what I call 'generic' plate varieties, ie those found, identical or at least similar to one another, in more than one position. I label them A, B, C etc, and writes these letters in the left-hand column against the relevant lines of the plating notes. When confronted with a stamp I check first which of the generic varieties it shows, and I can then at a glance narrow down the possibilities for its position. For instance if it shows B and C but not A, I know that it must be from one of the positions labelled BC in the left column.

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In the plating guides in subsequent articles, I will describe these so-called generic varieties in relatively great detail, since they are usually the key to the rapid identification of positions in the sheet of 50. To have to go through all 50 positions every time a possible flaw is identified would otherwise be very time-consuming.

Occasionally one meets positions which are really hard to identify. The plate is clean and it takes a long time to find a flaw or other identifying mark. In my notes I mark these positions with a special symbol. When I meet that position again, the relative absence of flaws itself becomes a guide to its location, since I can concentrate my search on the positions I have marked with that symbol.

Sometimes positioning is easy while at others it seems hard and frustrating. As time passes, and the locations of more and more plate varieties are retained in the memory, positioning generally becomes much easier, but there are still always a few difficult ones. The more difficult the identification, the greater the sense of satisfaction when it is achieved. The plater requires great patience but his patience is usually well rewarded.

Overprints and surcharges

Intelligent use should be made of extraneous guides to position. The presence of selvedge or sheet margin is an obvious example. A more subtle example can be found with stamps with irregular perforations, where the 'pattern' of the irregularity is different on two opposite sides. Because of the way in which the line perforator was moved down the sheet of paper, but the sheet had to be reversed before the last line of holes was punched, this non-matching of facing lines of irregular perforation is an indication that the stamp comes from the edge of the sheet. (These perforations are described further below.)

However the most important extraneous guide to position is found in certain of the surcharges and overprints. Handstamped marks such as the Congo Belge and Tombeur overprints and the Elisabethville surcharges are obviously no help when positioning. The Red Cross, AO and Malines surcharges I have also found to be of little use. However the typo Congo Belge and Est Africain overprints and the 1921 and Boma surcharges are very useful indeed, and while they are strictly outside the scope of these articles - and have been well covered in earlier Bulletins - it is worth adding a brief résumé of them here.

Typo. The best article on the typographed Congo Belge overprints appeared in Bulletin 8 as long ago as 1952. It described how Brussels handstamp 5 was used to make five papier maché moulds from each of which probably twelve type-metal clichés of the overprint were cast. 50 of these clichés were assembled into the overprinting plate for the horizontal stamps. This plate was then dismantled and reassembled for the vertical stamps, ie the 15c and 5fr.

Because of shrinkage of the papier maché after the first five clichés were cast, and minor defects in several of the moulds, the following 'generic' constant varieties are found in the overprinting plates:

Long overprint: positions 4,10,11,12,31 (stamps of horizontal format); 11,13,17,24,43 (stamps of vertical format).
Broken C of CONGO: 8,34,36,37,38 (horizontal); 12,13,14,17,22,30,38,43,44 (vertical).

Nick in first E of BELGE: 6,11,14,17,18,19,20,26,28,35,40 (horizontal); 15,16,21,23,32,33,34,35,37,40,41 (vertical).
Short bottom bar of first E of BELGE: 2,16,22,25,29,30,31,44,45,47,48 (horizontal); 2,3,6,7,20,24,25,26,29,31,49 (vertical).
Uneven bottom bar of second E of BELGE: 8,10,27,32,37,38,39 (horizontal); 12,13,14,19,22,43,45 (vertical).
None of these features: 1,3,5,7,15,23,24,33,41,42,43,46,49,50 (horizontal); 1,4,5,8,9,10,18,27,28,36,42,46,48,50 (vertical).

These varieties together with others applying to single clichés are illustrated in the 1952 article. They facilitate the positioning of all stamps with typo overprint, since a quick look at the overprint narrows the possibilities to at most about a dozen positions.

When the time came to overprint the Princes stamps, the plate had again been dismantled and had to be reassembled, using a different selection of the original 60 clichés once more in random order, first for the horizontal and then for the vertical stamps. With Princes typo too, therefore, the overprint helps positioning. The positions of Princes typo varieties were described in Abbé Gudenkauf's comprehensive article in Bulletin 25.

