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Time gnaws away at these small works of art with their serrated edges

Letters are becoming increasingly scarce as most correspondence is now sent electronically. This means that fewer and fewer stamps are being used. Proud stamp collectors nevertheless hope that this does not spell the end of philately. Swiss Post gives them hope.

By Marc Lettau

When Christian Fiechter franks a letter, he does not buy the stamp required at the post office counter but instead takes it from one of his stamp albums. The active senior citizen from Zollikerberg sticks 30, 40 and sometimes even 50-year-old unstamped philatelic collector's items on his letters. He plunders his collection because an expert has advised him to do so. His collection, in which he has invested well

Switzerland. The oldest stamp still valid was issued in 1938, and since 1964 all stamps in Switzerland have enjoyed unlimited validity – provided they have not been franked. This permanent validity contrasts with the reduction in letter mail. Its volume is declining by two percent every year. According to Susanne Ruoff, the chief executive of Swiss Post, it is possible that letters will only be delivered on five

ated just 2.2 million francs from the surcharges. Marianne Affolter, Head of Communications at Pro Juventute, believes that the figures reflect just how fundamentally the importance of the letter has changed in Switzerland due to SMS and email. It has long since focused on new sources of income to continue funding projects for children. "Donations, corporate partnerships and bequests play a key role today," Affolter

his confidence partly from the fact that "stamps convey the country's image to the world". Switzerland will not dispense with such "ambassadors" in a hurry. Stamps are also a "cultural asset". "Stamps of great artistic value are constantly attracting attention," he says. Hertsch is thinking of stamps such as those by the artist Franz Gertsch. This master of the giant image created something "captivating" in the tiny format of the stamp, he says. "That is no mean feat as it takes much more than simply reducing the subject for a stamp to succeed."

Bestseller with a billion-plus circulation

Some 1.488 billion of the 10-cent definitive were printed in 1960 compared with just under four million of the 2013 Christmas stamp. Aren't dwindling issues affecting the desire to collect? Hertsch rejects this

to their diversity." For him it is "a point of honour" to only use stamps. He sometimes attaches a stamp that he particularly likes to his many registered letters – the circular six-franc stamp coated with 18-carat gold which shows a gold Vreneli coin. This "gold stamp" issued in 2013 supplements the range of philatelic specialities of Swiss origin, which also includes embroidered stamps (2000), stamps made of spruce (2004) and stamps with a chocolate aroma (2001).

As long as there are collectors, there will be stamps

The official answer from Swiss Post to the question about the future of stamps is very clear: "Stamps are not going to be discontinued." Around 45 new stamps are issued every year. "That will not change in future," says media spokesperson Nathalie

"without having to complete a delivery order", Hertsch points out. Swiss Post do not wish to focus on the monetary aspect. In their view, the stamp enhances the appearance of the letter. Dérobert Fellay: "The stamp is sometimes seen as underlining a message."

Hertsch agrees with this sentiment – stamps sometimes make the difference between a simple postal delivery and a personal message. Stamps are often very carefully selected. Pro Juventute is also placing its hopes on this. Marianne Affolter says: "It is increasingly rare to have to send letters to correspond with other people. Sending letters may nonetheless represent an attractive, traditional gesture in future." The changed status of the stamp may be of some comfort to collectors like Christian Fiechter. Their investment does not generate profit in the traditional sense. The new



Switzerland's first stamp: the "Double de Genève" from 1843



Expensive collector's item: "Baster Taube" from 1845



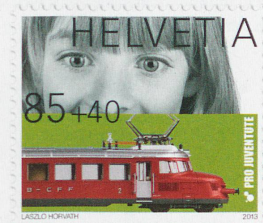
Almost 1.5 billion of this 10-cent stamp have been printed since 1960



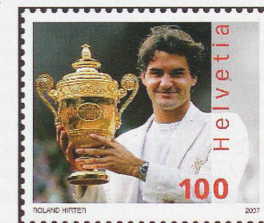
The six-franc "Gold V" stamp from 2013 with 18-carat gold



The "Chocosuisse" from 2001 has a chocolate aroma



Pro Juventute stamp with a charitable surcharge from 2013



Contemporary stars, such as Roger Federer, are also popular subjects for stamps

over 50,000 Swiss francs over six decades, is deemed "largely worthless and unsellable". The expert's advice was to simply use up the uncanceled stamps from his collection, which is what Fiechter is now doing.

