



The Story of Iceland's Worlds Fair Stamps

By Þór Þorsteins

A special series was authorized to help finance Iceland's participation in the New York Worlds Fair in 1939-1940. The cost of the exhibition was to be paid over two years based on equal contributions by individuals, institutions, and societies. Part of the cost was to be recovered by the sale of stamps and coins at the pavilion.

An exhibition council of 15 participants headed by a steering committee was appointed. The steering committee was headed by Vihjálmur Þór, who was assisted by Ragnar E. Kvaran and Haraldur Árnason. They were to implement the decisions of the exhibition council.

The Icelandic Post and Telegraph Agency agreed to three commemorative stamps for the fair, as well as a number of definitive values. Among the subjects considered for the commemorative stamps were the following:

1. A statue of Leif Ericson,
2. Leif Ericson at Vinland,
3. A statue of Þorfinnur Karlsefni,¹
4. A Viking ship,
5. A map showing the routes of Leif and Þorfinnur,
6. The Icelandic pavilion at the fair,
7. The Trylon and Perisphere at the fair,
8. The Icelandic flag.

Numbers 3, 5, 7, and 8 on the list were considered the best motifs for the fair stamps.

On February 25, 1939, Postmaster G. Hlíðdal instructed De la Rue & Co in London of the intended stamps, both commemoratives and definitives,² and that Árnason was his representative. He further indicated that Árnason was to transmit the printer's quotations to him and that the stamps were to be printed by April 1 or sooner. The Icelandic flag stamp (*Facit* Iceland 244) was retained on the list of stamps but dropped as a Worlds Fair issue.

On March 10, De la Rue submitted its printing estimate, which the postmaster found too high. Reduced quantities of three stamps were ordered and the same plate was to be used for two values (40 aur and 2 kr) of the Þorfinnur stamp, resulting in at least a 50 percent reduction in printing cost. At this time, the Post decided to drop a separate 40-aur Þorfinnur stamp and substitute the 40-aur geyser stamp that was issued May 10 as *Facit* 230.

Delivery of the Worlds Fair stamps was made via the "SS Manhattan" sailing from Southampton on April 20 bound for New York with the 20-, 35-, and 45-aur stamps. As is required, the Universal Postal Union was advised of the new issues, but was told that the 2-kr stamp was a definitive and not a Worlds Fair commemorative. Upon receipt of the balance of the shipment in Reykjavík, it was discovered that the 2-kr stamp bore the Worlds Fair lettering, which had not been intended. ➤



Halldór Pétursson's original drawing for the 20-aur stamp.



Drawing by Halldór Pétursson for the 35-aur stamp.



Drawing by Halldór Pétursson for the 45-aur stamp.

The postmaster requested that the exhibition council return the incorrect 2-kr stamps from New York and that none of them should be sold. The council replied on May 15, indicating that stamp sales were going well and inquiring how many of the 2-kr stamps had been printed. They furthermore requested permission to sell this item.

The postmaster advised the Ministry of these developments and recommended that there be no change from what was advertised to the public and that a new definitive 2-kr stamp without the Worlds Fair wording must be ordered. He advised De la Rue of the serious error on their part and that a great shortage of definitive 2-kr stamps existed. One hundred thousand 2-kr stamps in the Þorfinnur design were ordered. The printing house responded on May 31 regretting the mistake and agreeing to absorb the costs for this additional printing.

Late in July, the stamp column of the New York *Herald Tribune* newspaper reported that Iceland had issued a stamp without advertising it. The exhibition authorities reported to the postmaster that they had knowledge of the sale of 2-kr Worlds Fair stamps. They advised the postmaster that in their opinion the best course of action was to release the stamp and thus prevent speculation. The postmaster advised the ministry that 35 sheets of the 2-kr Worlds Fair stamps had been sold. There were reports that the stamps might have been sold as early as June 20.

The postmaster informed the Universal Postal Union on July 25 and dealers were informed that 75,000 stamps (changed to 50,000 the next day) would be issued.³ The Postal Service also advised De la Rue that it was prepared to pay for 50,000 of the 2-kr Worlds Fair stamps.

In December 1939 the Icelandic trade delegate, Vilhjálmur Þor, indicated that the government intended to participate in the Fair in 1940 and that 75,000 sets of three should be overprinted. Of this quantity, 10,000 were to remain in Iceland and 65,000 were to be sold at the fair.

