The French Congo 1900 Pictorial Issue

Watermarked, Engraved and Flashy!

This exhibit tells some of the highs and lows of the first privately produced French area stamps, the first engraved French area stamps, and the only watermarked stamps the French postal authorities ever have authorized.

Context: Rumors were circulating that Belgian Congo was about to issue a pictorial series. The 1900 Paris Exposition was also in full swing. Thus, there is heavy speculation that one or both of these factors motivated the French postal authorities to issue these colorful stamps.

Designer: Paul Merwart (1855-1902), a French-Polish illus-



trator, painted the original art for all three designs. In 1896 he was appointed official painter for the Ministère de la Marine et des Colonies, which included his commission to design these stamps. He died in Martinique when Mount Pelée erupted.

Engraver: Benjamin Damman (1835-1921) was a French painter who first exhibited his engravings in 1876. His most

famous etchings are of J. F. Millet's paintings, although philatelists know his work on these stamps as well as the Somali Coast pictorial issue of 1902 and the Madagascar zebu issue of 1903.

Printer: The government printer was unable to produce engraved stamps, so the French P&T contracted with A. Chassepot et Cie., Paris. Chassepot was expert at printing the navy's hydrographic charts and in 1894 had printed stamps for Bolivia.

1. Design

The First (?) Design

Very small sunken die essay. One of fewer than five. Why first? Only three color design, smallest of all essays, only a few produced, only round-eared leopard, no value in tablet. Design was quickly rejected as too small and complex. \bigcirc



It appears from the inking that it is a single die with three colors applied simultaneously.

The Second Leopard Design

Two dies: background and leopard / frame. Still smaller than final design. Mini-sheets may have been to test die transfer process, ability to align two dies. Several trial colors produced.



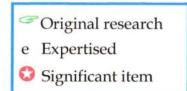




Relatively high quality engraving, heavier inking than threecolor essay. Single master die used to create four essay plate.

The Plan

- Design
- II. Production
- III. How the Stamps Were Used
- IV. Promotion
- V. Using the Overstocks
- VI. After the Stamps

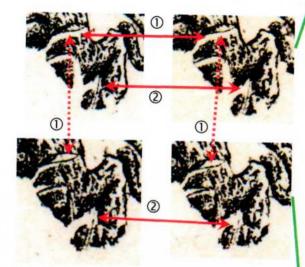


The master die included the "2" centimes value. Other values were engraved for each stamp. Note identical variations in bottom marginal markings, where plate was bolted to press.

Examples

(Position numbers based on 100-stamp sheet.)

2 centimes position 17 4 centimes position 17



2 centimes position 76 4 centimes position 76

Timages from same positions on different sheets are nearly identical. ① Curved line in rear leg creates larger oval in position 76.

Vertical line is truncated in position 76.



Block from similar plate proof of background. Each position is different.

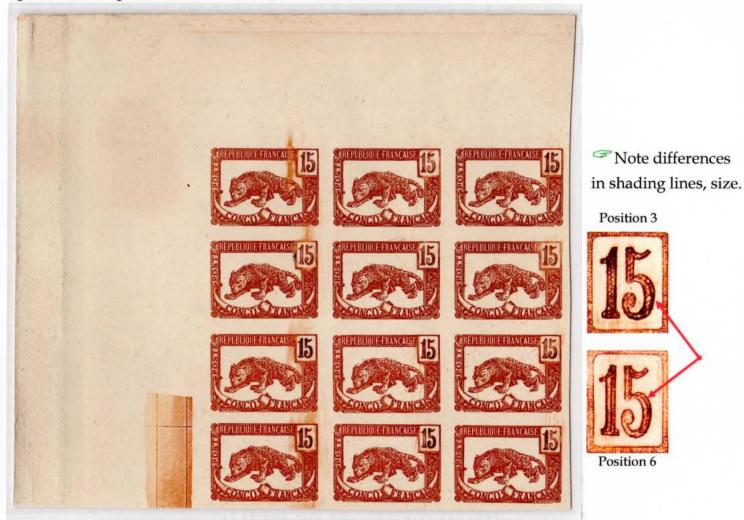


Presumably the next step was to prepare trial color proofs. Unknown number of sheets prepared.



Trial colors on card. Most are close to the final selected color.

Brown trial color on card. Small differences, especially leopard's back paw. More pronounced differences in "15"s.



Paper



Bi-color trial color proofs on card and unwatermarked paper. Note color registration problems.

Paper



Paper



Card



Card



Paper



Paper



Card

Position 3



Card



Paper



Paper



Paper



Card



Paper



Card



Paper

For all values except the two centimes, numeral placement and engraving details in the value tablet are different from stamp to stamp.

