



A special IRC, adapted from the Beijing type II design, has been produced to mark the centenary of the International Reply Coupon

Centenary of the International Reply Coupon

The sixth Universal Postal Union Congress held in Rome in 1906 introduced a new worldwide postal service—the International Reply Coupon, better known as the ‘IRC’. The first was put on sale on 1 October 1907, a century ago. Jean-Louis Emmenegger looks at this original postal document which was proposed by the British Post Office

At the 1906 UPU Congress the delegates approved a plan for the introduction of an international postal document which would have the following characteristics. It was to be named the ‘International Reply Coupon’ (IRC) and would bear the UPU form number ‘C22’ (later ‘CN 01’), this ‘small paper document’ would be sold by all post offices of all postal administrations that were members of the UPU. It would be sold against cash payment in the local currency, and the selling post office had to postmark the IRC showing where and when it was sold. The customer would then be able to send this IRC to almost any country in the world so that the recipient could pay for the return postage costs (by surface mail) by simply presenting the IRC at his post office as payment of the postage on his letter. The post office was obliged to accept it. When cashed, the post office had to cancel the IRC.

Postmarked at left

The selling post office cancelled the IRC on the left of the form and this explains why most IRC’s are found in this form. Mint IRC’s (bearing no cancellation at all) or ‘double cancelled’ IRC’s (bearing two different postmarks, the ‘selling’ postmark and the ‘receiving’ postmark from two different countries) are uncommon but not rare.

The IRC should be placed in context with the period of its birth in the 1900s. At the time the UPU was trying to develop postal exchanges among its member coun-

tries by implementing new services and rules to be followed by all members. In this connection, other such services were ‘Registered Mail’ (acceptance, delivery, indemnity in case of loss, etc) and the ‘Advice of Delivery’ service (with the special AR cards). For the introduction of IRC’s, a complicated system of exchange rates among the numerous different currencies around the world had to be organised: the cost of a letter abroad had to be calculated in each currency, to make selling and cashing possible.

Seven different types of IRC

The IRC design that was adopted at the 1906 Congress is known as the ‘Rome’ type and during the following 100 years there have been seven different designs. These are:

- 1) Rome type approved at the 1906 UPU Congress in Rome. This first design was issued on 1 October 1907 and sold until September 1925.
- 2) Stockholm type (approved at the eighth UPU Congress in Stockholm in 1924, issued in October 1925 and sold until June 1930. It looked like the Rome type, but was slightly smaller in size. It is often regarded as an amended ‘Rome’ type rather than a new design.
- 3) London type (approved at the ninth UPU Congress in London in 1929, issued on 1 July 1930 and sold until December 1964.
- 4) Vienna type (approved at the 15th UPU Congress in Vienna in 1964 and issued in January 1965. It remained on sale until December 1974).
- 5) Lausanne type (approved at the 17th UPU Congress in Lausanne in 1974 and issued

in January 1975. The same form was on sale in all UPU countries. The sale price was not obliged to be shown.

- 6) Beijing type I (approved at the UPU Congress in Beijing in 1999 and issued on 1 January 2002. The size is larger, a limit of validity and the name of the country are included. This form was also bar-coded and had an expiry date of 31 December 2006.
- 7) Beijing type II (issued and sold since 1 July 2006. New design with a hologram. Valid until 31 December 2009).

Design

On the first types, the name of the country is shown in French and the country's language—Switzerland has its name in three languages!—together with the value of the IRC in the country's currency and the name of the printer. A text, both in the national language (upper part) and in French, the UPU official language, can be found on the front. On the IRC's sold by the French Post Office, only a French text is shown.

On the reverse the text is printed in different languages depending on the IRC's type. For example, on the Rome type sold by the Swiss Post, there is German, English, Spanish and Italian. Then Italian disappears, and on the London type sold by the Swiss Post, we find the new languages adopted by the UPU: Arabic, Chinese and Russian, totalling six languages. With French and the national language on the front, we get a total of eight languages!

There is an imprint found on each of the IRC's issued from 1907 to 1992: 'V. Benziger & Co A.G., Einsiedeln' which changes to 'Benziger & Cie S.A., Einsiedeln' (with slight differences between the IRC types). Later, the imprint disappears. 'Benziger' is the name of the printer, a small company located in Einsiedeln, a rural village in the canton of Schwyz, in central Switzerland. This printer produced all the IRC's from 1907 to 1992. In 1993, another company was commissioned but this printer closed down in 1995.

Changes for the Lausanne type

On the first four IRC types—from the Rome to the Vienna—the name of the country always appears on the front. But this disappeared on 31 December 1974, as the Lausanne UPU Congress decided that the new type—the Lausanne type—would no longer bear the name of the country. Instead, 'Union Postale Universelle', with the UPU emblem, would feature in the design. To the right, is the inscription 'COUPON-REPONSE INTERNATIONAL' in French.

An important change was also adopted regarding the text on the front: only the French text now appears, and the text in the national language was removed. But the six other foreign languages still remain on the back. All this is the result of a more modern way of managing (by the UPU) all the IRC's circulating in the world. From the Lausanne type on, the value of the IRC is left to the Postal administration and could be printed directly by the IRC's printer, by a local printer, by hand by the postal clerk, etc. They can also be sold without any printed value.

It is interesting to note that the USSR and its satellites never participated in the IRC system and the People's Republic of China only adopted the system in 1995. There are



Top: The Rome and Stockholm designs differed only in size

London (above) Vienna (right) and Lausanne (below) types



Beijing type I, with barcode on front, and Beijing type II designs

earlier Chinese IRCs dating back to the years of the civil war (from 1946 to 1948), but usually these sell for high prices.