The Postal Service reacted favorably to overprinting from 50,000 to 60,000 sets of three and 10,000 to 15,000 of the 2-kr stamp. The Postal Service further hoped that the public would accept this overprint of "1940" on each value.

On March 26, 1940 the Postal Service overprinted 60,000 sets of the 25, 35, and 45 aur stamps and 7,500 of the 2 kr. One-half of this quantity of the lower valued stamps was shipped to the fair along with 7,500 of the 2-kr stamp. The overprinted stamps were to go on sale in Iceland on May 11 and be valid for postage until the end of 1940.

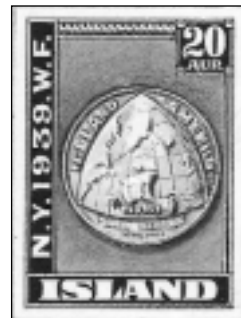
There was some discrepancy in either the number of 2-kr stamps that were overprinted or the amount shipped because on May 18, an additional 5,000 sets of the lower values and 1,000 of the 2 kr were shipped to New York. Because of confirmed orders for the stamp it was deemed sold out in Iceland.

Revenue from sale of the 1939 and 1940 issues in Iceland was used for a post office building fund.

Final tabulations reported that 75,000 sets of the lower values of the 1940 overprints and 24,500 of the 2-kr value were produced. Some 5,500 of the 2-kr value were destroyed in 1941. ■

(Author's Note: The basic information for this article was obtained from the records of Iceland Post and the De la Rue printing firm. Part of this article appeared in the NORDIA 1996 exhibition catalog.)

(Editor's Note: SCC's former Treasurer, Howard Schloss, who specializes in the philately and the history of the 1939-40 New York Worlds Fair, assisted with editing this article.) ►



Imperforate proof, with frame design by Árni Sveinbjörnsson and illustration by Halldór Pétursson. Some changes made before printing.



The 2-kr stamp printed and sold in error.

References:

Brandt, Don, *Exploring Iceland Through Its Stamps*, Iceland Review, Reykjavík, 1991.

Jónsson, Jón A., *One Hundred Years of Icelandic Stamps, 1873-1973*, Post and Telecommunications Administration, Reykjavík, 1977.

¹ Þorfinnur Karlsefni was an Icelandic merchant who led a party of settlers to the New World in 1004 with the intention of permanent settlement. During their stay, his wife bore a child — the first European descendant born in North America. Unfortunately, flintlock weapons were not yet available and the natives were unfriendly. The Vikings were forced to leave in 1007. It was not until 1587, almost 600 years later, that Virginia Dare became the first child born to English parents in the New World. Virginia Dare and her parents are shown on a 1937 commemorative, *Scott U.S. 796*.

² A commemorative stamp is issued for a special occasion. A definitive stamp is intended for more extended use and may be reissued.

³ Compare *Facit* Iceland 255, *Scott* Iceland 216, and *Facit* 260 and *Scott* 229.

Icelandic First Day Covers at the New York Worlds Fair

By Howard Schloss

The first day covers for the 1939 Icelandic stamp appeared on April 30, the opening day of the Worlds Fair.

The cover shown in Figure 1 was prepared by Ludwig W. Staehle for Jacques Minkus, who operated a philatelic concession in Gimbel's Department Store in New York. Not many cacheted first day covers exist since they were not particularly popular among conventional stamp collectors of the period. The cover, sold by Gimbels for \$0.50, does not contain a 2-kr stamp since its issuance was unintended as is carefully explained in the accompanying article by Þór Þorsteins



Figure 1.

A more valuable first day cover is the one for the Icelandic overprint of 1940, which was issued on May 11, 1940, the first day of the Fair in 1940. A return address on Figure 2 indicates J. Wahlgren of Sweden, who may have designed this cover.

Unknown to the Icelandic planners, the British Army had scheduled an invasion of Iceland for May 10. This was intended to forestall German occupation of strategic Iceland, which would have been disastrous for the Allies.

Many of the 1940 FDCs were held in Reykjavík and bear backstamps of Liverpool, England on December 1, 1940. Some of the covers bear censor strips while others do not. From Liverpool, the covers followed normal wartime routing to their destinations.

I am indebted to Alan Warren for a photocopy of a cover to Sutton Coldfield in England, which was censored and arrived May 23, 1940. It is not known how many covers were dispatched this soon. ■



Figure 2.

Reference:

Gimbels Stamp News, Vol. 2, No. 5, May 1940.