



Minerals on postage stamps: A mix of art, history, economics and geography

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Most people would agree that minerals represent some of the most beautiful natural objects known to mankind, especially in the form of precious and semi-precious gemstones. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that they are often illustrated on stamps. Examples are the fine crystalline forms represented as coloured etchings in the French 1986 issue, and the stylized simplicity of the mineral stamps that were part of the Swiss Pro Patria series, issued annually between 1958 and 1961. I aim in this presentation to introduce the beautiful world of mineral illustrations on stamps. The talk cannot be comprehensive because of the very large number of minerals and stamps concerned, but it will introduce the range of minerals depicted on stamps, then look in some greater detail at several sets from France, Southern Africa and East Germany.



Fig. 1. French 1986 issue of four stamps, depicting typical French minerals: marcassite, quartz, calcite, fluorite.

Minerals become the subject of sets of stamps for many reasons. In many cases, it is part of an attempt by the particular national post office to depict the whole of the natural history of their country in stamp form – a statement of nationality and politics. The 1986 French issue was an example which followed sets of stamps that had already portrayed insects, flowers, trees and birds native to France. We also find that certain countries have produced several sets of stamps to mark the importance to their economy of mining particular minerals. Many African states depend upon minerals for much of their wealth and economic power, explaining why, for instance, Sierra Leone issued over 35 stamps on the subject of diamonds between 1965 and 1978, and why over 77% of mineral stamps come from countries with major mining interests. Countries with traditional links with the history of the study of geology and mining also produce mineral stamps. These are usually European countries with a long record of the study of the Earth, such as Germany and Switzerland. Curiously enough, though, despite its fine tradition of geological observation and research, the United Kingdom has never produced a stamp depicting rocks or minerals.

It is often said that the study of stamps is a study of history, language, culture, art, geography and politics. If this is true for stamps in general, it is particularly true for minerals on stamps.