1921 surcharges. See my article in Bulletin 41. The '1921' overprint on the high values shows few variations and is therefore of little help to positioning. The surcharges on the lower values are much more helpful. The overprinting plates were made up of bloc-reports of five elements reproduced ten times to make a plate of 50. Each surcharge shows five different 'types', distinguishable by the shape and alignment of the bars. On the horizontal sheets type A appears in rows 1 and 6, B in rows 2 and 7 and so on. On the vertical sheets type A is in columns 1 and 6, B in columns 2 and 7 and so on. For the 5/40c, 10/5c and 15/50c the same varieties in the overprinting bars appear. In this plate types C, D and E are easily distinguishable, though not A from B. On the vertical 25/15c all five are distinguishable. On the 30/10c and 50/25c different variations are found and only type E (30/10c) and type A (50/25c) can be distinguished from the others.

The well-known 'missing dots' on these surcharging plates also help to indicate positions. The relevant positions and the order in which the dots went missing are as follows:

15/50c: 41 left, 48 left, 47 left.
25/15c: 12 left.
30/10c: 36 right, 39 right, 19 right, 37 right.
50/25c: 27 and 28 left, 30 left, 35 left, 10 right, 40 right.

Boma surcharges. Four values were surcharged, the 5c, 40c, 1fr and 5fr. Four different plates were used for each of the 5c and 40c and one for each of the 1fr and 5fr (though the plate overprinting the 5fr was adjusted during the course of overprinting).

The standard work on the Boma surcharges is the booklet published by the Abbé Gudenkauf in 1974. The ten overprinting plates are full of constant varieties, illustrated by the Abbé, which help with the positioning of the stamps. Typically these consist of damage to the 1, 0 and c of the surcharge in the 10c/5c and 10c/1fr, and to the 2, 5 and c of the 25c/40c and 25c/5fr. In addition the vertical spacing between the bars in the 10c/1fr and 25c/5fr varies a little from

column to column, and in most case the column number of an individual stamp can be determined by measuring this space. With all values except the 5fr, the presence of a stamp on the edge of the sheet is indicated by the fact that the bars stop short of the edge of the stamp.

The four overprinting plates A, B, C and D of the 10c/5c can be distinguished by the horizontal distance between the bars, or (for plate A) by the carmine shade of the surcharge. In the 25c/40c the plates can be distinguished by the vertical distance between the 25 and the bars, except for A and B where this distance is the same. In the first two columns, the horizontal distance between the 5 and the c is 2½mm in plate A and 4mm in plate B. In the other three columns A and B can usually be differentiated only by positioning the underlying stamp -an example of a situation where the ability to position is a necessary aid to classifying the basic variety of a stamp.

East Africain overprints. This complex and fascinating overprint has been exhaustively studied in Bulletin articles, of which I would refer the reader particularly to those in Bulletins 41 and 46. I use here the nomenclature for the plates established in the latter article. I will not repeat all the details of these studies but will just summarise the ways in which the overprint can help the plater to position single copies of the stamps.

The EAA overprints fall into two categories. The first consists of the short overprints (type S) and the first group of long overprints (L1). These overprints were applied not sheet by sheet but row by row using a block of five adjoining clichés. Accordingly, any flaws in S or L1 overprints give no clues to the row number of the stamp, only its column number (or row number in the case of vertical stamps).

The flaws are of two kinds. The first are irregularities in the metal letters of the overprint which therefore show in all stamps printed from that block in the column in question. There are only a few of these as follows:

Long T in OCCUPATION: block L1(t), column 2 (or row 4 in vertical stamps).
Elongated stop after BELGE: block L1(t), column 4 (or row 2).
Dash in 2nd L of ALLEMAND: block L1(g), column 3 (or row 3).
Nick in top of G of BEZETTING: block L1(g), column 4 (or row 2).
Dot between A and L of ALLEMAND: block L1(g), column 5 (or row 1).
Nick in top of I of BEZETTING: block L1(i), column 3 (or row 3).

The blocks which do not show these flaws are grouped together as L1(o).