Overprinted types

To accommodate changes in currencies, exchange rates, etc, IRCs could be overprinted with new values, with the authorisation of the national postal administration, sometimes with a manuscript correction written by the postal clerk or applied by rubber stamp, or with a stamp affixed on the front to make-up the new value (this practice has been followed by Argentina). Some IRCs have been overprinted twice, following two revaluations.

Through the decades, many changes occurred in the list of the IRC-issuing countries: some countries changed their name and others became independent. Such changes can be traced through the IRCs. Sometimes, the new name of the country was overprinted on the 'old' IRC, until new ones were prepared. Some other countries just disappeared, such as Palestine, Danzig, Bosnia-Herzégovina, etc. Other IRCs were used abroad, German (Reichspost) coupons were sold and cancelled by German post offices in Turkey, for example.

The 'special' RC's

In addition to the IRCs of the UPU, there is another family of Reply Coupons: those issued by 'special postal unions'. France and its former colonies, and the United Kingdom and Commonwealth countries, for example. Both issued their own Reply Coupons, whose selling and exchanging validity was restricted to the countries concerned.

The French Reply Coupons group has four different categories: 'Coupon-réponse Franco-Colonial', 'Coupon-réponse Union Française', 'Coupon-réponse Communauté Française' and the 'Type E' (still in use for France, Monaco, Andorra, Mayotte, and some overseas territories).

The special United Kingdom Reply Coupons group has two different categories: the RC's marked 'IMPERIAL REPLY COUPON' and the RC's issued for and valid in the 'British Commonwealth of Nations' only. The latter bear the text 'COMMONWEALTH REPLY COUPON' and 'Valid only for exchange between the countries of the Commonwealth'.

Other categories of non-UPU Reply Coupons include the reply coupons that were used between Spain and its colonies, those (two types) used between Japan and Manchuria (from 26 January 1936 to 8 August 1945), the special reply coupons valid between Japan and the Ryukyu Islands, the coupons valid among the countries of the 'American-Spanish Postal Union', and those valid among the countries members of the 'Arab Postal Union'.

The latest type

On 1 July 2006, the current UPU IRC (Beijing type II) was placed on sale. It is this type that you should be able to buy at your

local post office. This IRC is available from post offices in more than 70 countries. They will be exchangeable up to 31 December 2009 in all UPU member countries. The new design features two fingers about to touch, framed in a postage stamp, the image was inspired by the famous Michelangelo work adorning the Sistine Chapel ceiling and symbolises the notions of communication and exchange that the International Reply Coupon represents.

The centenary

Today, about 70 UPU member countries sell IRCs at their post office branches imagine the opportunity for research that field opens! You can either study and collect the IRCs of a specific country, or a group of countries, or a continent. You can also collect a special kind of IRC, those issued to mark the 100th anniversary for example; UPU countries will be allowed to overprint their IRCs with a special inscription 1907-2007: 100 years of the IRCs. Has somebody already seen one of the anniversary IRC types? Let's start the search!

IRC's used by 'Special Postal Unions': UK, France and Japan





The IRC's in brief

When one writes a letter and requests a reply, it is considered polite to enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. This works well when both persons live in the same country. However, if they are of different countries, the enclosed postage stamp will not be valid. This technical problem was solved in 1906 when the Universal Postal Union (UPU), during its Congress in Rome, introduced the 'International Reply Coupon' service. As the service began before the days of airmail, the earliest coupons could only be redeemed for a single-rate ordinary postage stamp to a foreign country. Today, IRC's are exchangeable in all member countries of the UPU for the minimum postage for a priority item or an unregistered airmail letter sent to a foreign country.

The UPU's International Bureau processes several million coupons each year and deals with all accounting procedures. The International Bureau does not sell IRC's directly to customers. They must buy them from their local post office. Although UPU member postal services are not obliged to sell IRC's, it is mandatory for post offices in the UPU member countries to exchange the coupons for postage.

Catalogues and books

1. An illustrated *Trial Listing of the Imperial Reply Coupons & Commonwealth Reply Coupons*. Published in 2005 by and edited by Peter Robin. 43 pages, black and white illustrations, colour cover. Available from the author at PO Box 353, Bala Cynwyd, PA 19004, USA. Email: peterrobin@att.net
2. *Systematik der Internationalen Antwortscheine*, by Dr Paul-August Koch, 1990, 82 pages (in German)
3. *I Buoni-Riposta Internazionale (con particolare riguardo ai Buoni-Riposta emessi dalle Poste Italiane)*. By

Vincenzo Altavilla, 2006, 96 pages in Italian, Ed Union Filatelisti Interofili, Italy (Monograph No 1 of the L'Intero Postale studies the IRC's issued by the Italian Post)

4. *100 ans de coupons-réponse en France 1907-2007: histoire,*

réglementation et catalogue. By André Hurtré, Ed. Académie de Philatélie (France), June 2007, 270 pages. Orders must be sent to Mrs Brigitte Abensur, 8 rue des Fossés, F-54700 Pont-à-Mousson, France. Email brigitte.abensur@wanadoo.fr (price 45 euros)

References

1. 'International Reply Coupons are collectible', by Michael Baadke, in Linn's Stamp website site, Refresher Course (www.linns.com)
2. Website of André Hurtré (France): among the best, it can be viewed at www.couponreponse.fr
3. www.upu.int (list of the countries selling IRC's)

Collectors Club

FIAS—Forschungsgemeinschaft Internationale Antwortscheine (Germany) is the IRC collectors society of Europe. It publishes a bulletin called *FIAS-Blätter*. For further details please contact Otmar Lienert, Kronenstrasse 25, PO Box, CH- 8840 Einsiedeln, Switzerland. e-mail: info@lienertkerzen.ch Mr Lienert has won many medals at international philatelic exhibitions with his IRC collection.

Thanks

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