

# *Abram Games and his 1956 photogravure stamp design course*

A sixtieth anniversary commemoration



**Glenn H Morgan**

with invaluable contributions from  
**Naomi Games** and **Dan Reisinger**



# *Introduction*

There is possibly no stamp design created specifically for photogravure reproduction that extols the tonal qualities of the printing process better than this dummy stamp.

It was produced by renowned graphic designer Abram Games in 1956 in preparation for teaching students and artists employed by the Israel Post Office how to maximise the potential of the process during an 18 lesson, six week design course.

There is a relevance to British philatelists in that initial sketches, artwork, proofing and cylinder making were all undertaken in the United Kingdom, while those collectors of the stamps of Israel will be interested because the printing was executed in that country by the Government Printer.

*Glenn Morgan, October 2015*

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# 1. Background to the Test Stamp

The story of this important dummy stamp was told by Naomi Games, daughter of Abram, at a British Postal Museum & Archive lecture in September 2015....

*"The Israeli Ministry of Posts issued its first stamps in 1948 and they were printed by photolithography. In 1953 the Israeli Government Printer installed its first photogravure printing machine, but it soon realised that the process demanded a different approach to stamp design when creating original drawings for monochromatic photogravure stamps.*

*In 1956, three years later, Abram was asked by the Ministry of Posts to conduct a six week course teaching 21 young designers and students how to produce stamps. His brief stated that he was to prepare a stamp in London to its final stage. The design had to invoke production and efficiency and had to take into account the subtleties of photogravure printing. The text on all Israeli stamps had to be in Hebrew, English and Arabic, and that posed quite a few problems.*

*Abram supervised the proofing of the stamp in London and he travelled on an empty cargo boat on its return trip to Israel from Harwich docks. He had with him the heavy printing cylinder, drawings and essays.*

*He taught the students to redraw the stamp stage-by-stage. Abram said: "I prepared the rough sketch based on the head of a Kibbutznik (i.e. a person who lives on a Kibbutz, or collective farm) and he wore a Tembel (a cotton hat)".*

*The Israeli authorities were not happy with the design because they stated that he was wearing a German military helmet. In truth, there is a similarity, albeit not Abram's intention, although I think that secretly my father rather enjoyed these sort of problems!*



Spot the difference.... or similarity.  
Kibbutznik cotton hat. (left), Test Stamp (central), German metal helmet (right).

*Abram deliberately incorporated the words 'TEST STAMP' in order to establish its true purpose beyond any doubt. Its tonal range and detail extended over as wide a range as possible to best suit the photogravure process, calling for the most exacting process work. Not only was it to be a test for the designers, but also for the printers.*

*Rumours circulated that this Test Stamp was a submitted design that had been rejected, but this was not the case."*

The above extract from Naomi's talk, as used in this paper with her kind permission, properly sets the scene for this dummy stamp, but also highlighted a need to seek answers from her to three important questions....

**Q. What company undertook the proofing exercise?**

A. They were proofed by Chambon in London under AG's supervision.

**Q. What company produced the photogravure printing cylinder?**

A. The cylinder was also produced by Chambon in London.

**Q. Is the original brief from the Israeli Post Office still in existence?**

A. Yes, a copy of a briefing letter sent to Abram by Moshe Hesky, Israel Philatelic Services, is held in The Estate of Abram Games.

Unbeknown to your author at the time of initially starting to compile this paper, the answers to these questions, along with lots of other useful information and imagery, is contained in the book *The Running Stag* (see *Further reading*), which Naomi brought to your author's attention.

## 2. *The Brief from the Israel Post Office*

The briefing letter sent to Abram by Moshe Hesky, Israel Philatelic Services as held in the Estate of Abram Games...