Reportedly, Merwart "borrowed" this image from a local trade card. There is a postcard with a photograph of this Bakelois woman which was more likely his source.



Very large essay, with value. Excellent engraving by Damman. On card, damaged at right. Fifteen centimes value ultimately appeared in leopard design. One of only two or three reported. ❖

Trial color sheetlets, no values in design. Smaller than issued stamps. Sheetlets allowed them to test die transfer alignment, colors, etc. As with leopard sheetlets, designs are consistent. Printed on newspaper quality paper.



Observe that third row is aligned slightly to the right compared to the top two rows in all sheets.











Many varied colors, not all used for final design and printing.



Trial color sheetlets and singles from them, no values in design. Smaller than issued stamps. Sheetlets allowed them to test die transfer alignment, colors, etc. Same as prior page with black background added.





are aligned.

1. Design

Chassepot tried many color combinations before making final decisions. These were still essays, smaller than the final stamp design. They were almost certainly from the plates of 12 (see position 12 below), but printed on card rather than newsprint.



As with the leopard, the third design was the charm (if one includes the very large essay). Black proof sheets allowed Chassepot and the P&T to check the quality of the plate. There were still variations, especially in the value tablets.

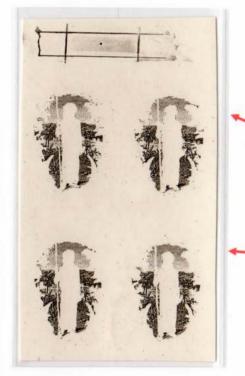


Observe varied positions of "30" within value tablet. Indicates each numeral was separately engraved on plate. Engraved line differences also appear under magnification.

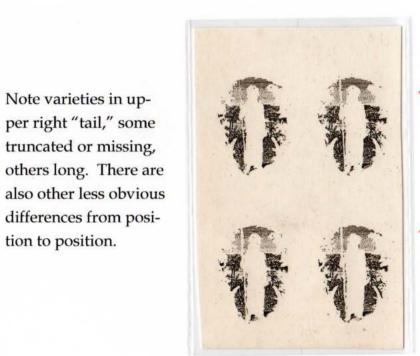
Note varieties in up-

tion to position.





Positions 5, 6, 15 & 16 from 100 image sheet.



Likely from top row, positions unknown.

1. Design

Bakalois Woman Black Proofs

As with the Leopard design, the black proof allowed Chassepot to inspect for errors in the intaglio plate. One cataloged error variety is unfortunately cut off (position 92). However, there are other constant varieties.

Examples

The most significant constant variety I discovered was in position 28.

There is a scratch through the designer's name, only in this position. It probably occurred as the engraver was reinforcing the frame line.



20 centime Position 28

Another catalogued variety is the dot between "RÉPUBLIQUE" and "FRANÇAISE" at the top of the design. It was amplified as the 20c plate was copied for other values.



