

Stamping Cultural Diplomacy

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Stamps are more than tiny pieces of colourful gummed paper that are used to pay for the carriage of mail. Every stamp is unique and informative and reflects the rich and diverse facets of a nation. Stamps are the pride of a nation.

Since Singapore became a republic in 1965, every stamp issue, starting from its first in 1966, has mirrored the different aspects of the nation. These stamps have showcased our political, economic and social development, our vibrant multi-racial culture, our arts and crafts, our flora and fauna, and our links with the world.

They also serve as our ambassadors to the world. Visitors to Singapore have adorned their postcards and letters home with stamps. Similarly, stamps have been affixed to the millions of letters that Singaporeans have mailed to their loved ones, friends and business associates abroad. In this way, the Singapore story has been brought to all corners of the globe.

As 2018 is the year Singapore takes over the Chairmanship of ASEAN, this essay shows how stamps have helped to document and cement Singapore's relations with her ASEAN counterparts and how they can also help to connect the region on a people-to-people level.

Stamps as Political Tools

Stamps are powerful tools. They are used to express territorial sovereignties and boundaries, political ideologies and policies, international and regional alliances, and bilateral relations.

In the context of Singapore, as a republic, stamps were issued to celebrate and commemorate our membership or participation in international and regional intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations and events. To date, Singapore has issued stamps to commemorate its involvement in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Commonwealth of Nations, Universal Postal Union (UPU), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Southeast Asian Games, Asian Games, Olympic Games, International Olympic Committee (IOC), International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), and United Nations' International Year of Cooperatives (IYC) in 2012.



Figure 1. First day cover of “Visit ASEAN Year” stamps, 4 April 1971. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

Stamps on ASEAN

One of the most important intergovernmental organisations for Singapore is ASEAN. ASEAN was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand. The founding member countries were Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Today, it is a union of ten Southeast Asian countries with the aim to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region, and to promote regional peace and stability.

The first Singapore stamp issue related to ASEAN was launched on 4 April 1971, only four years after the establishment of ASEAN. The title of the issue was “Visit ASEAN Year” (Figure 1). Cooperation in tourism was one of the earliest areas of ASEAN activities. Projects were aimed at promoting the ASEAN region as a tourist destination, preserving the ASEAN cultural and environmental heritage, promoting intra-ASEAN travel and human resource development in the tourism section (ASEAN Secretariat 2012).

The themes featured on the stamps were trishaws, the Singapore River, a scene at a Chinese temple, the Singapore waterfront skyline, and places of worship. These stamps were issued shortly after the ASEAN Tourism Association (ASEANTA) was formed on 27 March 1971. ASEANTA is a non-profit tourism association. It has members from public and private tourism sectors in ASEAN, hotel and restaurant associations, airlines, and National Tourism Organisations. Its objective is to focus on the development and promotion of tourism destinations and attractions, and the supporting infrastructure within the ASEAN region.

“Through its humble beginning, ASEANTA has grown to become a tourism association of influence within the ASEAN tourism landscape, playing an integral role in shaping tourism development growth and policies in the ASEAN region.” (ASEANTA Secretariat 2013)



Figure 2. First day cover of “25th Anniversary of ASEAN: Visit ASEAN Year 1992” stamps, 8 August 1992. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

The next “Visit ASEAN Year” stamps were issued in 1992 (Figure 2). “Visit ASEAN Year 1992” was noted to be the biggest tourism promotion in the region. It was one of the most concrete achievements of ASEAN tourism organisations. For the period of 1991 – 1995, the growth of ASEAN tourism was phenomenal. It was more than two-fold the world’s arrivals and over that of the Asia-Pacific region (ASEAN Secretariat 2012).

The official launch of the “Visit ASEAN Year 1992” took place at the 10th ASEAN Tourism Forum held in Bandung, Indonesia on 13 January 1991 (ASEAN Secretariat 1991). The campaign was aimed at promoting the diversity of cultures and attractions in the six ASEAN nations consisting of the five founding members

and Brunei Darussalam who had joined the group in 1984. A set of stamps, carrying the theme of the tourism campaign, was issued on 8 August 1992 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of ASEAN. These stamps expressed refreshing, colourful and vibrant designs, capturing the spirit of ASEAN.

Stamps on ASEAN Members and Anniversaries

ASEAN started off as a union of Singapore and four neighbouring countries during more turbulent times. The 10th anniversary was celebrated in 1977. The five founding member countries issued commemorative stamps on 8 August 1977 to mark the occasion. Flags and maps of the five members were featured on the stamps (Figure 3).