*"You are requested to prepare a dummy stamp according to your own choice, the cylinder for which will be prepared by Messrs. Chambon in London under your supervision.*

*Starting with 3 April, 1956, you will lecture to a number of Israel graphic artists, including three or four gifted students of Bezalel, Jerusalem, and two or three employees of Israel Government Printer, on the technique of preparing the models for photogravure work, especially postage stamps. The participants will have to re-draw the dummy stamp, which will then be executed and printed by the Government Printer's workshop under your guidance.*

*Lectures will be given twice or three times weekly, as necessary, and will last for about six weeks.*

*The necessary materials will be bought by the Government Printer through the good offices of Messrs. Samuel Jones, of London.*

*The above is the outline of the programme, which I hope conforms with your own suggestions. I should like to make the following remarks to some of the above paragraphs:*

*We discussed the question of whether a real stamp should be executed or a dummy stamp. We came to the conclusion that the prolonged procedure as to receiving the confirmation of the real stamp would endanger the project, as we understand you wish to arrive in Israel by 25 March in order to spend the Passover holidays here and prepare the lectures. Please be good enough to let me have a rough of the intended dummy stamp.*

*I suggest that the stamp, in addition to the usual contents (Israel in three alphabets and three-figure denomination) should have some additional text, as matters of text are especially troublesome for our designers.*

*Messrs Chambon will be informed about the project by the Government Printer.*

*The interest in the project is considerable. About forty designers have applied. As we are interested mainly in artists who have already executed a postage stamp or are likely to execute stamps for us, we shall try to limit the participation to these individuals\*.*



*The Government Printer has kindly promised to take care of a suitable room for the lectures.*

*Messrs. Samuel Jones, of London, are informed and will await your instructions as to the purchase of the material... They will also take care of the despatch of the material if requested by you. I think we shall leave the proper arrangements as to purchase and forwarding of this material to you.*

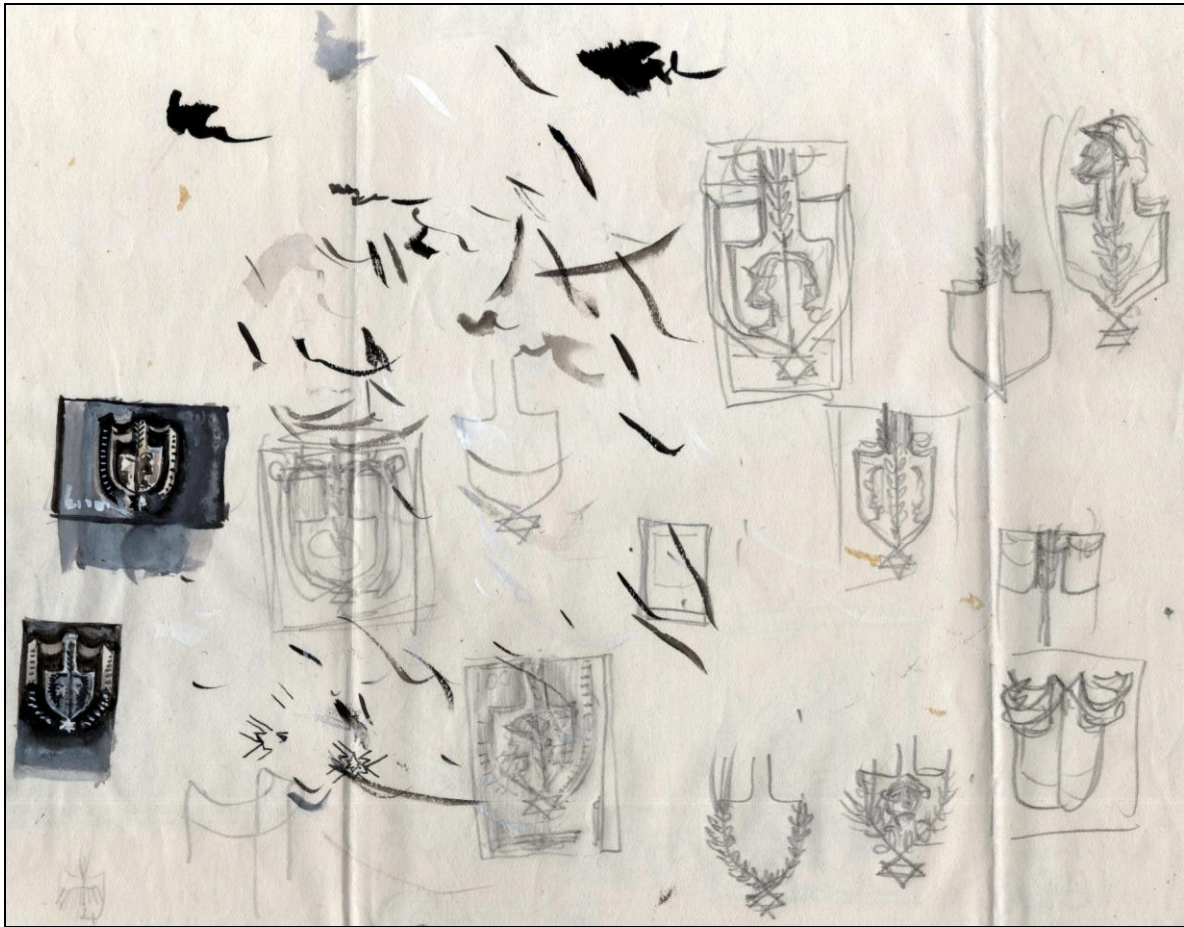
*We shall also request Mr Shamir, of the Israel Embassy in London, to take care of the despatch of the material by diplomatic pouch if this should be necessary for lack of time or for any other reason. "*