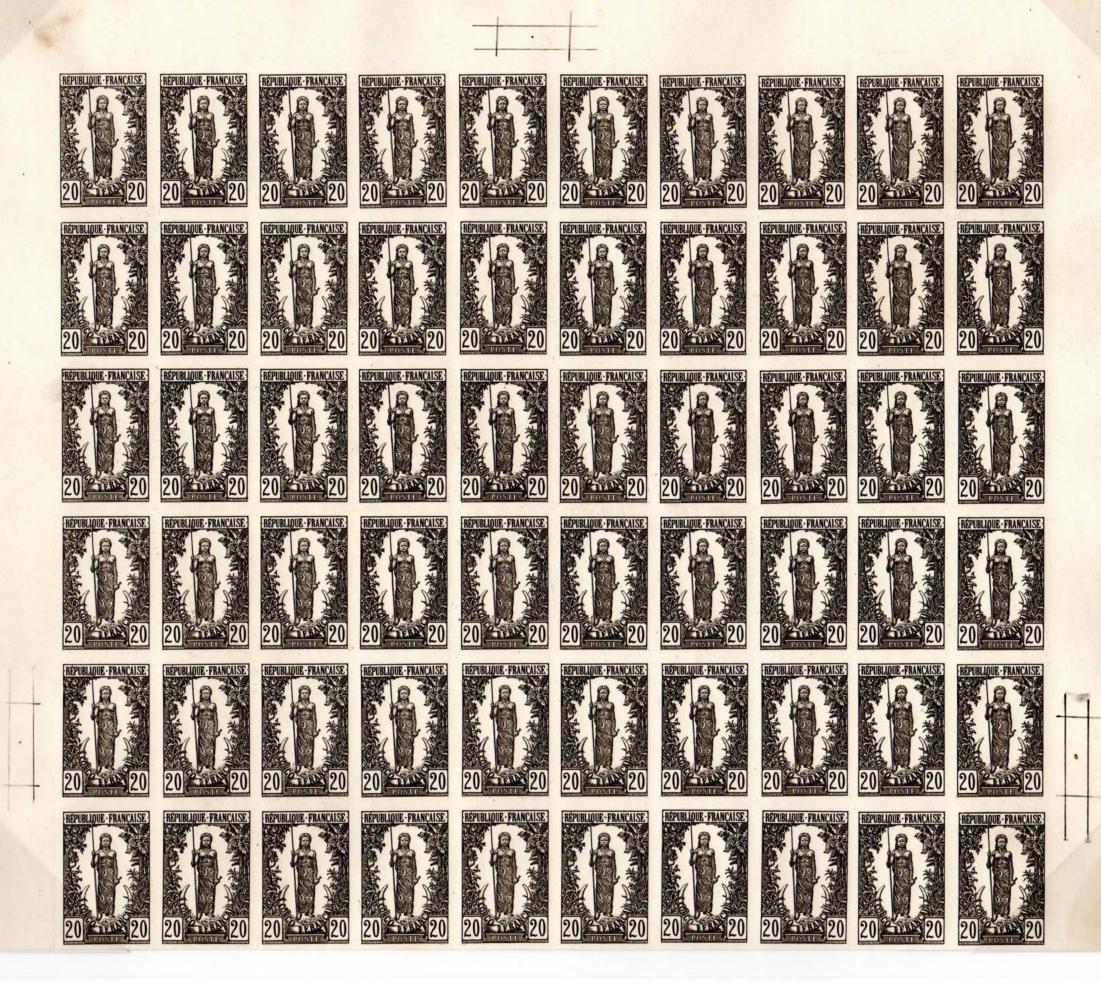
20 centimes

Position 49



75 centimes

Position 49



I. Design Bakalois Woman Black Proofs

It appears that the master die had "20" inscribed in the value tablets. Their position is uniform and the engraved numerals are complete and filled in. Values in other sheets are roughly engraved and not uniformly placed in the tablets.





Positions 18 from each black proof, left value tablet, more or less randomly selected. Note position dot in 75 centimes tablet.



Position 28 showing consistent scratch through Merwart's name.

Brown trial color proof, probably rows seven and eight from sheet of 100 (positions 68-70, 78-80).



Brown trial color proof, positions 85-86 and 95-96.

Each "75" value tablet has guide dot in center. Values are engraved differently in each position.



Position 80, right tablet



Position 86, right tablet



Thick paper



many were two color. These were printed on card stock, on thick paper and on thin paper.

Thick paper



As with the Leopard design, Chassepot prepared a wide variety of color trial proofs. Some were frame only,

Thin paper



Thin paper



Card



Thick paper



Thick paper



Thin paper



Thin paper



Thin paper



Thick paper



Thin paper Inverted background



Thin paper







Thick paper



Thin paper



Card



Thick paper



Thick paper



Thin paper



Card

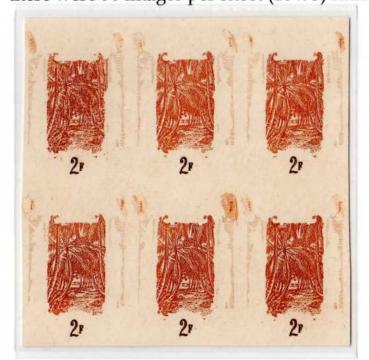


Thick paper



Thin paper

Damman prepared only one design in one size for the high value stamps. It is larger than the others, and the value is the same color as the vignette. As before, it appears that the master die included "1F," which was then removed and re-engraved in each position for the 2F and 5F values. There are no surviving sheets, but students of the issue have concluded that there were 50 images per sheet (10 x 5) rather than 100.



Brown trial color proof, unknown positions.





"Upper left vignette shows portion of frame incorrectly engraved on vignette die (right side).



Trial color block, positions 38-40, 48-50.



Position 49 shows portion of frame incorrectly engraved on vignette die (left side).

As with lower values, trial colors appeared on card and thin paper. There were also perforation trials.



11. Production

Damaged full sheet.
Cliché separations
vary from three to
four mm between columns and rows.
Background and
frame go out of registration from position
1 to position 100.
Stamp widths vary
from 30.5 to 34 mm
and heights from 24
to 25.5 mm.

