



Austria's Unusual Pandemic-Themed Postage Stamps: Toilet Paper, Facemask, Bandage

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Since the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the postal service in Austria has issued 3 stamps that have challenged traditional assumptions of how a postage stamp should look and feel.

First, in October 2020, Austrian Post issued 300,000 three-ply toilet paper souvenir sheet stamps (Scott B407), in recognition of the peculiar hoarding behavior that plagued the early pandemic and resulted in global shortages of toilet paper rolls. These self-adhesive stamps, perforated similarly to a toilet roll sheet and printed with the theme of “*Distanz, Die Uns Verbindet*” (translation: Distance That Brings Us Together), depict stylized coronavirus particles and animals of varying sizes. The animal depictions include a metallic baby elephant, an image widely used in the country during the pandemic, to suggest appropriate physical separation between people for “social distancing.” The toilet paper stamps are 10 cm long — one-tenth of the typical size of a newborn pachyderm.

In September 2021, Austrian Post issued 150,000 miniature face mask-shaped stamps (Scott 2948), which were made out of filtering material of the European FFP2 standard, which filters at least 94% of airborne particles. The mask stamps came complete with cloth ear loops, but at only 6 cm x 4.1 cm would be a better fit for a doll than a human.

Most recently, bandages with the message *Tut gar nicht weh!* (translation: “It doesn’t hurt at all!”) were the March 2022 issue in the Austrian Post pandemic series, designed to encourage vaccination. These bandage stamps, of which 150,000 were issued, have a central absorbent pad and an adhesive strip that can be peeled off.

All 3 stamps bear the 2.75 Euro denomination, a current rate for sending small packages in Austria. The 2020 toilet paper issue was a semi-postal that included a 2.75 Euro surcharge to raise funds for pandemic-related charities.

Most postage stamps since the first Penny Blacks issued by Great Britain in 1840 have been rectangular or square-shaped and have been printed on various forms of paper. Austria had previously experimented with embroidered stamps, including an embroidered Edelweiss in 2005 (Scott 2019), gentian flowers in 2008 (Scott 2175), and a dirndl dress in 2016 (Scott 2632). Switzerland issued the first-ever embroidered stamp in 2000 (Scott 1019), and Italy followed with a lace stamp in 2004 (Scott 2624).

Austrian Post, which made history by issuing the first non-fungible token stamps in 2019 (Scott 2801) and the first stamps with an embedded blockchain chip in 2021 (Scott number pending), has also used other non-paper materials for stamps, including stamps in the shape of lederhosen made out of leather in 2015 (Scott 2089), a porcelain rose in 2014 (Scott 2492), and a glass stamp depicting a pieta in 2021 (Scott pending). Singapore issued a 2008 beaded stamp to commemorate Peranakan ethnic heritage (Scott 1316) and followed with a similar stamp in 2021 (Scott pending), while many countries have issued stamps made of aluminum foil or other metals (eg, Tonga’s 1963 coin-shaped foil series, Scott 128-133 and C1-C6).

In addition to these novel philatelic materials, there have been a number of stamp-issuing entities that have experimented with non-parallelogram shapes. Unusual triangle and diamond stamps issued by Tannu



Tuva in Central Asia from 1926-1936 were once popular with stamp collectors, and inspired Nobel prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman to travel to then-Soviet Republic many decades after he saw them as a boy, as described in the 1991 Ralph Leighton book, *Tuva or Bust!* There have also been a few stamps with more than 4 sides. For example, Indonesia issued a pentagonal stamp in 2005 to honor that country's president and vice president, while India debuted a hexagonal tortoise stamp in 2008 — one of several hexagonal issues by various countries, including (fittingly) honeycomb-shaped stamps honoring bees. Thailand chose a heptagon to celebrate the 7th 12-year birthday cycle (ie, 84th birthday) of King Bhumibol in 2011. Innovative Austrian Post issued a circular polyurethane soccer ball in conjunction with the 2008 Euro football tournament.

Some stamps have not used regular geometric forms. Thailand's postal service commemorated Valentine's Day in 2013 with heart-shaped stamps, while similar

stamps were issued by Taiwan in 2012, Hong Kong in 2011, and by France several times since 2001. South Africa selected a waterdrop-shaped stamp in 2013 to commemorate United Nations World Water Day, and the United Kingdom's Royal Post chose a jigsaw puzzle motif in 2009 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of biologist Charles Darwin's birth. A few shapes have been humorous. For example, France honored the comic book character Asterix with a menhir-shaped stamp in 2009.

POTENTIAL COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors report no competing interests.

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