© **The Estate of Abram Games.**

\* Attendee numbers were eventually culled to around 50% of original applicants by the Israel Post Office and the 21 participants included the following students and artists:

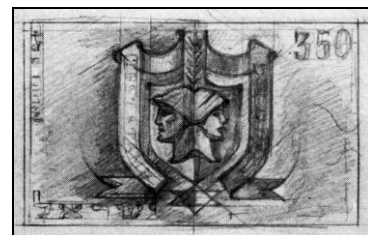
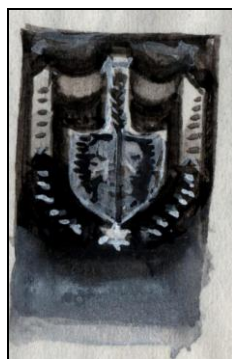
- The Shamir brothers
- George Hamori
- Miriam Karoly
- G Rothschild
- Z Lippmann ('Roli')
- Friedel Stern
- Paul Kor
- Zvi Narkis
- Yaakov Zim
- Yitzchak Yoresh
- Asher Kalderon
- and
- Dan Reisinger

### 3 *Preparatory drawings by Abram Games*



© *The Estate of Abram Games.*

A selection of horizontal and vertical initial thoughts for this test design.



*All four images* © *The Estate of Abram Games.*

Progressive rough sketches, for both vertical and horizontal designs.



#### 4. Absolutely NOT the original artwork



NOT the artwork of Abram Games.

The artwork depicted above was offered in 2012 at an American stamp auction (not eBay). It was for sale at US\$2,236 and it is assumed that it sold, as it has not been offered since.

When Naomi was shown a scan of the artwork, alarm bells rang with her and she consulted her brother. Her email response clarified matters...

*"Thanks for sending the artwork. Daniel, my brother, and I are 100% certain this is NOT the work of AG. The signature is not his and the quality of the work is definitely not his. He would never have painted or drawn like that. It's very clumsy.*

*It may have been a copy by one of the students on the course or someone tracing and selling a fraud. The typography is very different too. Please don't credit this as AG's as it is not. A mystery!*

*Besides, unless the artwork was stolen in the first place, AG never sold or gave away work unless in specific cases to the client. Rarely!"*

It is clear that the purchaser bought a 'dud' and highlights the need for not taking things at face value, for at times they are not at all what they at first appear to be. *Caveat Emptor*.

The genuine original artwork is not held in the Estate of Abram Games, and is assumed lost.

## 5. *Dan Reisinger's attendance on the course*

Naomi had mentioned during her talk that graphic designer Dan Reisinger was one of the 21 artists who had attended the photogravure course and that he was still working in Israel. Your author therefore took the opportunity of making contact with him via his website to see whether he had any reminiscences about the sessions....

*"Dear Glenn,*

*Yes, I did participate in Abram Games's photogravure stamp design course in 1956. As a great admirer of AG's posters, I felt honored and privileged to be invited and to learn from the great artist.*

*At the time, I was serving in the Israel Air Force and needed a special permit to leave the base for each session of the course. My enthusiasm must have influenced my commanders in their decision to give me permission each time.*

*Participants included both young and senior / established graphic artists. AG gave each of us a photocopy of the Test Stamp he designed; our task was to copy it with all gradations of the single color - suited to photogravure.*

*Since the original was executed with an airbrush, most of the participants used the same technique. As a soldier, I did not have airbrush equipment or technology..... I executed the stamp exercise with an ordinary brush - achieving the relevant hues by mixing the right colors for the required gradations, as in AG's sample. I am still in possession of this exercise.*

*It was a great satisfaction for me to receive Abram's very positive comments on my effort.*

*With best wishes,*

*Dan Reisinger "*

Dan has gone on to have a great design career with commissions from many important client names down the years and more than 20 one-man exhibitions of his work.

