

# The Merry Widow

10¢ Special Delivery Issue of 1908



Model of original sketch

Since 1885 United States special delivery stamps have represented the likeness of a messenger boy on foot and later on a motorcycle. The Postmaster General in 1908 felt it was time for a change. In 1908 a well known New York architect, Whitney Warren, presented his idea for a novel stamp design. Postmaster General George von L. Meyer listened. The result was the green special delivery stamp. Its first day of issue was December 12, 1908, while the order canceling its official life provided for a June 9, 1909 finale.

This stamp remains one of the most artistic designs ever produced for a United States stamp. Mr. Warren studied art in Paris and records indicate that the first designs were prepared there commencing with three pen and ink sketches, first shown to the Postmaster General by a friend. Warren was encouraged to reduce the basic designs to stamp scale for submission to the Third Assistant Postmaster General and Joseph Ralph, Director of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Several drawings apparently crossed the ocean and received critical comments from Bureau personnel who wanted to design all United States stamps.

The official Bureau view of the design appeared in a brief article in the *Philatelic Gazette* (Feb. 15, 1911) which noted that "He (Warren) submitted a large drawing, which after being reduced to the size of the stamp, did not prove satisfactory. A second drawing showed some improvement and we accepted it with a few changes in the design made at the suggestion of the Director of the Bureau. Both original drawings showed a 'V' instead of a 'U' in U.S.

Warren decided to use the Helmet of Mercury as a central feature. In Roman mythology, Mercury was the messenger of the gods. In 1903, a hat inspired by Viennese composer Franz Lehar's operetta, the "Merry Widow", appeared. It was a

large cartwheel type of straw sailor hat for summer wear. Immediately, the philatelic press dubbed the stamp the Merry Widow issue and to this day, it is so called.

The stamps enjoyed but a short official life allegedly because the special delivery stamp looked like the current one cent regular issue; therefore the mail did not receive Special Delivery handling. This exhibitor has never seen such a cover in almost 40 years of collecting. The demise was certainly hastened by the departure of Mr. von L. Meyer as Postmaster General in March, 1909. On March 6, 1909, Frank H. Hitchcock of Massachusetts became postmaster General. One of his earliest official acts took place on June 9, 1909, in Order No. 2347 which stated:

ORDERED, That the manufacture and issuance to postmasters of special-delivery stamps of 1908, described on page 7 of the January 1909, Supplement to the Official Postal Guide, be discontinued; and that the manufacture and issuance of the special-delivery stamp of the series of 1902, described in Section 769, Supplement of 1907 to the Postal Laws and Regulations, be resumed. The stamp was never demonetized.

This exhibit contains the following items of interest:

- Unique stamp sized BEP model
- The only two design sketches in private hands
- Most diverse assembly of woodblock trial color proofs
- Approved large die proof signed by the P.M.G.
- Approved large die proof signed by Whitney Warren
- The only Bureau trial impression known on card
- The only recorded territorial use of the issue
- A proper last day of official use