

Finland's Semi-Postal Issues Reach the End of the Road

By Lauri Poropudas

Finland's Post ended a 78-year tradition of issuing semi-postal stamps in 2000 with the two-stamp Red Cross issue featuring farm animals. The reasons given for suspending these issues related to changes in the general stamp market and changes in the management and operation of the Post Office itself.

Over the years, Finland issued semi-postals to raise money for the Red Cross; the anti-tuberculosis program; Pro Filatelia for international philatelic exhibitions; major sporting events; and aid for war casualties, reconstruction, the National Relief Fund, Brothers-in-Arms Federation, and hospitals for war invalids.

From 1922 to 2000, the Post issued 275 semi-postal stamps in 99 issues. More than one-half of these stamps (53 percent) were issued for the Red Cross, 29 percent for the anti-tuberculosis campaign, 8 percent for philately, 5 percent for sports events, and 4 percent for various war relief and reconstruction programs.

In addition to having both the first and the last semi-postals, Red Cross stamps were issued each year from 1930-1946 and thereafter almost every year until the 1960s. Then, the Finnish Red Cross (SPR) and Anti-Tuberculosis (TUB) alternated issues every other year. The first anti-tuberculosis stamps were released in 1946 and the last in 1983.



The first Pro Filatelia stamp in 1931 comes from the first Finnish stationery cover from 1845, the so-called Porto Stempel. The early Pro Filatelia semi-postals were good as admission tickets for exhibitions.



Finland's first semi-postal from 1922.

The first Pro-Filatelia stamp was issued in 1931 to raise money for the Post Museum to purchase an important postal stationery collection. It was another 60 years before there was another semi-postal benefiting philately, but then they appeared every other year through the 1990s. Semi-postals for philately served as tickets to the exhibitions with the extra fee assisting those exhibitions. (The Post supported other exhibitions through the sale of regular issues, such as the high value stamps for registered letters issued in conjunction with FINLANDIA 95).

Before 1922, Finnish stamps were definitive issues dominated by designs of lion and double-headed eagle coats-of arms. Semi-postals served to introduce new designs of important religious, political, and cultural figures in national history, as well as historic buildings, ships, sporting events, and illustrations portraying the Finnish culture, character, and landscape.

Change Impacts Semi-Postals

During the past 12 years, the Finnish Post has undergone dramatic organizational changes, first in 1990 when it became a commercial governmental organization and later when it was transformed to operate more as a private company. Nonetheless, the Post was charged with maintaining the same basic services as though it were a tax-subsidized government agency.

At one time, the Post operated 3,900 post offices, one in almost every town, village, and hamlet. These offices offered the same assortment of stamps and service. This was expensive, but the expenses could be shared.

However, with the demand that each post office operate as a profit center, the Post started to close the smallest or the most non-profitable offices. There are now only about 300 offices in the largest towns and cities. ➤

Smaller post offices did not want to order products that might remain unsold for some time (the return system was difficult when every unit inside the Post tried to be profitable). Semi-postals were viewed as “slow sellers.”

By the 1990s, collectors complained they could not buy semi-postals, especially Pro Filatelia stamps, from their own post office. They had to order them from Helsinki if the local post office was not willing to order them. When the Post closed local post offices, it transferred the retail sale of stamps to kiosks and other outlets



The first anti-tuberculosis stamp from 1946. Later stamps in the series showed flora and fauna.

(now some 3,800) and hired local merchants to keep a post office as a sub-unit in their shops, bookstores, or gasoline station, etc. (now some 1,100). The semi-postals were not popular enough and the shopkeepers were not willing to order them.

The format was another problem for semi-postals. Normally, semi-postals are printed and sold from a sheet. Now, all stamps were to be packed in booklets or miniature sheets. This type of packaging proved unsuitable for semi-postals. The last two Pro Filatelia semi-postals were sold in booklets of two and three stamps, raising production expenses. So, it was decided to end the sale of semi-postals, at least for awhile.

Some Aspects of Finnish Semi-Postals

The first semi-postal in Finland, the 1922 Red Cross stamp, was the first Finnish stamp showing something beyond the familiar lion in the national coat of arms. Actually, the lion is there but the red cross overlies it. This first semi-postal departed from the normal stamp manufacturing process. The Finnish Red Cross bought the paper itself (it has been identified as Canadian paper, which is exceptional as the printing house usually bought Finnish paper). This first Red Cross was also the first large-sized stamp in Finland; it measured 24.5 x 34.5 mm while the definitive issues were 18.5 x 24.5 mm.

The first Red Cross stamps did not sell very well. Only 355,650 were sold in the post offices, 300,000 were given to Finnish Red Cross organization, and 1,344,350 were burned. This stamp was valid only on domestic mail until December 31, 1930. Its FDC is rare.



This semi-postal showing a World War I soldier was issued in 1938 to raise funds to help war veterans. Other issues were used to collect funds for veterans involved in the war against the Soviet Union.

Regular issues of semi-postals began in 1930. The Red Cross semi-postal issues dominated the 1930s; in some years they were issued with a



The 1931 series of Red Cross stamps showed a flag standard, sword and cloak, and a Viking ship. Later Red Cross stamps were quite wide in their themes, using history, buildings, war, flora and fauna, and personalities.

new value in the model of the 1930 stamp. The first philatelic semi-postal appeared in 1931 in order to acquire a stationery collection for the Post Museum. In 1938, there was a three-stamp issue for the first World Ski Championships at Lahti and another stamp for the victims of the 1918 War of Liberation.