He also received seven major awards, including the *Israel Prize* - the highest recognition of the State for professional achievement and the *Order of the Knights' Cross* - awarded by the President of Hungary for his contribution to cultural relations between Israel and Hungary.

While on the course, Dan re-created the Test Stamp and he kindly sent a scan of his original artwork for exclusive reproduction on the next page.



© Dan Reisinger.

Of particular interest is how the hat has been rendered. There can be no confusion with a German steel helmet, as all lines of stitching are clearly rendered. Also, the gradation of colour shows all the hallmarks of airbrushing, but as he mentions in his email, Dan never had access to this tool. Note also how the top right and bottom left inscriptions are omitted.

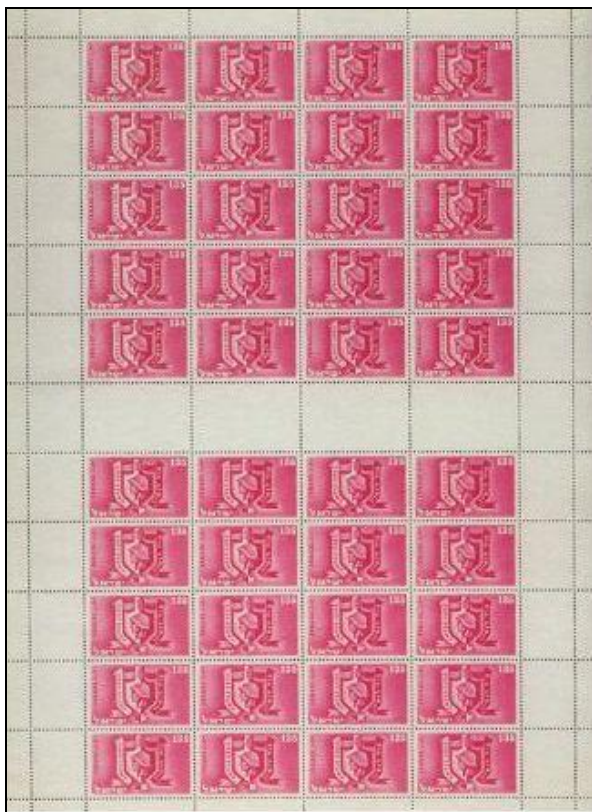
A further artwork is shown below that Dan had created as a part of the course depicting the 'production and efficiency' elements requested by the Israel Post Office.



© Dan Reisinger.



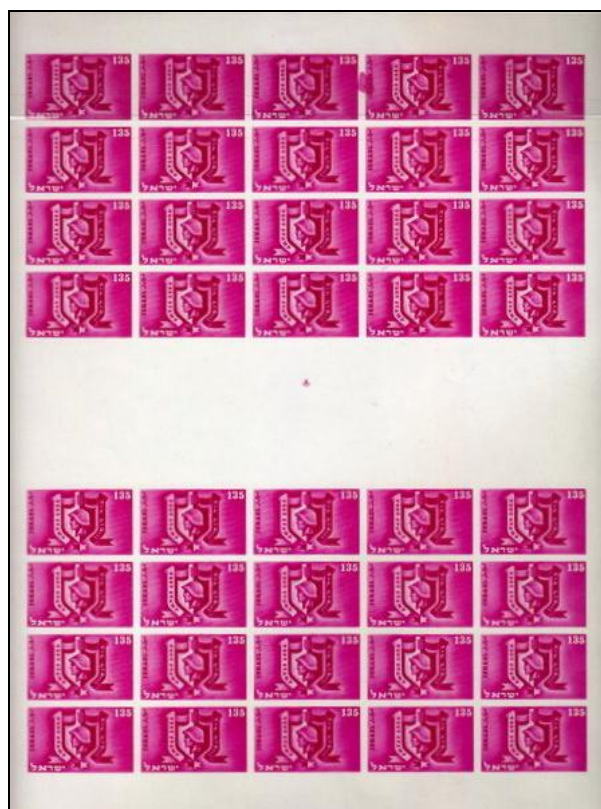
## 6. *The two sheet formats*



Towards the end of the course, Abram's dummy stamp design was put to press at the Israel Government Printer.