Figure 3. From left: “10th Anniversary of ASEAN” stamps issued by Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, 8 August 1977. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

The ASEAN logo or emblem appeared on the 15th anniversary stamps issued by the five countries (Figure 4). The emblem is a bundle of rice stalks. Beneath it is the acronym “ASEAN” in blue. Each stalk of rice represents a member country which is bound together in friendship and solidarity, and set on a field of yellow encircled by a blue border. The use of rice stalks to represent each member is very appropriate as rice cultivation is indigenous to Southeast Asia and rice is the staple food of the member countries. Brown stands for strength and stability, yellow for prosperity, and blue for the spirit of cordiality in which ASEAN affairs are conducted (ASEAN Secretariat 2012).

The policy-making body of ASEAN is the annual meeting of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers. The meeting is responsible for the formulation of policy guidelines and coordination of all ASEAN activities. The 15th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting was held in Singapore from 14 to 16 June 1982. Under the ASEAN Charter, Article 31, the Chairmanship of ASEAN rotates annually based on the alphabetical order of the English names of the member countries. A member country assuming the Chairmanship chairs the ASEAN Summit and related summits, the ASEAN Coordinating Council, the three ASEAN Community Councils, relevant ASEAN Sectorial Ministerial Bodies and senior officials, and the Committee of Permanent Representatives (ASEAN Secretariat 2012).



Figure 4. “15th Anniversary of ASEAN” stamps issued by Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The ASEAN emblem shown on the stamps was the original version. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

This first day cover in Figure 5 was autographed by the foreign ministers of the five founding member countries who were present at the 15th Ministerial Meeting held in Singapore in 1982.

In 1984, Brunei Darussalam joined ASEAN as the sixth member. The addition to the membership was reflected in the ASEAN emblem. The five stalks of rice were increased to six. Stamps which were issued to commemorate the 20th anniversary of ASEAN featured the revised emblem (Figure 6).

Eleven years later, Vietnam became the seventh member of ASEAN on 28 July 1995. Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) and Myanmar were admitted to ASEAN as the eighth and ninth members on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia as the 10th member of ASEAN on 30 April 1999. The increase in membership was reflected in the stamps that were issued on 8 August 1997 (Figure 7). However, the ASEAN emblem showed 10 stalks of rice instead of nine. This is because ASEAN was prepared for the entry of Cambodia as a new member together with Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23 July 1997 but that did not happen as planned. Cambodia's entry was delayed to 1999 due to domestic violence that broke out in the country.



Figure 5. First Day Cover of the “15th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting” stamps. Autographs from top left to right: Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand; Professor Dr. Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Indonesia; General Carlos P. Romulo, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Philippines; Mr Suppiah Dhanabalan, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Singapore; and Tan Sri Haji Muhammad Ghazali Shafie, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, 14 June 1982. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board. Cover donated by Professor Tommy Koh.



Figure 6. “20th Anniversary of ASEAN” stamps issued by Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, 8 August 1987. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.



Figure 7. First Day Cover of the “30th Anniversary of ASEAN” stamps. In anticipation of having 10 members, the ASEAN emblems were revised to reflect 10 stalks of rice. To celebrate this monumental milestone, Singapore’s stamps were designed to be semi-circular in shape. These are the first and only semi-circular stamps issued by Singapore thus far. 8 August 1997. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

In 2007, all 10 members of ASEAN celebrated the 40th anniversary by jointly issuing a special stamp issue comprising 10 stamps in a single issue. Each stamp represented a member country featuring a historical or important building of that country. In philatelic terms, this form of joint stamp issue is known as omnibus issue (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Omnibus stamp sheet issued to commemorate “40 Years of ASEAN – ASEAN Joint Stamp Issue” launched by all 10 countries. 8 August 2007. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

Since 2013, ASEAN member countries have collaborated on the project “Joint Stamp Issue of ASEAN Community”. In 2015, Thailand Post Company Limited was put in charge of organising the ASEAN stamp and postmark design competition for a “Joint Stamp Issue of ASEAN Community”. The theme of the stamp was “One Vision, One Identity, One Community”. Submissions by the 10 countries were received. The winning entries for both the stamp and postmark were submitted by Vietnam. The issuance of this single stamp by 10 countries reflected the unity of the ASEAN Community (Figure 9).