Printed one sheet at a time, also perforated one sheet at a time.
Side edges trimmed after production.

Marginal rectangles allow for color registration alignment.

Note missing tusk variety in position 91, rounded tusk in position 94. Cliché varieties noted on black proof are consistent on final printed sheet.

Gum, storage and age have caused separated perforations and curling.

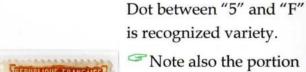


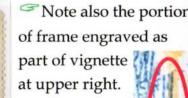
First printing and varieties

The best known variety. The left tusk does not reappear after passing behind the right tusk. Only position 91, each Leopard value.



grounds of the 1, 4, and 5 centime values and the foreground of the 15 cen-









































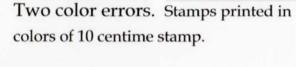








Minor variety - end of left tusk is rounded. Position 94, all Leopard values.











Large dot between "RÉPUBLIQUE" and "FRANÇAISE" at top of stamps. Position 49.











time stamp.

The engraved bi-color stamps caused many problems for the printer. Shown here are background displacement, inverted frames and vignettes and similar production varieties. No one is sure if these were sold as printers waste or through the post offices, although used stamps with displaced backgrounds are often found.





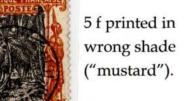














Generally, the watermark is oriented to the background, so the displaced image is the frame.



Top row-ink problems. Underinking on 20 c and 1 f.



At leftinverted centers.













Rose branch inverted

Olive branch reversed





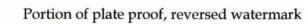








Double background, one inverted



Reversed, inverted and inverted-reversed watermarks occur on several values.

Chassepot had seemingly endless problems with perforations. The examples on this page are typical—double perforations, imperforate between, both horizontal and vertical, and all three designs. Most stamps were reasonably centered within normal perforations, but extra rows were frequent. The partially imperforate stamps are much less common.





Below and right - Partially imperforate





UPU rules required postal authorities to provide about 800 examples of each issued stamp to the UPU. These were then distributed to UPU members and re-distributed to their country units, overprinted to prevent use. The page below was sent to a Portuguese colony.



"Ultramar" is Portuguese for "overseas." The cursive notation says there were seventeen stamps on the page, although only fifteen remain. It is the complete first printing of these stamps. Twenty-five centime is Type I, position 91, 93 or 94.

In July 1903 the colony exhausted its five and ten centimes stamps. To address the shortfall they surcharged two values. The surcharged stamps were to be applied directly to the envelope or card and canceled. Genuine mint stamps are believed to have leaked from the 800 of each value sent to the UPU in Switzerland.









5c on 30 centimes, 4,000 printed, 1,185 incinerated, 2,015 sold

0,10 centimes on 2 franc, 4,000 printed, 1,178 incinerated, 2,022 sold.

New perforations

By 1902 Chassepot began perforating the stamps with an 11.5 perforator rather than 11 gauge. These examples are from the first printing on thick paper.













Watermark reversed.





Watermark reversed and inverted.

In May 1904 Chassepot reprinted the stamps on thinner paper. All stamps were perforated 11-½. Printed from the same plates, position varieties occurred again in this printing.





Above and left – position 91, missing end of tusk.





















Position 49 – large dot between "RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE."







Perforations were more reliable, but there were shifted backgrounds, color variations and reversed and inverted watermarks.



Left and right – shifted background





Left and below - color shades



Below-reversed watermarks















5 centimes – reversed and inverted watermark

III. How the Stamps Were Used

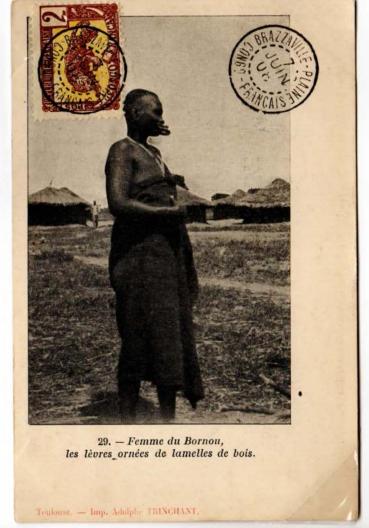
Souvenir Postcards

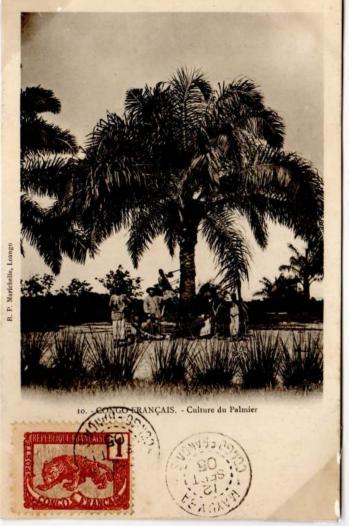
This was the golden age of the postcard, which began around the turn of the century and continued to about 1915. Many visitors to French Congo bought stamps for the cards but didn't mail them. The cards were photographic records of their visit.