Two different sheet formats have been seen, namely 10 rows of 4 with a single gutter and 8 rows of 5 with a double-height gutter.

Could one be the alleged 'English printing' talked about by collectors (possibly the sheet alongside in violet-red) and the other the Israeli run (above sheet in dull red)?



## 7. *The different printings and colours seen*



It is strongly suspected that these colours will have been from the Israeli printed version. No further colours have been seen, but a 'dark blue' version exists according to Cherrystone Auctions [USA].



This block of four is clearly a different printing to the ones at the top of this page. Not seen, but the detailing is different, aside from the deep shade. Could this be the rumoured 'English printing'? Pure speculation, although proofing did occur in England and this version only appears to exist imperforate, which is more in line with proofing. Note how the right hand text is not in white, but appears to be screened.



## 8. *Stamp printing by photogravure in Israel*

As Naomi has already mentioned, in 1953 the Israeli Government Printer installed its first photogravure printing machine. The photograph below depicts the printing of postage stamps underway at its premises in Israel using that printing process.

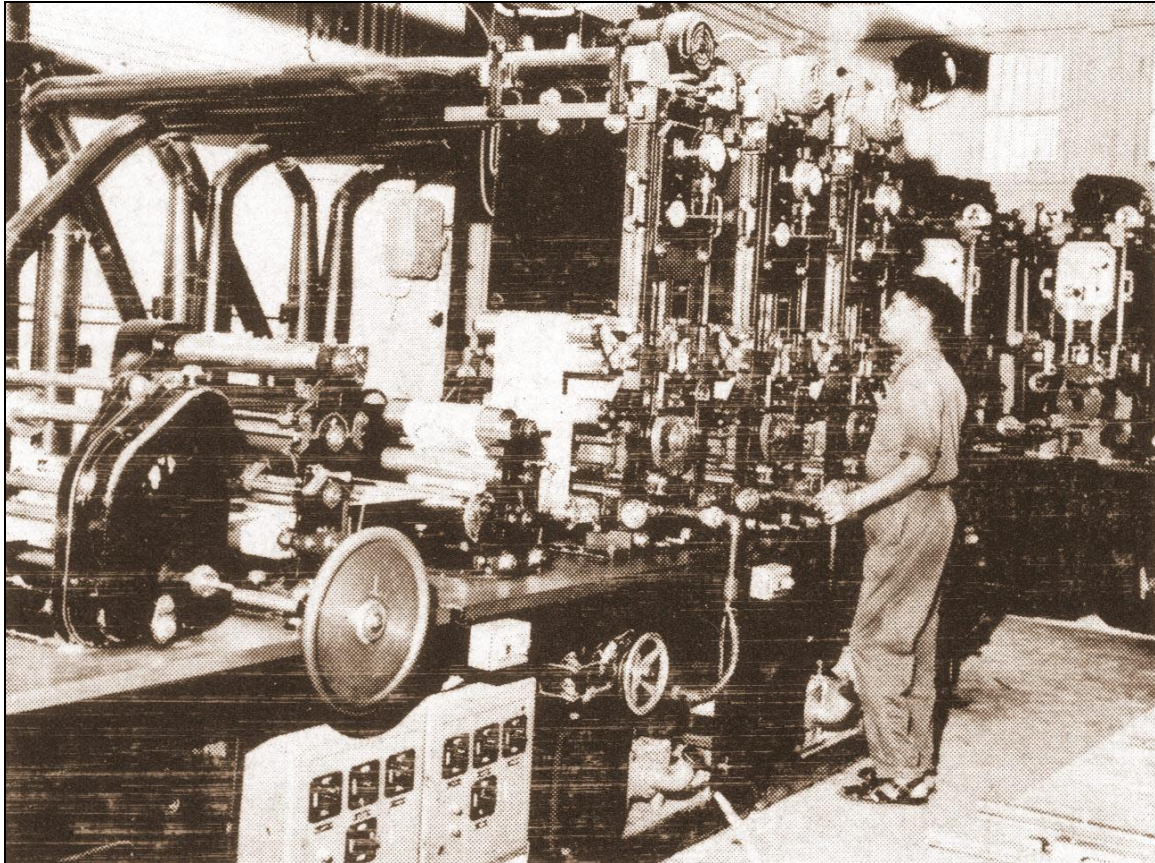


Image from *Israel Catalogue number 8*, 1970. Published by the Philatelic Service of Israel.