ASEAN has come a long way since 1967. On 8 August 2017, ASEAN celebrated its 50th anniversary. It has “made extraordinary progress in preserving peace and security, promoting



Figure 9. “Joint Stamp Issue of ASEAN Community” stamp issue to commemorate ASEAN 48th anniversary. The ASEAN Community was formally established on 31 December 2015. It comprises the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. 8 August 2015. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

economic cooperation and integration as well as social development. An important milestone in this 50-year journey was the formal establishment of the ASEAN Community at the end of 2015 ...” (ASEAN Secretariat 2017). To celebrate the Golden Jubilee, a common-themed stamp was issued by each member country in 2017, except for Brunei Darussalam which did not participate in this joint stamp issue. The theme chosen for the monumental milestone was national flowers. All the stamps featured the new ASEAN Post logo (Figure 10).

Stamps on ASEAN Economic Cooperation

Cooperation in transportation and communications were top-of-mind when ASEAN was established. Well-developed and interconnected

infrastructure was necessary to accelerate trade. Establishing good and efficient transport and communication services and facilities across ASEAN would reduce transaction costs in trade. Thus, one of the major projects undertaken was to set up a robust communication infrastructure to link up the ASEAN member countries through submarine cables by 1983.

The ASEAN Submarine Cable Network construction was split into four sections. The first three sections linked the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand to Singapore. Stamps were issued to commemorate this milestone in Singapore’s history of communications. These series of stamps were designed in a round shape.



Figure 10. From left: Rumdul (*Mitrella Mesnyi*) of Cambodia, Moon Orchid (*Phalaenopsis Amabilis*) of Indonesia, Dok Champa (*Plumeria rubra*) of Laos, Hibiscus of Malaysia (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*), Padauk (*Pterocarpus Indicus*) of Myanmar, Sampaguita (*Jasminum sambac*) of the Philippines, Vanda Miss Joaquim of Singapore, Ratchaphreuk (*Cassia fistula Linn*) of Thailand, and Lotus of Vietnam (*Nelumbo nucifera*). Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board. Collection donated by Vietnam Post.



Figure 11. “ASEAN Submarine Cable Network: Singapore – Philippines Cable Link” stamp issue. 3 October 1978. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.



Figure 12. “ASEAN Submarine Cable Network: Indonesia – Singapore Cable Link” stamp issue. 8 August 1980. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.



Figure 13. “Inaugural Ceremony for the ASEAN Submarine Cable: Completion of Malaysia – Singapore – Thailand Cable Link” stamp issue. 27 September 1983. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.



Figure 14. “ASEAN Trade Fair ‘80” stamps. 3 October 1980. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

The first section of the submarine cable network was laid in 1978 with landing points at Currimao, Ilocos Norte in the Philippines, and Katong in Singapore (Figure 11). The second section was laid in 1980 linking Ancol in Indonesia to Changi in Singapore (Figure 12) (Glover 2018). The third was laid in 1983 between Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand (Figure 13). The last section was completed in the same year between Thailand and the Philippines.

To promote and boost intra-ASEAN trade amongst ASEAN members as well as to promote the international trade of the member countries, the biennial ASEAN Trade Fair series was introduced. The fair was an exhibition of industry and business firms representing ASEAN products and services. Singapore hosted the ASEAN Trade Fair '80 at the World Trade Centre from 3 to 12 October 1980. The fair, which was attended by 300 companies from five ASEAN countries, aimed to “arouse interest between ASEAN nationals to trade more amongst themselves and visitors from outside the ASEAN region to increase

their economic relationships with ASEAN businessmen” (Goh 1980). It was the first trade fair hosted by Singapore. A set of stamps was released to commemorate the event (Figure 14).

Stamps in Cultural Diplomacy

Stamps have also been issued to celebrate bilateral relations between Singapore and other countries. Typically, stamps bearing mutually agreed upon themes and designs are jointly issued by the two countries on the same date. The first joint stamp issued by Singapore was in 1996, together with China to commemorate the Suzhou Industrial Project. This was followed by a joint stamp issue with Thailand, the first ASEAN member country, on 9 October 1997. The theme chosen for the Singapore – Thailand joint issue was sea shells (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Miniature Sheet of “Singapore – Thailand Joint Issue: Sea Shells”. 9 October 1997. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

