

# Die Cut, Or Not?

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I puzzled over the 1911 Paris-Rome-Turin stamp in Figure 1 for a long time. The catalogs differ over the method of separation, with Gardiner & Greiczek calling it arc roulette, Silombra calling it perf 12, and Naudet saying “printed perforation cut 12”, which I would interpret as die cut. There is color along the edges, as would be seen in rouletted in color, but it would not seem possible to get the pointed projections at the corners with rouletting. Perforation could not do the corner projections either, plus there are no torn paper fibers at the “perf tips” of these stamps. It seemed that it must be die cut, though I had never heard of “die cut in color” before. Recently I managed to obtain a large multiple of this stamp shown below in Figure 2.



Figure 1



Figure 2

The stamps are printed individually, which rules out roulette and perforation, where the stamps are attached to each other prior to separation. The stamps appear to be printed with a pair of embossing dies, but somewhat haphazardly with the pair at the lower right angling up. In spite of this, the “die cutting” achieves perfect registration which seems rather implausible. More typically in this time period, one would see something like Figure 3. A sheet of round stamps is printed; then a circular die, like a cookie cutter, is pressed onto the sheet stamping out circular stamps. Perfect registration is hard to achieve however, resulting in off center specimens. Modern computerized printing such as with US Forever stamps avoids this, but it is still a 2 step process. The stamps are printed, but might be sold as uncut press sheets before the die cuts are applied. Most of the time the die cuts are applied, but might fail for whatever reason, leading to missing die cut errors.



Figure 3

The answer is that these stamps were produced by a technique called cameo stamping with a cutting edge incorporated into the die. The process is described in Williams' *Fundamentals of Philately*. The engraver starts with a blank die and inscribes the outer edge of the stamp. Next, all the metal within the design is removed to a shallow depth, as is the metal to the outside of the design. This leaves a thin sharp edge. Next, the design to be embossed is engraved onto the die, and metal is usually removed just inside the cutting edge, leaving a small moat, which will also be embossed. Then ink is applied to the die, which inevitably will also be applied to the cutting edge. The die is placed into the press with paper between it and the counterpart made of pasteboard, leather, plaster, or wax. When the press is operated, the recessed areas will get embossed, and the cutting edge, since it is slightly higher than the rest of the die, will cut the stamps at the same time. Thus all the irregular shapes we are familiar with are produced with perfect registration of the cutting and the design, since they are done at the same time. An inspection of the embossed stamps in my albums reveals that most have the colored ink visible on the edges indicating they were produced in this way.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

As can be seen in Figures 8 and 9, stamps that have been previously described as perforate are actually a result of this process.

So what should we call the embossed stamps that have been described as “die cut”? Calling them “cameo stamped with a cutting edge incorporated into the die” certainly seems awkward. But the process does include “cutting” and a “die”, so I think it’s reasonable that we keep calling them die cut. We should be aware however that it is a one step process rather than two steps, and something different from what postage stamp collectors call die cut.

Gardiner, Stewart and Greiczek, Steve. *A General Illustrated Catalogue of Exhibition and Event Poster Stamps to 1914*. Cinderella Stamp Club. 2014

Naudet, G. *Les Vignettes Francaises D’Aerostation et D’Aviation des Origines a 1940*. L’Arc en Ciel. 1967

Silombra, Jean. *Histoire de L’Aerostation et de L’Aviation Francaise a Travers le Monde de 1783 a 1930*. Yvert & Cie. 1989

Williams, L.N. *Fundamentals of Philately*. American Philatelic Society. 2008 Edition pp. 403-404