

The Printings of the First Stamps of Greece

The Large Hermes Heads were the first stamps that were put in circulation by the Greek Post Offices. The first day of circulation was October 1st, 1861. The stamps depicted the Ancient Greek god Hermes and they had been designed by the French engraver Albert Barre. Seven denominations were produced: 1 lepto, 2 lepta, 5 lepta, 10 lepta, 20 lepta, 40 lepta and 80 lepta (lepto means cent and lepta is the plural of lepto). The French Mint produced one printing plate for each denomination. Each printing plate could produce a sheet of 150 stamps for the corresponding denomination.

The initial quantities ran out very quickly and the Greek post offices had to urgently print new quantities in Greece. The Greek technicians had already visited Paris and had observed the methods used by the French printers. Their first task was to precisely mimic the French method. This did not bring right away the desired results and they had to adapt their methods in order to achieve better results. In this exhibit we are going to study the first printings done in Athens. They offer a rich field of study since they were so diverse in nature and they reflect in the best possible way the struggle that the Greek technicians faced. We will try to do an exhaustive study of the characteristics of these printings and describe as well as possible the difficulties of applying the French methods of printings as well as the alterations that Greek technicians adopted.

The first printings were of the 20 lepta denomination. This was the standard postal rate in the interior of Greece and it is understandable that these were the stamps in greater need. The first sheets that were printed by the Greek post offices circulated in a very limited amount of places: Athens, Karpenision and Pyrgos. Only about 250 specimens of these first printings survive nowadays. Their defining characteristic is their overall coarse printing and the absence of the control numbers in the back. In some sense, these are the first Greek stamps.

After this, the Greek printers got a little more systematic. They started printing all the denominations and their attempts were nowhere as good as the initial French stamps. However this gave rise to many printing varieties. To understand the nature of these varieties we will need to explain a few of the characteristics of the French technique and how the Greek printers tried to adopt them. We will present different colors and different printing characteristics and we will try to classify them in a systematic way.