

# Forty years of the Queen Elizabeth "Machins"

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It's a funny thing about philately, that stamps themselves become the object of celebration if they've been around long enough.

Of course, centennials of first issues are traditionally a legitimate excuse for commemorative stamps: the celebra-



**Figure 1.** Norway's 1-skilling Posthorn stamp from its 1872 definitive series, and Great Britain's 1-penny Queen Elizabeth II stamp from its 1967 Machin definitive series. Norway's ongoing series is older, but the Machin stamps mark 40 years of service in 2007.

tion of one stamp design still current after 100 years began in 1972 when Norway accorded this tribute to its Posthorns, a series that is still with us.

The British definitive series popularly known as the Machins is now 40 years old, a mere youngster compared with the Posthorns (Figure 1).

The artist Arnold Machin (pronounced "MAY-chin") created the plaster portrait in profile of Queen Elizabeth II that is pictured on these stamps, and it is his name that is

so closely associated with the series.

The Machin series has now overtaken in longevity the Victorian line-engraved stamps of 1840-79, arguably still the world's most complex series. I say "arguably" with some trepidation, for Machin buffs the world over would dispute that assertion.

What is incontestable, however, is the fact that the Machins are now, far and away, the most prolific definitive series of all time, in terms of the range of denominations. Even to put together a display of the different values and colors on a simplified basis, regardless of paper, perforation, printer or process, would take some doing, but would make for a very impressive array.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are philatelists who have devoted all their time to collecting and studying the Machins to the exclusion of everything else.

Royal Mail has celebrated this iconic series with a miniature sheet released on its 40th birthday, June 5, 2007 (Figure 2). The sheet, by Together Design, has two large, square first-class stamps, one portraying Arnold Machin himself and the other reproducing the 4-penny stamp from the inaugural series in pre-decimal old money. These stamps flank a vertical pair of £1 stamps, the upper one in the



**Figure 3.** Most of the stamps from the 1967 issue had the denomination at lower left, but on three values the denomination was presented in the lower right corner.

obsolescent Iridion violet ink and the lower one in a new ruby shade.

Iridion is a trademark of the Merck Corporation for a range of pigments based on the mineral mica, overlaid by various metallic oxides to create its distinctive pearl luster. The result is a beautiful tonal quality characterized by iridescent colors.

In addition, a prestige booklet containing four panes of stamps has been issued, titled "The Machin: The Making of a Masterpiece."

The first-class stamp picturing Arnold Machin is also sold in a generic sheet of 20 with attached labels picturing the earliest stamps from the definitive series.

The Machins have come a very long way since they first saw the light of day. Simplicity in design and production was the keynote of the series launched in June 1967. The basic design was quite radical, and although one may detect the influence of Hubert Brown's design for the Edward VIII series, it broke entirely new ground.

As with all breaks with tradition, this design was hotly debated and the subject of extensive research and develop-



**Figure 2.** A four-stamp miniature sheet celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Machin definitive was issued June 5. Artist Arnold Machin is pictured on one first-class stamp, while the other shows the 4-penny stamp issued in 1967. Two £1 Machin stamps sit between them.

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**Figure 4.** Four high-value intaglio-printed Machins with engraved designs were issued in 1969. The £1 stamp is Scott MH21.

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