

# Declassifying the Classifieds

Classified ads are by their nature very compact, and abbreviations are common. But sometimes “classified” almost seems to have a secondary meaning. Like a classified document, classified ads sometimes have an aura of secrecy, and only those who are insiders can understand them. A recent car ad in my local newspaper touted the features of the car for sale: “4d, auto, air, pl/m/w, cd, cc.” I was able to figure out that the car was a four-door with automatic transmission, air conditioning, a compact disk player, and cruise control, but I still don’t know what “pl/m/w” means! Now try to imagine that you are a recent immigrant who is fluent in English but has no knowledge of the special vocabulary of automobiles. You might wonder in what language the seller was writing.

A new stamp collector may experience similar confusion when browsing the classified ads in a philatelic publication. Let’s see if we can “declassify” some of the common terms used in the classifieds.

We’ll start with some of the classifications themselves. Where do you look to find an ad selling something you want to buy? Some headings are pretty straightforward — Worldwide, U.S. Booklets, or Used Canada — but some headings use abbreviations and *any* abbreviation has the potential to stump a new collector, particularly if it refers to the conventional meaning of a term *as it is used in philately*, which may not be obvious to someone just starting out.

For example, FDC = First Day Cover. Easy once you know. And BEP Cards are the souvenir cards produced by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, often for International stamp shows. But just what are the distinctions between Mixtures, Packets, Lots, and Collections?

## Mixtures

Mixtures usually have a lot of duplication. *Mission Mixtures* are accumulations of stamps similar to those collected



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by charitable organizations, either from their own mail or from donations, although nowadays most “Mission” mixtures are from non-religious sources. Expect lots of the common definitive stamps from the past couple of years (the vast majority of which will be from the single country specified in the ad), and few if any higher value stamps. The stamps will generally be on paper, so they need to be soaked. There are often quite a few damaged stamps. If you love looking for things like die-cut varieties, you’ll have a fine time with a mission mixture, but don’t expect to be able to fill in a lot of empty spaces in your album. Similar mixtures are often labeled “kiloware,” meaning that they are sold by weight (often by the ounce or pound rather than the kilogram) rather than by the number of stamps or their catalogue value. Mixtures can be on paper or off paper.

*Bank mixtures* can be expected to have more stamps with high face value, reflecting the incidence of registered, Express, and mail other than first-class

letters received by banks. They may have higher value foreign stamps as well. Again, the name is a convention, not a description, and most “bank” mixtures don’t actually come from banks.

## Packets

Packets are usually small collections of all-different stamps. The descriptions are usually fairly specific: “500 all-different used Israel,” for example, is pretty easy to understand. Don’t expect any happy surprises here — any rare varieties are likely to have been spotted by the packet maker. Packets are a great way to fill album spaces at minimal expense. But beware of inflated claims. For example, “1000 different, \$200 Catalogue value” means that the stamps are all (or nearly all) of the minimum Scott Catalogue Value of 20¢ per stamp, which may be a reasonable price to pay for a single stamp, but is not the going rate for large lots of common stamps.

## Lots

Lots are generally grab-bag accumulations of all sorts of philatelic items. Unless the description states otherwise, a lot will be a mostly unsorted box of whatever the owner is trying to clear out of an overstuffed stamp room. There may be mint and used stamps, postal stationery, covers, supplies — you name it! Some lots even say they include sports cards, coins, or other non-philatelic items. Lots are often what is left after a dealer has stripped out the high-value items (which can be sold individually) from an estate accumulation. Some lots have been hastily sorted, so pleasant surprises are possible.

Most new collectors find something of interest in a lot, but be prepared for a lot of stuff you don’t really want to be included in the assortment. You can sometimes resell the portion of a large lot that does not interest you for what you paid for the whole thing — or even more. But packrats beware, you can fill up your stamp room very quickly with

lots that you intend to sort through “one of these days.”

## Collections

Collections are usually less chaotic than lots. They may even be on album pages. However, you also may receive glassines, stock pages, retired sales books, or just stamps that have been removed from an existing collection. There may be some duplication, but usually not much. Expect the high catalogue value stamps to have been cherry-picked out by the seller.

Sometimes sellers have their own definitions of *lots* or *mixtures* or *collections*, so read carefully and check out the related classifications for offers that may not fit the rough-and-ready distinctions made here.

## Approvals

Another heading is Approvals. Often the ad begins with a free or almost-free offer, a desirable item or set of stamps for a dollar, perhaps, *with approvals*. That means that when you purchase this bargain item, the seller will ship what you have purchased along with other stamps “on approval.” You have a limited period of time to examine these stamps in your home. Then you need to pay for them or mail them back to the seller. Approvals can be a convenient way to get the stamps you want, and most sellers will tailor the approvals they send you to your interests. There is no profit for the dealer, after all, in sending U.S. approvals, for example, to someone who only collects Peru. The downside is that approvals, at least at first, are likely to be low-value stamps, and it may cost you more in return postage to send back the stamps you don’t want than it does to pay for the stamps you do want. You will probably continue to receive approvals from the dealer until you cancel the service.

### Sample Ad I

Let’s say you’ve decided to look at worldwide mixtures. You come across an ad for “1/4 pound, off paper. Many HV. No CTO, dunes, IC, or cinderellas.”