Left and right: Brazzaville-Plaine, 7 Jun 1908. Stamps are from 1904 printing.

Printed by Adolphe Trinchant, Toulouse, France. Undivided backs.





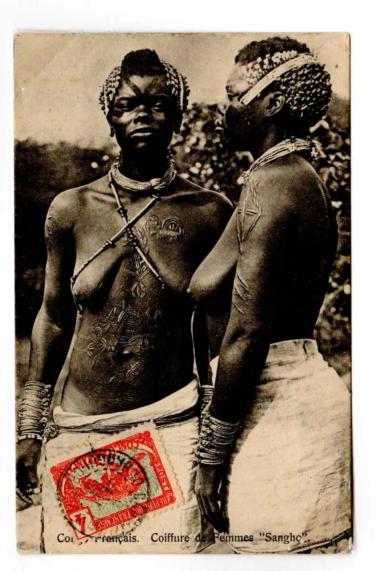
Left: Mayumba, 12 Sep 1905. Stamp is from 1904 printing.

Printed by R. P. Marichelle, Loango, French Congo. Undivided back.

Right: Ouesso, 8 Aug 1906.
Ouesso was small interior town known for pygmies in the area. Stamp is from 1900 printing.

Printed by J. Audema. Divided back.





Above: Bangui, ? May1908. Stamp is from 1904 printing.

Unknown printer. Divided back.

III. How the Stamps Were Used

Often the cards have sufficient postage to be mailed but were still just kept as souvenirs. The postcard rate dropped from ten to five centimes in November 1905.



Loango à Marseille, 15 Nov 1904, L[igne] [Maritime] No. 7. Maritime marking is less common. Stamp is first (1900) printing.

Printed by Adolphe Trinchant, Toulouse, France. Undivided back.

Loukolela, 11 Dec 1905. Loukolela is a small village upriver from the coast. Stamp is from 1904 printing.

> Printed by J. Audema. Divided back.





Loango had been important to the slave trade, with more than five million unfortunate souls passing through the port. The slave trade ceased in 1867 in Loango.

Brazzaville, 20 Oct 1904. Stamp is 1900 printing.

> Unknown printer. Undivided back.





Brazzaville, 15 May 1912. Stamp is 1900 printing. The postcard rate was 10 centimes at this time.

Printer was "Collection J.F." Divided back.

Visitors to French Congo also mailed postcards. At the time this was probably the cheapest way to show local culture to the folks at home. The postcard rate was ten centimes but five centimes if the message was fewer than five words.



Libreville to Paris, France, 28 Aug 1901. Left stamp is missing tusk variety (position 91), 1900 printing.

Unknown printer. Undivided back. Brazzaville to Bourg-en-Bresse, France, 27 Aug 1907. Stampa are 1904 printing.

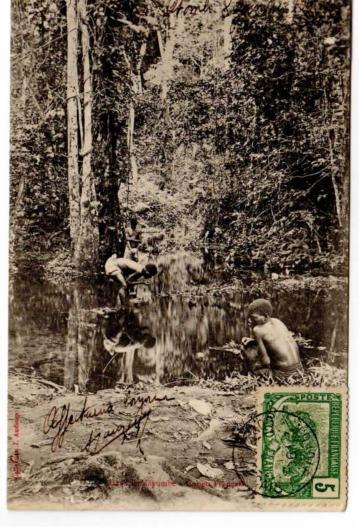
Photograph by Robert Visser, probably printed in Germany. Undivided back.



Visser (1860-1937) ran plantations for the Dutch but was also a prolific photographer and collector. By 1907 he had returned to Germany.

N'Djole to Langon, France, 19 Jan 1905. Stamp is 1900 printing. Marked "T" (postage due) on back – underpaid by five centimes, double collected from addressee.

> Printed by J. Audema. Undivided back.





Libreville to Paris, France, forwarded to Calvados, 29 Jul 1903. Ten centimes postage card rate, 25 centimes registered mail fee, total 35 centimes. Return receipt would have been separate postal form with ten centimes postage affixed. Only use of the five centime stamp known to this exhibitor.

Printed by C. Woermann, Hamburg.

