

Counterfeit Covers!

[This is an updated version of an article I first ran ten years ago. It's perhaps even more appropriate now because, with covers no longer so easily available, some collectors are taking a second look at some of these practices and are seeing them as....h-m-m-m-m...maybe not so wrong now. Perhaps it's the teacher in me, but I always balk at lowering standards, so I still see all of the practices described below as totally unacceptable, and, as far as I know, they're still considered with disdain by consensus of opinion]

Counterfeiting? In our hobby? Well, I don't mean to say that someone has a printing press in his basement and is running off Lindbergh covers, but there definitely have been definitely fraudulent practices within the hobby in the past, and there are certainly fraudulent covers circulating between collectors now. "What!? Where? Martha! Run and get my DQ album, please! Hurry!!"

Don't panic. It's not as nefarious as that, but you should know what practices have occurred in the past (and maybe the present) and what to look for. There have been some questionable practices within the hobby over the years in this respect. You may unwittingly have some doctored covers in your own albums. I'm what some people would refer to as a knowledgeable veteran, and I discover I've been 'stiffed' fairly often, and I'm also probably just as guilty as anyone else of unknowingly passing such covers on to other people. So, let's take a look at the most frequent problem areas, at least.

One of the more common practices here has been the 'recoloring' of strikers. Usually a felt pen has been used to 'resurface' a struck striker in an attempt to make it appear unstruck. It's usually fairly easy to spot such covers, because the recoloring normally doesn't exactly match the rest of the striker—or, in the case of the entire striker being recolored, the resulting striker is now a shade that's never been seen before by collectors, hence raising suspicions. Although not especially difficult to spot, they do require your stopping and examining the cover, which, if you process your incoming covers in a similar fashion to what I do, often doesn't happen until the collector is sorting or putting into albums, and by then it's too late to return such covers to the originators (because by then you probably won't be able to tell who you got them from). In the past, this kind of thing may have been done more out of innocent naivete or immediate practicality rather than for fraudulent purposes—but the result is the same...a doctored cover. It's the same as setting odometers back on cars or taking damaged vehicles, fixing them, and then passing them off as never having been damaged. This practice is fraudulent and is a definite no-no!

Do you count similar covers as two distinct varieties if the striker colors are different? Most collectors do. Then, how might the above practice affect you? Collectors have changed strikers in other ways, as well. In 1976, Vance Marks, writing for the Long Beach bulletin (reprinted in Sierra-Diablo Bulletin #80) recounted the story of the U.S. Navy Ship collector who used to leave selected ship covers out in the sun for extended periods of time so that the strikers and ink would fade to a lighter color. He would then claim to have discovered hitherto unknown 'new' varieties of ship covers. Heavens knows, we have to deal with more than enough striker shades already that have been altered 'naturally' (oxidation, other chemical reactions, aging, covers which have faded because they've been innocently left on window sills, etc.), without having to cope with ones that have been fraudulently produced.

Another, more obvious way, is simply adding a completely new striker to the cover. This type of doctoring is seen on old covers which have been previously bobtailed. A striker from one cover is cut off and taped onto the bobtailed cover—like splicing two pieces of tape. This may not be immediately noticeable, since many old covers have had tape applied to the back of the striker area to keep it from crumbling (an entirely legal procedure, by the way). Doctoring a cover like this is unethical because it

also is disguising a damaged cover as an undamaged cover.

“But,” one might well argue, “I’m only doing this for myself; I have no intention to trade such covers to anyone else.” That would be perfectly OK, if that were only as far as the situation goes. But, what happens to those covers in that collection when you pass away?.....They eventually go to ANOTHER collector when the collection is sold or donated, and the new owner is not expecting to get doctored covers. Again, in all probability, the original intent was simply to get the cover back to a size where it could be properly mounted in a pre-cut album page, but, eventually, such covers find their way *back* into circulation within the hobby. It’s a bad practice, and it shouldn’t be perpetuated. And, of course, you, in turn, should always be aware of what you’re getting.

And it’s not always easy. Collectors have been known to take “flats” (salesmen’s samples; covers that have normally never been folded and never held matches) and crease them and then add staple holes to make them look like true, circulated covers. Unlike the practices described above, which could have been done without fraudulent intentions, this practice is out and out deceit. And on some of these counterfeits, you’d be hard put to tell the difference between the fake and the real one (it’s usually the creasing or lack thereof that gives the fake away).

Why would a collector go through the effort to change a flat into an acceptable cover in the first place? Covers are a dime a dozen (well, they used to be!). Aside from the fact that it may allow the collector to add one more cover to his or her collection (and I’ve seen some pretty darn good looking flats that I’d wished were real), many flats are *old*! I’ve seen lots of Safety First, DQ, Crown, and Jersey flats, for example. Also, consider that many collectors, understandably, will only trade DQ for DQ, Crown for Crown, etc. That presents an additional “pressure” to “find” such covers to trade. Unfortunately, ‘manufacturing your own’ is an option that at least a few collectors have resorted to in the past.

There’s nothing wrong with collecting flats, by the way, say as an adjunct to your corresponding “regular” collection, but flats are not accepted within the hobby as regular covers. They’re mock-ups. They’ve never held matches and were simply intended to be used as...what they were....samples of quality, size, and art work that salesmen could show prospective customers.

Fortunately for you and I, such practices as I have described here, have not been widespread in the past and in all probability are still relatively rare today. They have existed, and do exist, though, so your best defense, as always, against such practices is simply to be knowledgeable. That’s always a good rule to follow in life in general, but certainly in a hobby that involves collectibles, and MOST certainly in a hobby that often involves the exchange of money for such collectibles...so BUYER BEWARE!