The second kind of flaw was caused by a foreign body getting trapped in the block as it was being used and therefore causing a spot to be printed on or between particular letters of the overprint. These flaws, which are quite numerous particularly on the 1fr value, therefore always appear in the same column, but not necessarily throughout the usage of the block. They include the well-known 'OCOUPATION' varieties on the 5c with short overprint and 1fr with long overprint. In the latter case the flaw appears twice, on one occasion in column 1 and on another in column 2. The dot flaws, whose blocks are denominated as L1(.), are illustrated in the article in Bulletin 46.

The second category of EAA overprint is known as L2. These were made quite differently, in fact in much the same way as the typographed CONGO BELGE

overprints. A plate of 50 overprints was assembled from individual clichés cast from perhaps five or six moulds. The assembled plate therefore shows both generic and individual varieties which aid positioning. Bulletin 46 illustrates these in full, but here is a list of the generic varieties and their positions:

Nick in right end of L of BELGE: 1,11,12,14,15,34.
Dot between U and I of DUITSCH: 3,4,6,8,16,19,24,36,39.
Uneven tops of T's of BEZETTING: 5,18,32,33,35,41,42,48.
Thickened bar of L of BELGE: 7,10,29.

These positions apply to the horizontal stamps. For the vertical stamps plate L2 was not reassembled but was simply turned on its side. However the plate was dismantled and put together again for late applications of the overprint to the 5c value only (including the 5c with Malines surcharge). This reassembled plate is known as L2'. It shows the same generic varieties as L2, though fewer of them and in different positions. The generic and individual varieties of L2' are also illustrated in Bulletin 46.

Fortunately, the L1 and L2 groups are easily differentiated on single stamps. L1 overprints are (like S overprints) somewhat blotchy in appearance while L2 are clean with clear outlines. The difference is always particularly noticeable in the S of EST in the top left corner.

The overprints and surcharges which show constant varieties add greatly to the interest of plating, and the articles referred to above on the typo, 1921, Boma and EAA overprints are indispensable reference material for the Mols plater.

Other background information

In parts 2 to 11 which will follow in this and later issues of the Bulletin, covering the values 5c to 10fr, the varieties of each issue will be described and tabulated. For the benefit of those who are relatively new to the Mols I should therefore summarise here certain basic information on the plate combinations, perforations and other features which make up these varieties.

Plate combinations. As described above, the frames and centres were printed from separate plates, and for new printings sometimes new plates were made but more often the old plates were repaired or re-entered. The nomenclature of the plates used for each value is as follows. The successive frame plates are labelled I, II, III etc and the centre plates A, B, C etc. When any deliberate change was made to a plate - re-entry, retouching, lay marks etc - this is regarded as creating a new state of the plate, and successive states of the same plate are labelled I1, I2, I3 etc. Sometimes the plate changed noticeably for accidental reasons - eg, typically, the appearance of numerous corrosion dots - and where the distinction is considered worth making, these are called substates of the plate and are labelled I1a, I1b etc. The full designation of the plate combination is shown by adding frame and centre label thus: I+A1a, I+A1b and so on. The position numbers on the sheet are counted from left to right and from top to bottom, so that the top left position is no.1 and the bottom right position is no. 50.

All Mols stamps were printed in sheets of 50 except for the 25c+25c Campagnes Coloniales issues of 1925, which used the 40c centre die and were printed in sheets of 100, and the 5c, 10c, 15c and 25c booklet panes of 1915. The booklet

stamps were printed in sheets of four panes of ten stamps per pane. Each value went through three printings designated 1st, 2nd and 3rd booklets, and the panes are designated by the Greek letters α, β, γ, and δ. Where there was re-entry or retouching during a printing this is designated by a number in brackets, so that the full description of a pane might be, for instance, 25c 2nd(2) booklet pane α. Within the pane positions are numbered again from left to right and from top to bottom.

Perforations. This is another fascinating and complicated aspect of Mols philately, described in Bulletins 39, 47 and 78 in much more detail than I can give here.