These five cards reflect an Imprimés rate, valid when marked by sender and when cards had five words or less on them. The rate applied on cards to France and UPU countries.



Libreville to Le Havre, France, 27 Aug 1904. Late use of old cancel device. Gabon became part of Congo in 1891. Stamp is position 94 (rounded tusk), 1900 printing.

Printed by C. Woermann, Hamburg. Undivided back. Mayumba to Chicago, Illinois, 22 Feb 1904. Stamp is 1900 printing. Sent between members of postcard exchange.

Printed by C.F.C.O. Undivided back.



Cap Lopez to Paris, 26 Oct 1904. Stamp is 1900 printing. Incorrectly assessed postage due—postcard rate was ten centimes, *imprimés* rate was five.

Printed by C.F.C.O.



CAR
Tous les pays étrangers n'acci

CORRESPONDANCE

AL ESSE

Mist Grifs.

Bahnpost tchaffner

Bensheim

Bensheim

Bensheim

Brazzaville to Bentheim, Germany, 1 Mar 1906. Evidence of missing stamp, but UPU rate (Nov 1905) was five centimes. Stamp is 1904 printing.

Printed by J. Audema.

Brazzaville to La Haye (the Hague), Netherlands, 18 Apr 1903. Stamp is 1900 printing. Receipt mark 's-Gravenhage, 14 May [03].

Photo by R. Visser, printed in Germany.



Of course not all visitors to French Congo were from France. These postcards all brought images of French Congo to recipients in other parts of Europe. The UPU postcard rate was ten centimes to each of these countries.



Bangui to Gand, Belgium, 20 Mar 1908.
Stamp is 1904 printing.
Five centimes postage added in Paris, common on mail to Belgium.

Photo by R. Visser, unknown German printer. Brazzaville to Mulhouse, Alsace, 12 Dec 1907. Stamp is 1904 printing. Sent between members of postcard exchange.

Unknown printer.



Loango to Anvers (Antwerp), Belgium, 2 Aug 1904. Stamp is 1900 printing. Routed through Cabinda (Portuguese Congo) and Lisbon.

Photo by A B & Co., Nancy. Printed by J. Audema.





Loango to Bucharest, Romania, 4 May 1904. Stamp is 1900 printing. Note background color variety. Written in Libreville, 29 Apr, posted on ship five days later.

Printed by C.F.C.O.

Libreville to Vologda, Russia, 30 Nov 1904. Stamp is 1900 printing. Only card to Russia known to this exhibitor.

Printed by Adolphe Trinchant, Toulouse.

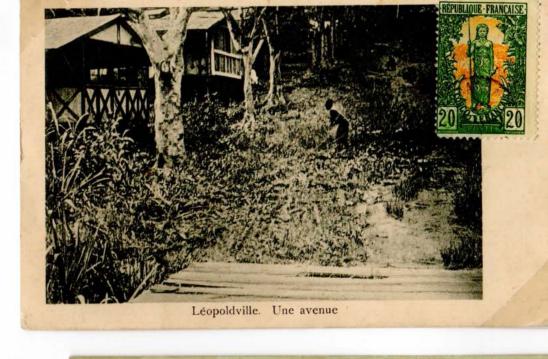
The table
RÉPUBLIQUE PRÂNÇAISE 10
CARTE POSTALE Ce côté est exclusivement reserve padrette
Mullie Vologda Bowood
. Lu Mpeloexadumenseal
Alexenneca Ilbaneale
Ycolata, Kypaerolo' Huranolaa

Postcard rates were straightforward under the U.P.U. tariffs, holding constant at ten centimes from 1879 through at least 1913. The *imprimés* rate was also constant at five centimes, and registration was 25 centimes. However, many senders ignored those rates when applying postage.



Libreville to Brussels,
Belgium, 29 Aug 1903.
Noted as *Imprimes* rate
(five centimes) but ten centimes stamp applied. One
of only two uses of this
surcharged stamp known
to the exhibitor.

Printed by C. Woermann, Hamburg.



Helle Vecke of Swakey Line 2

Sent Post of Swakey Line 2

Wellen Exergiespl 2

Aramselweig

Wellen ague

Libreville to Braunschweig (Brunswick), Germany, 14 Sep 01. Overpaid by one centime. Stamps all from 1900 printing.

No publisher information.

Brazzaville to Brussels, Belgium, 29 Jun 1910. Postcard rate ten centimes, registered fee 25 centimes. Overpaid by 60 centimes. Stamps are from 1904 printing.

Postal card issued in 1900.