In the 1940s, semi-postals were issued for the reconstruction and for the victims of the wars (Winter War 1939-40, Continuation War 1941-44), one for sports, one for philately, and the first anti-tuberculosis stamps in 1946. There was no Red Cross stamp in 1947.

In the 1950s there was almost an annual Red ➤



Three-stamp series from 1938 to support the World Ski Championships. The stamp showing the slalom was an unusual event for Finland at the time.

Cross or anti-tuberculosis semi-postal. There were two stamps issued in 1951 and 1952 for the Helsinki Olympic Games. Philately received semi-postal stamps in 1955 and 1956.

In the 1960s, SPR and TUB each received five issues of three or four stamps each. Philately was allowed two stamps. The anti-tuberculosis stamps ended in 1983 while the Red Cross and philately continued to receive aid from the sale of semi-postal stamps through the 1990s.

Semi-Postal Motifs

The themes in the semi-postal stamps have represented Finnish history, culture, art, flora, and fauna. In the beginning, Red Cross stamps were devoted to national history. Many political, cultural,



The final Red Cross stamps in 2000 showed farm animals.

stamps pictured Finnish nature and familiar aspects of every day life: mammals, fish, birds, mushrooms, berries, flowers, and insects plus that national icon, the sauna. Red Cross stamps also show the work of that organization in disaster-relief, community work, and emergency health care, but the last three issues represented farm animals. The TUB stamps initially used pictures from its work, such as caring for children, but later showed more flora, fauna, and art in its stamps. The Pro Filatelia series in the 1990s was devoted to art from Finland's golden era.

Stamp artist Signe Hammarsten-Jansson, whose first stamp design was in 1929, was the primary stamp designer for the Finnish Post for nearly 30 years. Among her 133 stamps (46 stamp sets) were about two-thirds of all the semi-postal stamps.



Normal and double-printing of the cross on the 1 1/4 markka value from the 1938 Red Cross series.

The Red Cross stamps are popular among general collectors and exhibitors. The other semi-postals have been collected mainly as part of a Finland collection or a thematic collection. Reasons for the Red Cross popularity come from the organization's long history, its various thematic possibilities, attractive design and because they were the original semi-postal issues. But perhaps the most important reason is the fact that there are a good number of errors in the Red Cross stamps.

From 1922 to 1964 the stamps were printed by copperplate recess or steel engraving recess in one color with the cross printed later by letterpress. That explains why there are missing crosses, double printings of the cross, and misplaced crosses. Later, almost ➤



The Pro Filatelia series in the 1990s used Finnish art as the motif. The 1999 series had two paintings by Hugo Simberg: Garden of Death and Wounded Angel.

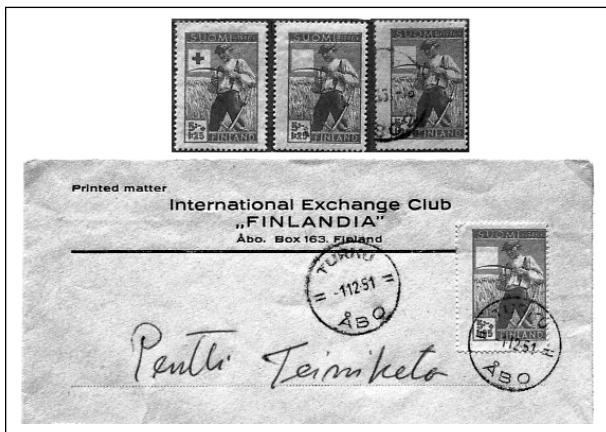
military, and science leaders from the past were pictured on the stamps. But there were also historical buildings, ships, and different coats of arms. It was time when a new nation was building its identity. During and just after World War II, the Red Cross stamps showed the reconstruction and the laborers, brick carriers, farmers, fisherman, and mother at home.

By the end of 1940s and continuing until the discontinuance of these issues, the Red Cross and the anti-tuberculosis



The final anti-tuberculosis stamp in 1983 showed local flowers.

Semi-Postals in Philately



Another Red Cross error stamp. The hayman is sharpening the scythe in the 1946 series. At left top is the correct stamp followed by mint and used copies without the cross and a cover with an error stamp. Missing crosses, wrong positions and double-printings are the most common errors because the cross was printed separately.

he is not certain if they exist at all. Bidders have been paid more than €1,000 for some FDCs from the 1930s, making them some of the most prized items of modern Finnish philately. ■

(Editor's Note: Roger Quinby assisted in editing this article. Author Lauri Poropudas, a professional journalist, is the editor of *Filatelisti* in Finland. As a result of his research for this article, the author has compiled an eight-page catalog of Finland's semi-postal stamps. SCC members interested in receiving a copy may contact the author at Lauri Poropudas, Salomaankatu 23, FIN-1330 Hämeenlinna, Finland, or email lauri.poropudas@mail.htk.fi.

all stamps were printed by offset and there are not as many errors although double printing can be found. There also are perforation errors, paper folds, and other oddities that appeal to the collector. The Red Cross issues include some imperforate proofs and color proofs that enhance the pre-production elements of an exhibit. The anti-tuberculosis stamps were found to have missing colors, perforation errors, and paper folds mostly from the 1940s.

It should not be too difficult to build a collection of anti-tuberculosis stamps in excellent condition. The Red Cross stamps are a more difficult challenge because of the errors and the scarcity of many of the FDCs from the 1930's. The early Red Cross issues present a special challenge. Kaj Hellman, who has the foremost auction house in Finland, says that he has never seen or had the possibility to offer all first day covers of Finnish Red Cross semi-postals. He maintains that he has never seen the 1931 and 1932 FDCs, and