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Mobile Images: Stamps as Branding Tools in the Gulf States

1 Postage Stamps in the MENA Region: Typology, Function, and History

Postage stamps belong to the realm of political symbols. National postal administrations are responsible for designing and issuing stamps. The stamp's face usually displays the name of the state and/or the ruler's portrait. Despite their small size, stamps offer ample space for purposefully selected imagery that generally relates to the place of issue. Based on an art historical analysis of stamps issued by the Gulf states during the second half of the 20th century, I discuss postage stamps' potential for place branding from a historical perspective.

Given the proliferation of postal communication in the 20th century, stamps have long been familiar objects of everyday use and part of the widespread visual culture of the MENA region. Firmly glued to a postcard, an envelope, or a parcel, stamps circulate widely not only in geographical, but also in social and cultural terms. Especially because of their quotidian visual presence, stamps are able to "touch the everyday lives (and reflect the attitudes) of both governments and ordinary citizens more readily than grand political rhetoric or state ceremonial" and can become significant political symbols.¹ Designs can include ornamentation or graphics in combination with abstract, numerical, or pictorial images. Stamps are, in effect, artistic "miniature prints with a very wide circulation."² The textual information on stamps, including the monetary value, is an integral part of stamp design, and a special typography is often used. In the case of a non-Roman script like Arabic, the textual information is usually accompanied by the same word(s) in Roman letters, thus effectively displaying the state name twice, making the place branding even more powerful on a visual level.

So far, Middle Eastern postage stamps have not yet been considered tools of branding. Only a handful of scholars have discussed the stamps of modern Arab countries, and these have focused mainly on semiotics, scientific history, propaganda, and identity construction, usually overlooking questions of aesthetics and po-

1 Jeffery, 2006: 46.

2 Gabriel, 2009: 190 (the author's translation).

litical place branding.³ This is surprising, given that stamps have long been recognised for their advertising and communicative function towards other states and people as “business cards of states.”⁴

For the Gulf states, which were either Trucial States or British quasi-protectorates up until their independence in the 1960s and 1970s, gaining full responsibility over their postal services was a crucial step in their nation-building process. With it came the task of creating new stamp designs and developing a political iconography that could advertise these states internally and externally. Compared with the previously used, overprinted British and British-Indian stamps, it was a milestone to issue stamp series with, for example, Kuwaiti motifs, the name of the state of Kuwait, Arabic writing, and a national currency. Having analysed a multitude of postage stamps issued since the 1950s, I find the popularity of certain recurring groups of motifs that can be considered highly effective for (political) place branding quite striking.⁵



Fig. 1 (left): First flight cover of Swissair’s route Kuwait – Zurich, issued 5 April 1976

Fig. 2 (right): 50 fils stamp, United Arab Emirates, GCC Supreme Council 7th session (Abu Dhabi, November 1986)

All stamps and images are from the author’s collection.

³ See Hazard, 1960; Sivan, 1987; Badry and Niehoff, 1988; Reid, 1993; Kadoi, 2009.

⁴ Benjamin, 2009: 186. Benjamin was a passionate philatelist.

⁵ However, the Gulf states have also issued stamp sets with motifs that have nothing to do with the region, such as tropical birds, US space missions, and European composers. This shows the deliberate outward orientation of the stamps, but the choice of unrelated motifs in combination with what could be called “kitsch” pictorial stamp designs undermined the value of Gulf stamps in the 1970s and 1980s amongst collectors.

