

The Secret World of Stolen Stamps

By Simon de Burgh Codrington of Hugh Wood, Inc.

As the world's leading provider of stamp insurance, Hugh Wood, Inc. has paid its fair share of theft claims. But, although many people might believe that when the victim of a stamp theft submits his claim form and receives his insurance check that is the end of the matter, for us a theft claim never dies. Our investigators continue to work quietly with dealers and collectors in the expectation that the stolen items ultimately will resurface, and over the last few years we have had many successful recoveries of philatelic material.

A few stories will show the lengths to which we will go in order to resolve stamp disappearances:

The first began in France when a collector client called us to say he had been mugged while leaving the bank with his \$35,000 stamp collection. He had a police report, full schedule, and submitted to us his claim form. Apparently two men on a motorbike grabbed his briefcase as he left the bank building, and sped away in to the distance. He had lost some very rare material and he was obviously very upset when our specialist interviewed him.

As is usual we asked around to see if anyone had been offered the items. Because the material was so easily recognizable, we were surprised to hear nothing. So we asked further away, and finally a Swiss dealer told us he knew where some of the material was. He identified a Swiss collector who had some of the items – and had owned them for years! We were, of course, a little surprised that our client was claiming items another collector was supposed to have owned for some time, so we looked a little harder at the list of “stolen” material he had provided and talked to more people. After a few more weeks we worked out that our client in fact *had never owned* the stamps. His entire “collection” was comprised of copies from auction catalogues – the claim was an insurance fraud. Due to our normal recovery efforts we found this quickly, and our ex-client has been prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

The next story took place in New York City, when a top collector, Jeffery Forster, was leaving a major stamp show. While trying to sort out his transportation needs he became separated from his briefcase – which was promptly stolen. With a \$1,000,000 collection now missing we did everything within our power to aid in its recovery. Our special investigators went to work and within days we had some leads. Working closely with the FBI, our team got the word out that this material was unique and thus unsaleable, and that we wanted it back! Eventually we were contacted by a lawyer acting for a third party, and we were able to negotiate the return of the collection in perfect condition – the only “loss” being that the items had been removed from the exhibit pages and now were loose. We returned the collection to its owner and even paid for new pages! This, at the time, was one of the fastest and largest recoveries ever made.

The third stamp theft story begins in 1999 as a major dealer, Stanley Piller, was driving back from a show in Florida. He got lost and stopped at a hotel to ask directions. In the few seconds while he was away from his car, his trunk was popped and a major part of his stock grabbed. This was unique material worth \$2,000,000. We again got to work, but this time there were no leads and we paid the claim as quickly as we could.

For more than a year the trail went dormant. However from experience we know to be patient and keep our investigators working. We published a reward and every so often reminded people that we were still looking for the missing stock. Stanley worked closely with us to keep the loss in the trade’s mind as well.

Everything remained quiet until, in 2000, a couple of the missing items appeared in a Cherrystone Auction Catalogue. As soon as the Cherrystone people realized that they had stolen material in their auction they started to work with us and the FBI to backtrack the offering. Unfortunately, in one sense, so many people had spotted the items in the catalogue that the entire trade became alerted, and an article discussing the stolen material even appeared in *Linn's*. Once again the trail went cold, although we did recover a few pieces.

Then, in January 2003, we got lucky. Several of the stolen items were offered for sale to one of our good and honest clients. He, knowing this material to be stolen, contacted us at once and we had an investigator in his office in thirty minutes. This time no one knew the material had been spotted. We worked closely with the FBI, and several more visits by the sellers were arranged. We arranged some funds to make "initial" purchases and then let the investigators get on with their job. After several tense weeks, the FBI followed the "vendors" to their premises and arrested them – recovering a good percentage of the stolen material. As this article is written, we know there is still some of the stolen material out there – but we are patient and again we will wait and watch!

So, what can you do to help us to help you if your stamps are stolen? The thing that was of the greatest assistance in these cases was that everyone had good records of the material that had been stolen. If you have unique items, keep a detailed record – and nothing is better than a good color photocopy or a color photograph. Even long after we have paid your claim our teams will be working to recover the material. Both so you have a chance of getting back the collection you spent years building and so the world of philately doesn't lose this unique material. Of course, most thieves don't know that some covers and stamps are so rare that they can be as positively identified as a fingerprint – but philatelists know, and we are lucky to have a hobby where so many honest dealers want to help recover stolen material.

We like to think that most stolen material is just temporarily lost; we recover so much each year that we know the odds are we will see it again – one day! The moral is that stealing stamps really *doesn't* pay.

If you think you are being offered stolen items call the APS or us. Your vigilance helps protect both the hobby and your fellow collectors.