Brazzaville to Berlin, Germany, 30 Dec 1913. Overpaid by ten centimes. Stamp is missing one leaf inside right tusk near "IS" of "FRANÇAIS" (position 92). Stamp is from 1904 printing.

Printed by Mena Viera & Coehlho, Brazzaville. Divided back.

Congo Français.

Om:

Thousand y his hor

Thou his

Loango to Bremen, Germany, 23 Nov 1904. Twenty-five centimes U.P.U. letter rate. Commercial letter directed by sender through Portuguese Congo and Lisbon. No transit marks. Stamps are 1900 printing.

> Brazzaville to Paris, 27 Oct 1913. French internal ten centimes letter rate effective 1 Oct 1907 for mail from French colonies. Stamps are 1904 printing.

Letter rates varied infrequently in the first decade of the 1900s.



Lambarene to Asnières, France, 24 Jan 1905. Assessed 20 centimes postage due, double the shortfall. Fifteen centimes letter rate in effect from 1899 through April 1906. Routed through Cap Lopez. Stamp is 1900 printing.



Return receipt



Receipt for registered letter sent from Libreville to Rennes, France, 30 Jul 1903. Ten centimes rate effective 16 Feb 1879. One of only two uses of this surcharged stamp known to exhibitor.

One presumes that mail service was somewhat undependable. Sending registered letters provided more assurance that they would arrive safely. Registry fee was 25 centimes.



Iguela to Coulommiers, France, 17 Sep 1903. Postage sufficient for up to 45 g (1899) plus registration fee. Stamp is 1900 printing.

Postal stationery issued in 1892 in several sizes and denominations. Fort Archambault to Paris, France, 19 Jun 1907. Ten centimes letter rate (1906) plus registration fee. Stamps are 1904 printing.

From postal official in Chad military district.





Libreville to Radebeűl. Germany, 20 Oct 1904. Overpaid twenty-five centimes letter rate (1879) plus registration fee. Stamp is 1900 printing.

Monsieur fud. Robin

Employe à la Mairie

France Ceine et ma

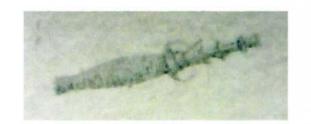
Brazzaville to Provins, France, 24 Nov 1906. Fifteen centimes letter rate (1899) plus registration fee. Stamps are 1904 printing.

Nola to Provins, France, 5 Jan 1906. Fifteen centimes letter rate (1899) plus registration fee. Stamps are from both printings.



IV. Promotions

The engraver, Damman, produced a die smaller than the issued stamps, perhaps for his own use when promoting his engraving skills. His "mark" was a dagger in scabbard, included on the die.



Damman's samples, frame only. Colors do not match the issued stamps.













Die proof on card

Damman engraved a larger size as well. While only one value for each design, the colors approximated those of the issued stamps (with exceptions). It appears that each was individually printed from a single frame and single background die on thin paper.



The serrated edges are a repeated pattern, distinct to these labels.





Damman probably engraved these two (without value also on thin paper) at the same time. It is likely that the Bakalois woman stamp was printed from the same die as the labels to the left.

The two labels on the prior page are glued on semi-glossy paper along with an essay of the low value leopard design (smaller than issued stamp). The source and use of this item is unknown, but could have been part of the Chassepot archives or a salesman's book to demonstrate the quality of their work.



The stamp to the right suggests that the presentation sheet French Congo items (far right) were from the original plates. The 5 franc stamp has two plate flaws—the period between the "5" and "F" and the extra spear at the upper right of the vignette. It appears to be cut from another example of the presentation sheet at far right.



Presentation sheet prepared in 1902 or later. Chassepot printed the 1902 engraved Somali Coast stamps as well as the French Congo issue. Because the Congo stamps were printed from the final plates, they are color proofs rather than essays.



Two halves acquired from two different sources and reunited. Faint stains indicate page was folded over where split.

IV. Promotion Box

The presentation box below contained the six cards that follow. The box is leather covered, $7-\frac{1}{2}$ " x $9-\frac{5}{8}$ ", and inscribed in gold foil:

TIMBRES - POSTE

DU

Congo Français

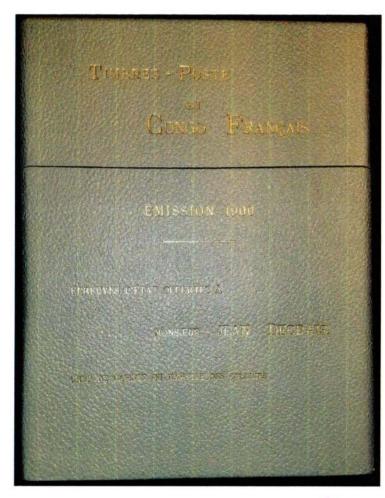
ÉMISSION 1900.