It is unlikely that the stamp on press at the time that the photograph was taken would have been the Test Stamp. The image is undated, but it has to have been 1953 or later.

## 9. *Additional comments*

The following additional information comes from the files of your author.

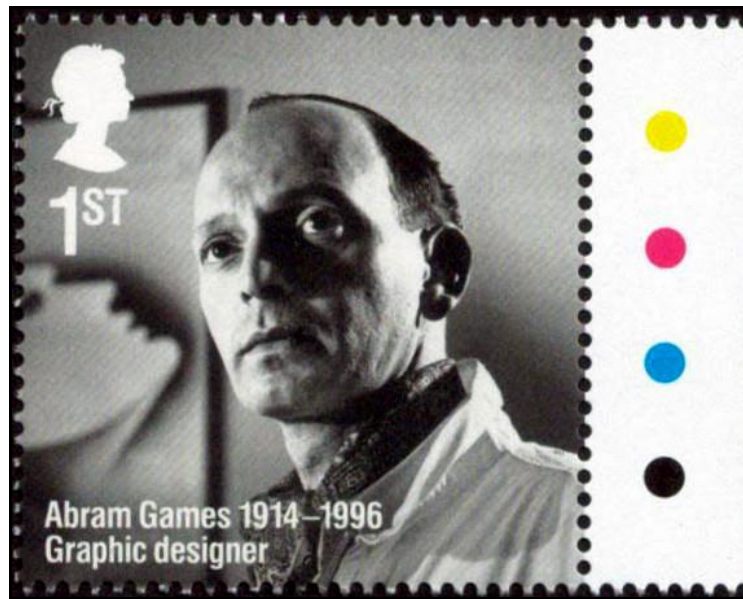
- To this day, this dummy stamp is frequently referred to as the "Helmeted Soldier", "Helmeted Man", "Army Series" or the "Steel Helmet" dummy stamp. We now know that all such names are wildly inaccurate.
- The date of issue is frequently stated to be 1948, not 1956, generally by those stamp dealers wishing to sell copies as being a rejected design for the initial series from the newly formed State of Israel.
- The *Mosden Israel Catalogue*, 1969, states that this stamp is part of an Army Series. "*Rejected essay for army series because the helmet resembled German soldier, exists in three colours*". Clearly inaccurate.
- The Hebrew apparently best translates as "Bul Bitachon" (Security Stamp), according to an auction description.

## 10. *Further reading*

- **Philatelic Services.** *Israel Catalogue number 8*, Israel, 1970. Includes image of printing by lithography and by photogravure at the Government Printer.
- **The Running Stag** by Meir Persoff. Published by Robson Lowe, GB, 1973. This book tells the extensive story of this dummy stamp, including imagery of preparatory artwork by two further students on the course, namely Yaakov Zim and Paul Kor. These are not shown within these pages owing to them being subject to copyright, clearances for which could not be obtained.

## 11. *With thanks*

Special thanks to Naomi Games and Dan Reisinger for their invaluable contributions regarding the content of this paper, for sharing their reminiscences and for giving their permission to incorporate key philatelic items within these pages.



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For more information about the prolific graphic design output of Abram Games, go to the website run by the Estate of Abram Games at [www.abramgames.com](http://www.abramgames.com), where a gallery of his work, links to other sites and publications are to be found.

The website of Israel-based multi-award winning graphic designer Dan Reisinger is located at [www.danreisinger.com](http://www.danreisinger.com), where lots of commissions for his many clients are depicted.

Extensive stamp printing and other philatelic information can be found at [www.stampprinters.info](http://www.stampprinters.info). The quarterly newsletter about British dummy stamps and the printers that created them is online at [www.stampprinters.info/dummystamps.htm](http://www.stampprinters.info/dummystamps.htm). This publication can also be downloaded as a PDF from the [stampprinters.info/dummystamps.htm](http://stampprinters.info/dummystamps.htm) link.