There are many philatelists who have inserted stamp after stamp in albums from a young age and are now at a loss over their collections. Thanks to them there is even a niche postal market in operation. The dealer Hans Harlacher from Triboltingen buys up unstamped collector's items and sells them to an exclusive clientele of the nostalgic and thrifty who use them to frank their post. The business works because Harlacher sells them for slightly below the postage value. Using old rarities is less expensive than buying new stamps.

Fiechter's solution to his problem and Harlacher's business are possible because stamps remain valid for such a long time in

days of the week in future. Saturday may become a "letter-free" day.

The example of Pro Juventute

Fewer letters obviously also mean fewer stamps. This is causing concern for a special Swiss charitable institution – the charity stamp, such as the Pro Juventute stamp first issued in 1913. A "charitable surcharge" is levied on these stamps and this goes towards the organisation's projects. The revenue from the sale of its surcharge stamps has become an important source of finance for Pro Juventute. And school pupils selling the Pro Juventute stamps under the slogan "children for children" have become a feature of everyday Swiss life. In peak years 45 million stamps were sold. But issues and revenues have been in decline for years. The revenues in 1982 correspond to present-day purchasing power of 13.6 million Swiss francs. In 2011, Pro Juventute gener-

says. Collectors should nevertheless remain loyal to the Pro Juventute stamps, which are popular philatelic collector's items in view of their often high artistic value.

An ageing club

However, the number of enthusiasts of these works of art with serrated edges is declining. Elderly gentlemen are largely by themselves in many philatelic clubs. Such a situation must surely give experts like Christoph Hertsch sleepless nights. But that is not the case. Hertsch, who runs the stamp dealership Zumstein & Cie in Berne, which was founded in 1905 and is now in the hands of the fourth generation, and who publishes the "philatelists' bible" – the Zumstein catalogue – remains confident despite all the prophecies of doom. He is regarded as an undisputed authority in the world of stamps and he does not believe they will suffer a rapid demise. He draws

notion: "It has actually become even more attractive." Collectors have also developed new passions. There is growing interest in letters "that tell a recognisable story". Hertsch points to a stamped envelope post-marked in Friedrichshafen. The remarkable thing about it is that the letter contains scorch marks. It comes from the wreckage of the Hindenburg zeppelin LZ 129, which went up in flames on 6 May 1937 in Lakehurst (USA): "You are holding a genuine piece of history in your hands," he says. Stamps therefore become "an authentic part of world history".

The enemy of the philatelist is the machine. Sending registered mail as a business customer today requires stamps costing six Swiss francs. However, Swiss Post only charges five Swiss francs for machine-franked registered mail. Hertsch says: "It is ultimately automation that poses the biggest threat to stamps as a cultural asset and

Dérobert Fellay. There are still around 150,000 collectors in Switzerland. They are contributing to the survival of the stamp, and tens of thousands have subscribed to all new stamp issues. Swiss Post generates significant revenues as a result

dividend is the sheer delight for those who discover serrated-edged missives from the past in their letterbox.

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ZÜRICH – PREPAID PIONEERS

The first stamp was issued in the United Kingdom in 1840. The basic concept was to charge the sender rather than the recipient for the cost of sending a letter. On 1 March 1843, the canton of Zurich was the first "state" after the UK to introduce this "prepaid postal system". Geneva followed suit on 30 September 1843 with its own stamp, the *Double de Genève*. On 1 July 1845, the people of Basel were able to purchase the first "Basler Tauben" for 2 1/2 cents. The Swiss postal system was not founded until 1849 and issued stamps for the whole of Switzerland from 1850. The most valuable philatelic collector's item dates from this period: the catalogue price for the "Rayon I" federal stamp of 1851, light blue with a framed cross, is around 250,000 Swiss francs. (MUL)