**Off paper:** This term means no more or less than what it says. The stamps may have been soaked off paper, but they may also be unused or canceled-to-order.

**HV:** HV stands for “high value,” usually stamps that were issued at a face val-



The “SERVICE” overprint makes this an Official stamp, one of the BOB categories.



Air mail stamps are among the most common BOB items.



The neat corner cancel is a strong hint that a stamp may be a CTO; the gum on the back of this stamp confirmed its CTO status.



Many “Iron Curtain” stamps feature popular topics.



A “dune” that is also a BOB stamp — air mail. This stamp, unlike some “dunes,” is Scott listed.

ue larger than the first-class domestic rate for ordinary letters (one ounce in the U.S.) at the time of issue. The recently-issued U.S. 78-cent Mary Lasker stamp is an example of “HV.”

**CTO:** This ad says “no CTO,” which means that this seller has not included canceled-to-order stamps. These are stamps bearing cancels, but they have not been used in the mail.



Mixtures often consist of mainly common stamps, although the seller may include a “sweetener” of some higher value stamps.



Semi-postals are one of the most common BOB categories.

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The cancels are usually applied to enable the issuing country to sell unused stamps cheaply with no chance that the stamps would eventually be used for postage. Some CTOs are canceled with the same devices used on mailed items, while others have cancels applied that simply make a small circular mark on the corner of each stamp. Some even have the cancels printed on then at the time the stamp is manufactured. They are usually attractive, not having been put through the rigors of postal usage, and sometimes they have full gum on the back. They are usually cheaper than either mint stamps or postally used stamps. Some collectors like them, and some avoid them. The point is that your collection is **your** collection, and only you can decide if you want to include CTOs.

**Dunes:** That was a term that puzzled me for some months. It is a derisive term used to refer to “sand dune countries,” primarily the Trucial States (Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujaira, Manama, Qatar, Ras al Khaima, Sharjah and Umm al Qiwain) and other Middle Eastern entities that at one time churned out huge quantities of stamps for the collector market, many of them never used for postal purposes. While some of these emissions were not even available in the countries that issued them, others did see postal usage, and covers from these areas are prized by some collectors. Some are not listed in the *Scott Catalogue*. Many are pretty, and the cost is low, so collect them — or not — according to your own preferences.

**IC:** IC refers to Iron Curtain. During the second half of the twentieth century, nations in the Soviet bloc such as Poland, Hungary, Romania and others, as well as the Soviet Union itself, issued many

hundreds of colorful topical stamps, many more than were needed for postal purposes. Some exist primarily as CTOs. Some collectors avoid them, while others love them.

**Cinderellas:** Cinderellas are labels that look like stamps but have no postal validity. Charity labels such as Christmas seals are a subcategory of cinderellas. Many of these labels are avidly collected, and they now have their own exhibiting division within APS.

Another disapproving term used for CTOs, dunes, Iron Curtain stamps, and some cinderellas, as well as stamps from some philatelically unrestrained African nations, is *wallpaper*. Don't let that label keep you from collecting any stamp that you want in your collection.

### **Sample Ad II**

Maybe you looked in the classifieds for stamps from Canada and found “MNH, LQ, SQ, SS and BOB, SCV \$100.” What is that all about?

**MNH:** MNH means “mint, never hinged.” Many collectors consider that term redundant — they say that a mint stamp is ALWAYS never hinged, that a hinge mark or disturbance of any kind downgrades the stamp form “mint” to “unused.” Not everyone agrees, and you will also see ads for *MLH* (mint, lightly hinged) or even *MHH* (mint, heavily hinged). Collect what you want, but be aware that different people mean different things by “mint.”

**LQ/SQ:** LQ and SQ are terms found only in ads for Canadian stamps. They are two popular sets of stamps from the reign of Queen Victoria: “Large Queens” and “Small Queens.” Other countries may have their own abbreviations that can confound the beginner. Don't be

afraid to ask the seller — we were all beginners at one time.

**SS:** SS refers to “souvenir sheets,” a term that now is often used to include almost any miniature sheet with decorative selvage, even if it's not a souvenir of anything.

**BOB:** BOB or B-O-B is “back of the book,” which refers to any stamp that is listed in catalogues after the main listing. Air mail stamps, semi-postals, postage dues, parcel post stamps, and many others are listed in their own categories in sections that follow the listing of regular postage stamps. Different countries may have different types of BOB material — not all countries have issued special delivery or newspaper or railroad stamps, for example.

**SCV:** SCV means *Scott Catalogue Value*. Large lots commonly sell for a small percentage of catalogue value. In U.S. publications “cat. val.” or just “catalogue value” refers to *Scott Catalogues*, as do numbers. For example, a U.S. 231 is the two-cent Columbian stamp. The number may refer to some other stamp in a different catalogue, but Scott is the most common stamp numbering and valuing system in the United States.

*Linn's Stamp News* includes a list of some common abbreviations at the beginning of its classified ad section.

See page 876 of this issue for the AP “Classifieds.” Happy shopping!

I welcome your comments at [ada@stamps.org](mailto:ada@stamps.org), but please put “APS” in the subject line, as otherwise your note may be discarded as spam. Or write to me in care of the APS address in the front of this magazine. Postal mail usually takes 2–3 weeks to get from Bellefonte to me, so please be patient.

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