ÉPREUVES D'ÉTAT OFFERTES À

MONSIEUR JEAN DECRAIS

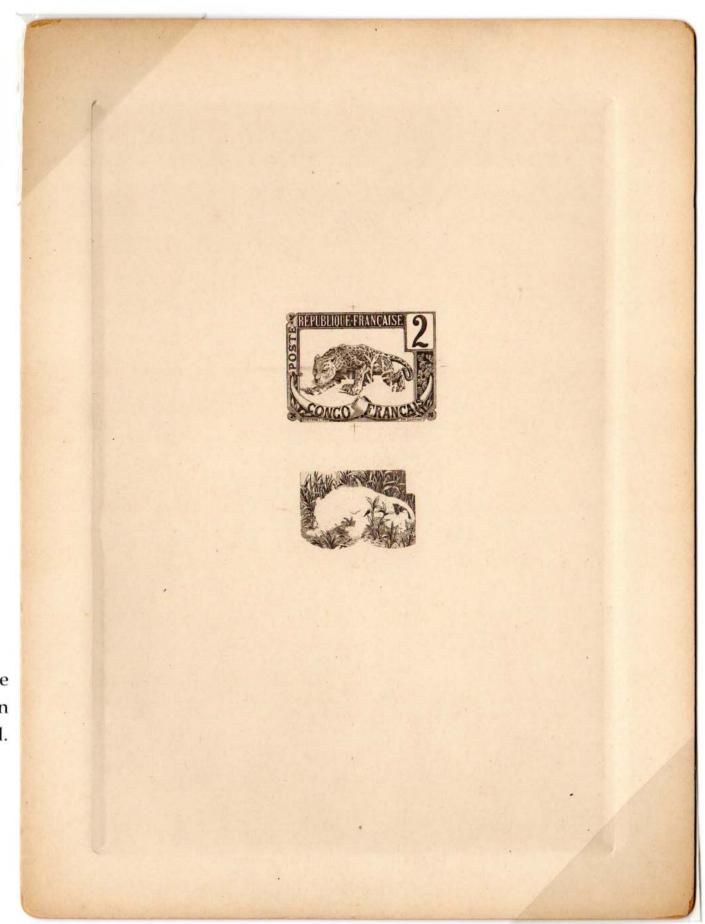
CHEF DE CABINET DU MINISTRE DES COLONIES

Louis Jean Decrais (1866-1945) was Secretary General of the Colonial Ministry and head of the Cabinet in this period.



Original in exhibitor's collection. ©

Sunken die proof, frame and background, on heavy cardboard.

















In 1904 the French Congo Post and Telegraph department overprinted and surcharged several of the pictorial stamps to use as documentary tax stamps. These stamps were used to pay recording (enregistrement) fees. Very few survive of the original printings

by the PTT.



Illustrations from 1915 Forbin catalog.

1,250 surcharged.



1,000 overprinted. Undated blue revenue cancel



ENREGISTREMENT

500 overprinted. CTO dated 1917, probably after the need for the stamps had lapsed.

In February 1916 German forces in Kamerun, a German colony, surrendered to British and French forces. Britain and France partitioned Cameroun, after which French forces overprinted French Congo (and Middle Congo) stamps for general use. There were 1,000 overprints of each French Congo value. These were the last uses of the French Congo 1900 pictorial issue.



Inverted overprint.













Overprint was fifty clichés, so sheets were put on the press twice, creating fifty stamps with overprints reading up, fifty with overprint reading down on each sheet. The result on the 15 centimes stamp was that half were inverted.







Duala, Cameroun, to Brazzaville, French Congo, 29 Jun 16. French and German CDSs applied at French post office. Twenty centimes letter postage plus 25 centimes registration fee. Only surviving cover with any French Congo / Cameroun stamp known to the exhibitor.



The stamps faded away after the final Cameroun overprints. But the image of the Bakalois woman continued for many years as a representation of the Congo. Sangha produced a trade card in the 1890s with the Bakalois woman on it. Its successors continued to use her image into the twentieth century. Note that the tool in her left hand is gone, but the rest is very much the same.

Bearer share certificate dated 1 Sept 28 with 32 coupons attached. The company was presumably one of many concessionaires allowed to exploit Congo's resources—forests, rubber or perhaps cotton. Issued just prior to a civil uprising that lasted from November 1928 to 1933.



Scan of coupon #1.