I leave on one side the Campagnes Coloniales issues of 1925 (p12½) and the 3½/3fr and 10fr stamps printed by Waterlow Bros and Layton (p14 except for some 10fr which are p12). For the remaining Mols issues many different perforating heads were used, some with regular and some with irregular spacing between the pins, some easily identifiable on single stamps and others indistinguishable from one another. Three irregular perforators were described in Bulletin 47 but one of them, the so-called p14-14½, has subsequently been dropped from the list since it cannot really be separated from the regular p14 heads. Our latest knowledge on the eight regular perforators (or groups of perforators) was tabulated by Ray Keach, with dates of usage, on page 15 of Bulletin 78.

For practical purposes in the remaining parts of this article I classify the perforations on single stamps in the following groups, recognising that (3) and (4) at least, and possibly (2), represent more than one perforating head:

(1) Regular p12½ (actual gauge 12.5). Very scarce and found only on the 15c and 40c of 1896 and 25c of 1900.

(2) Regular p13½ (actual gauge 13.7). Not uncommon and found in the later printings of the 1900 issues and most subsequent issues.

(3) Regular p14 (actual gauges 13.9, 14.0 or 14.2). Covering several different perforating heads and plentiful throughout all issues.

(4) Regular p15 (actual gauge 15.0 to 15.1). At least two heads: common from 1894 to 1900; also found, but less common than p14, from 1910 onwards.

(5) Regular p16 (actual gauge 15.8). A distinctive head which is fairly common in some of the issues of 1895 to 1900, but is not found otherwise.

(6) Irregular p12-14 (actual gauge: long stretches of 13.9 alternating with short stretches of 12.0, 12.8 and 13.5). A most distinctive perforator found not uncommonly on issues from 1894 to 1900, but never later. Of course, single stamps displaying only stretches of 13.9 on each side would be classified under (3).

(7) Irregular p14½-15 (actual gauge: alternating stretches of 14.4 and 14.9). A single perforator found quite plentifully on issues from 1894 to 1900, and occasionally on early printings of the 1910 issues, but not subsequently. Where only stretches of 14.9 appear on each side of a stamp it is difficult but certainly not impossible to distinguish this perforator from (4).

Rarely, stamps are found with compound perforations, ie with a different perforating head being used for adjacent sides. The best known examples are the 10c and 25c 3rd booklet stamps p14x15.

Shades. In the earlier issues there is found a great variety of shades, often associated with separate batches of printing. Some values of the later issues also show shade varieties, but to a lesser extent. In the case of the 1fr of 1894 the shade changes are so marked - from violet to lilac to carmine - that even in the simplest of catalogues they are listed as separate stamps. Shade variations are also found in some of the Malines surcharges.

In the listings that follow, the choices of shade changes which are shown as significant varieties are largely a matter of personal taste. Often particular shades are associated with particular plate combinations or perforations; at other times the same combination can show several different shades. Other collectors may disagree with the way I have grouped or described these shades, since we all see colours differently. All agree however that the shade variations are important and make an interesting subject for study.

Errors and curiosities

I do not deal in these articles with the errors and curiosities found in the Mols stamps, eg so-called proofs, overprints and surcharges on the wrong stamps, inverted and doubled overprints and so on. Some of them are most interesting, others of more dubious provenance. All have been amply described in the literature.

The popularity of these expensive items stems from the desire of collectors to fill their pages with greater interest and to have further material to collect once the fairly simple task of completing a one-of-a-kind collection has been completed. As I commented in the introduction, the urge to extend one's collection in this way becomes less compelling if one has embarked on sheet reconstruction, when the risk of running out of material to collect will never arise. Having said that, there is at least one collector - André Vindevoghel, who displayed some of this at the 1991 anniversary meeting - who not only collects the rarest curiosities but reconstructs sheets of them, perhaps the ultimate in philatelic ambition!

Conclusion

The contents of these articles will already be familiar to the old hands of Congo collecting, but they may find it useful to see them updated and gathered together in one place; they may also find some plate varieties described which they had not previously noticed. For newcomers to the Mols, I hope the articles will provide a comprehensive introduction to one of the most interesting of all areas of specialist philately. For those who have collected the Mols for some time, but have not embarked on plating studies, I hope that what I have written will encourage them to do so, by showing that sheet positioning is not so hard as is sometimes imagined, and is always rewarding.

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