2 Map(ping) and Emblems: Stamps as a Reflection of Political Geographies

A stamp's basic function is to act as a receipt for the amount that the sender paid to the issuing body to transport a letter or package. Stamp cancellations on international envelopes and parcels document the interactions of different postal administrations, border regimes, and individual senders and receivers. A fascinating special case is the pre-printed envelopes with pictorial stamps that were occasionally issued to celebrate the opening of a new air route, for example the route Kuwait – Athens – Zurich, which was first flown on 5 April 1976 by Swissair (Fig. 1). The envelope displays one stamp with the official portrait of Kuwait's then-ruler and another medically themed stamp. It is imprinted with a drawing of Kuwait's Sief Palace, the seat of the ruler and the government, which underlines the political nature of this seemingly commercial enterprise. This visual display highlights the dependence of the modern postal services not only on air transportation, but equally on diplomatic relationships, relationships that became mapped through postal networks. Similarly, stamps have often promoted political rule over a clearly delineated geographic area through motifs of maps and national emblems. A good example of this is the relatively large stamp that commemorated the seventh session of the GCC Supreme Council held in Abu Dhabi in November 1986. The stamp motif is in fact the GCC logo, which consists of the mapped territory of all member states in a hexagon that is surrounded by the states' national emblems (Fig. 2). Such instances show that stamps are not only receipts, but can also be tools for political (place) branding

3 Architecture: Stamps Showcasing Cityscapes

The stamp culture of the MENA region has a long tradition of showcasing sites like dams and factories or standardised housing schemes as part of "Development Weeks" (Iraq, 1958) or of socialist planning agendas (UAR, 1961). In the Gulf, a strong tendency has developed to single out specific buildings and present each on an individual stamp that is often published at the same time as the inauguration or anniversary of the building. Such stamps form a travel guide of architectural sights that shows what is officially recognised as part of the urban landscape or architectural heritage of the issuing city-state. Over the years, the state of Kuwait has for instance selected the Al-Sabah Hospital (1967), the Telecommunications Centre (1972), the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (1974), and the iconic Kuwait Towers (1977), but also the Kuwait Hilton Hotel (1969) (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: 20 fils stamp, Kuwait, Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (established 31 December 1961), issued 1974

I read this as the philatelic prologue of today's branding strategy: Dubai and Qatar making international headlines by commissioning iconic buildings by starchitects like Jean Nouvel and Zaha Hadid.⁶ Prior to the Internet, stamps long served as a mobile miniature travel guide that made the addressee a visitor to the Gulf's iconic cityscape through images.

4 Oil Derricks and Pipelines: Stamps Declaring the Gulf States “Petro-nations”

Over the decades, something like a “petro-philately,” the philatelic study of oil-related stamps, developed among stamp collectors. In a 1988 article in the oil company magazine *Saudi Aramco World*, collector Raymond Schuessler explained that petro-philately included not only motifs related to the modern petroleum industry and petroleum-based products, but also those related to pre-modern uses of oil for shipbuilding, religious practices, and medicine. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, petroleum, especially in the form of large-scale oil infrastructures like derricks, tanks, and pipelines, emerged as a frequent motif of postage stamps in the MENA region and elsewhere. It is noteworthy that the Gulf states also issued oil-related stamps to mark grand national festivities, such as the stamp showing a refinery in the Qatari set celebrating the ninth anniversary of independence in 1980 (Fig. 4) and a Kuwaiti stamp issued on the 17th anniversary of Kuwait's National Day in 1978 displaying a fictive skyline that merges iconic high rises such as the Kuwait Towers with the silhouette of an oil derrick (Fig. 5). The circulation of

⁶ For more details, see Hindelang, 2022a.

such petro-philatelic images reinforced the reputation that the Gulf states were “petro-nations.”



Fig. 4 (left): 10 dirham stamp, Qatar, 9th anniversary of independence (3 September 1980), showing a petroleum refinery, Qatar’s flag, and the vignette portrait of Sheikh Khalifa Bin Hamad Al Thani
Fig. 5 (right): 80 fils stamp, Kuwait, 17th anniversary of the National Day (26 February 1978), including the vignette portrait of Sheikh Jaber Al Ahmad Al Sabah

In conclusion, it is worthwhile to take into consideration the Gulf’s often-overlooked 20th-century urban visual culture when discussing the contemporary phenomenon of place branding and political image building.⁷ Postage stamps yield especially rich findings, as they are by definition a very visual, condensed, strategic, political, and mobile medium that has played a significant role in the way the Gulf states have presented themselves to the world.

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⁷ See Hindelang, 2022b.

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