

The Western Australia 'Inverted Swan'

Australia's most famous stamp is not only a spectacular misprint, but also a spectacular misnomer! At first glance the Western Australia Four Pence blue of 1854 has an 'Inverted Swan'. In fact the swan is not upside down; it is the frame with the name of the country and the value that was placed on the printing stone upside-down in relation to the upright swan!

The discovery

The collector R.U. Pegg discovered an 'Inverted Swan' for the first time in 1863. Pegg sent his curious find to the well-known philatelist and catalogue publisher Dr. John Edward Gray. However, Dr. Gray had no explanation for an inverted centrepiece in a monochrome stamp printed in a single operation: "...I had not seen it before, nor do I understand how such a reversal of the Swan could have occurred."

The 'Inverted Swan' was described for the first time in philatelic literature in 1868 by the famous British philatelic pioneer Dr. Charles Viner. As the 'misprint' could not at the time be explained in regard to the method of printing, its genuineness was in doubt until the mid-1870s. Then the famous Irish collector the Duke of Leinster acquired the 'Inverted Swan' and the discussions fell silent. In the years that followed, more 'Inverted Swans' were found. Thomas Keay Tapling acquired a copy and in 1892 donated the item together with his collection to the British Museum in London. As early as 1890, a certain B. Plashet Rodd exhibited a third example at the London Philatelic Exhibition, selling it shortly afterwards to William B. Avery. To date, fifteen 'Inverted Swans' had been discovered, one of which was later exposed as a forgery.

'Inverted Frame' rather than 'Inverted Swan'

London, Strand, 1937: The well-known stamp dealer F.B. Smith discovers in a lot of old stamps a vertical pair of the Western Australia Four Pence of 1854 on a piece of a cover. However, only part of the frame of the lower stamp is visible, the image of the swan has been torn off. But what a surprise! Instead of POSTAGE, the part of the frame that remains showed an inverted inscription FOUR PENCE. This was the proof! It was not the swan was upside down, it was the frame with the inscription. Nonetheless, Australia's most famous misprint is known to collectors as the 'Inverted Swan'. It was later demonstrated that in order to produce the lithographic stone, 60 images were taken from the steel plate for the One Penny value of the 'Swan' issue that had been supplied from Great Britain. Then for these 60 sheet positions on a transfer stone, all the frames with the inscription ONE PENNY were removed and a newly-drawn frame with the inscription FOUR PENCE was individually transferred to all the 60 sheet positions on the intermediate stone by hand. When doing this, the lithographer at first did not notice the error of transferring the frame on one stamp upside-down. This stone with 60 stamp images was then transferred four times side-by-side on to the final printing stone. During the four-fold transferral the 'inverted frame' image was copied to positions 141, 146, 151 and 156. Soon after the start of production of the new Four Pence stamps, the printers discovered the inverted frames. They removed the four incorrect stamp images and transferred correct stamp images to their positions.

The ex-Ferrary 'Inverted Swan'

Of the 14 genuine 'Inverted Swans' that exist today, seven are inaccessible to collectors, being in institutional collections in museums or in the collection of Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain.

This example 'ex-Ferrary collection' is by far the most attractive of the seven 'Inverted Swans' available in private collectors' hands. Postmarked almost clear of the image you can see the Inverted Swan - or more correctly: the inverted frame - ideally! The margins of the stamp are wide and cut square on all sides. Philipp la Rénotière von Ferrary acquired this most beautiful example of the 'Inverted Swan' at an unknown time. At the auction of the sixth part of the Ferrary collection in Paris on 24 April 1923, the stamp dealer Tom Allen bought the item for his client E.H. Collins. With a bid of 62,000 francs Allen thus outbid Theodore Champion, who had retired after bidding 61,500 francs. When the E.H. Collins collection was on sale at Plumridge's just five years later, Tom Allen bought the 'Inverted Swan' a second time, shortly afterwards selling it to the 1923 underbidder, Theodore Champion.

For the next half century, the 'Inverted Swan' from the Ferrary, Collins and Champion collections was no longer seen at auction. Then in 1980, the Paris auction house J. Robineau offered the stamp. The buyer was the well-known rarity dealer Paul Morgoulis, acting as agent for a Swiss client. In September 1981, this 'Inverted Swan' was auctioned for the last time by David Feldman in Geneva. The buyer was unknown. In 2017, exactly one hundred years after the death of Philipp la Rénotière von Ferrary, Corinthia Auctions in Zurich was commissioned to auction this, the most famous stamp in Australian philately.

Sources:

L.N. and M. Williams in 'Stamps of Fame', Mackay & Co. Ltd., London 1949

L.N. Williams in 'Encyclopaedia of Rare and Famous Stamps', D. Feldman S.A., Geneva 1993



3517



Baron Philipp von Ferrary

Gibbons

Start price
in CHF Start price
ca. AU \$

3517 4 d. blue, the famous INVERTED SWAN variety, technically an 'Inverted Frame', a superlative used example with four large margins all round, extremely lightly cancelled for this rarity, with the only fault being an unapparent 3mm. paper break near the centre of the stamp best viewed under ultra-violet light and perhaps a vertical bend, otherwise this stamp can be listed as one of, or perhaps, the finest known example as far as appearance is concerned. Full listing of how this variety occurred and other relevant information of this error is included with the lot and more information is to be found in L. N. and M. Williams "Stamps of Fame" on page 192, where listed as example 'IX'. Just 15 examples of this error are recorded of which 6 are in Museum collections, including one (ex Duveen) in the collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. A truly wonderful example of this legendary error, of exceptional provenance and the finest specimen of the most iconic Australian stamp in private hands. Signed Calves; certs. Friedl (1980) RPSL (2017)
Gi = £ 140'000.

L.N. Williams in Encyclopaedia of Rare and Famous Stamps (1997) listed 14 recorded genuine examples of this variety, of which seven are housed in museums and institutional collections (Royal Collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II; British Library, London; Australian Museum, Sydney (2); Mitchell Library, Sydney; Western Australia Museum, Perth; National Museum of Ireland, Dublin). From the remaining seven examples in private hands, no less than four are in one private collection.

*Provenance: Baron Philipp von Ferrary (1923);
bought by Tommy Allen for E.H. Collins.
E. H. Collins collection, Plumridge auction, London (1928);
again bought by Tommy Allen.
Sold by Tommy Allen to Theodore Champion (approx. 1929/1930).
Sold by Theodore Champion at an unknown date.
Robineau auction (Oct. 1980);
bought by Paul Morgoulis acting as agent for an unknown collector.
David Feldman auction (Sept. 1981).*

3h

100'000 (135'000)