



Skill: *Classifying*

## Olympilex Lesson 7

# Stamp Centering and Condition



If you go to the movies and the picture isn't centered in the middle of the screen, there's a good chance someone might complain to the manager. When looking at a framed picture or painting, most of us prefer to see a centered image. Certainly, this is true with most philatelists—but for reasons in addition to simple preference.

Among the factors that can affect the value and attractiveness of a stamp are centering and condition. The first of these—**centering**—refers to the location of the stamp image or design within the outer edges of the stamp. Though millions of copies of a particular stamp may have been printed, often the paper moves so quickly through the presses that it's difficult to print the image exactly in the middle of the stamp's borders. As a result, many stamps, particularly older issues, were printed off-center. How far off-center can affect a stamp's value.

To judge the centering of a stamp, philatelists have agreed to some general guidelines. These are not scientific or mathematically exact, and it is possible in a borderline case for two collectors to disagree. Generally, these guidelines work for describing most stamps. The four stamps shown below illustrate the rules for describing centering.

Figure 1 shows a stamp with “good”—or “average”—centering. You'll see both terms used



Fig. 1. “Good” ( or “Average”) centering. Here, perforations on the left edge cut into stamp design. Short and missing perforations and stain at lower left decrease the value of this stamp.



Fig. 2. “Fine” centering results when design is clear of perforations but is off-center on two sides (here top and left). Stamp color is slightly duller than the other examples shown here.



Fig. 3. “Very Fine” centering results when design is slightly off-center on one side but entire design is well clear of the perforations. No defects are visible on face of this stamp.



Fig. 4. “Superb” centering results when design is perfectly centered on all four sides. This plus the stamp's extra large margins, brightness, and lack of defects make it a premium stamp.

interchangeably, and they refer to a stamp where the image is so far off-center that the **perforations** (tiny holes that separate stamps) cut into the edge of the design. For many collectors, stamps with good centering are perfectly suitable for their albums—particularly since they usually cost much less than stamps with better centering.

Figure 2 shows a stamp with “fine” centering, which means that two margins of the stamp’s image are off-center—but the image remains clear of the perforations. Sometimes, the perforations will come right up to the edge of the image, but the key to fine centering is that the perforations don’t cut into the design. The majority of older stamps tend to fall into this category.

When the stamp image has only one margin off-center, it is described as “very fine” (see Figure 3). This is a very popular grade for advanced collectors—especially those who exhibit their stamps in competition. Old stamps with very fine centering tend to be rare, which can make them expensive.

Figure 4 shows a stamp with “superb” centering—meaning the image is centered perfectly within the stamp’s edges. While modern printing presses can achieve perfect centering, this is seldom found on really old stamps—which can make old stamps with superb centering very expensive. Superb centering is the most sought-after grade for advanced collectors. For those who exhibit competitively, having key items with superb centering can sometimes mean higher awards from the judges.

When advertising stamps for sale or trade, most collectors and dealers use these four grades of centering, abbreviating them as “G” for good (or “Ave” for average), “F” for fine, “VF” for very fine, and “S” for superb.

When you see good, fine, very fine, and superb copies of the same stamp, the differences are pretty clear. Unfortunately, however, it’s not always that easy. For example, imagine having a stamp that fell in the middle of two of the grades of centering. This is not only possible—it’s what usually happens (most often with a stamp that falls somewhere in between fine and very fine centering). Often, you’ll see such stamps described as “F/VF”. Stamps that fall between very fine and superb may be listed as “VF+” or as “XF” (extra fine). Just remember, there’s no scientific way to absolutely grade every stamp’s centering. Centering can be important to a stamp’s value, but this is more true for rare and expensive stamps.

When acquiring stamps, another factor to take into account is **condition**. Condition refers to those factors (other than centering) that affect the physical appearance and attractiveness of a stamp. Is the paper the stamp was printed on fresh, clean, bright, and free from stains and smudges? Are there any creases, tears, or thin places in the paper? Has someone attempted to repair any damages? Is the ink bright and intense? Was the stamp separated cleanly at the perforations, or are there short or missing perfs? Does the stamp have full, undamaged gum, or are there hinge marks or remnants still attached? Is the stamp missing all gum? Has it been regummed? If the stamp is used, is the cancel light and clean, or does heavy inking hide much of the image?

How important are a stamp's centering and condition? For exhibitors, investors, and other advanced collectors who deal with rare stamps that cost hundreds or thousands of dollars each, centering and condition can be critical. Some rare stamps are valuable in any condition, and good centering and condition can make them even more valuable. Most stamp collectors, however, don't spend \$500 on a single stamp—not when \$500 might buy 10,000 or more stamps for their collection.

The general rule is that if you can choose from among multiple copies of the same stamp—all at the same price—select the one with the best centering and condition. You'll probably have to pay more for VF stamp in good condition than a F stamp in average condition. This means you'll have to consider whether *quality* is more important than *quantity* to you. That is to say, if you have \$10 to buy stamps, you'll get more stamps by accepting F centering with hinge marks on the back rather than insisting on VF centering and excellent condition. On the other hand, you may value the beauty of a well-centered stamp in excellent condition.

Many collectors handle this dilemma by choosing less-than-perfect stamps—or even damaged stamps known as “space fillers”—with plans to replace them in the future with better quality stamps. In the end, it is a very personal decision. What's important to *you*—as many spaces filled as possible in your album, or attractive stamps that are clean, bright, and well-centered? That's just one more reason why philately is fun—it's very personal, since you make the decisions about what goes into your collection