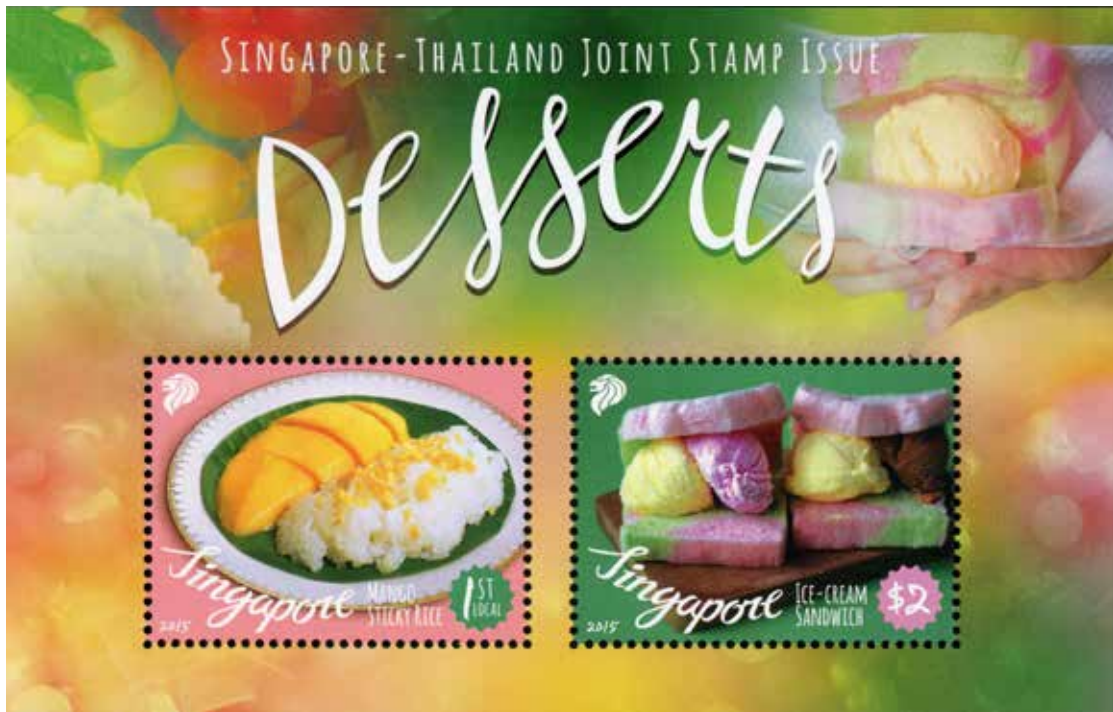


Figure 16. Miniature Sheet of “Singapore – Thailand Joint Stamp Issue: Desserts”. 18 September 2015. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

To celebrate 50 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries, another set of joint stamps was issued on 18 September 2015. The theme for these stamps was desserts; ice-cream sandwich for Singapore and mango sticky rice for Thailand (Figure 16).

Singapore has also issued joint stamps with other ASEAN member countries – Malaysia (Figure 17), Vietnam (Figure 18 and 19), Indonesia (Figure 20 and 21), Philippines (Figure 22), and Brunei Darussalam (Figure 23).

Singapore and Vietnam released two joint stamp issues. The first was in 2008 to commemorate 35 years of diplomatic relations (Figure 18) and the second in 2013 to mark the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations (Figure 19).

Singapore and Indonesia also issued two joint stamp issues. The first was in 2009 featuring the theme of tourist attractions in both countries (Figure 20). The second was in 2017 featuring corals to commemorate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries (Figure 21).

To commemorate 40 years of close diplomatic relations between Singapore and the Philippines, a set of joint stamps was issued on 28 August 2009. The theme, ‘Bridges’ was chosen to signify the strong, multi-faceted ties between both countries (Figure 22).



Figure 17. First Day Cover of “Singapore – Malaysia Joint: Birds” stamps. 27 June 2002. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.



Figure 18. Miniature Sheet of “Singapore – Vietnam Joint Issue: Fruits”. Popular fruits from both countries – durian for Singapore and dragon fruit for Vietnam – were featured. In Singapore, the stamps were launched at the closing of the country-themed exhibition “Journey to the Land of Lotus” at the Singapore Philatelic Museum. 18 November 2008. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.



Figure 19. Miniature Sheet of “Joint Stamp Issue between Singapore and Vietnam” issued to commemorate the 40th of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The Grey Peacock Pheasant of Vietnam and Red Junglefowl of Singapore were featured. 12 September 2013. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.



Figure 20. First Day Cover of “Singapore – Indonesia Joint Issue: Tourist Attractions”. 28 October 2009. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.



Figure 21. Miniature Sheet of “Singapore – Indonesia Joint Stamp Issue: Corals”. In Singapore, the stamps were unveiled at the Istana by Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Indonesian President Joko Widodo, as part of the 2017 Singapore – Indonesia Leaders’ Retreat. 7 September 2017. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

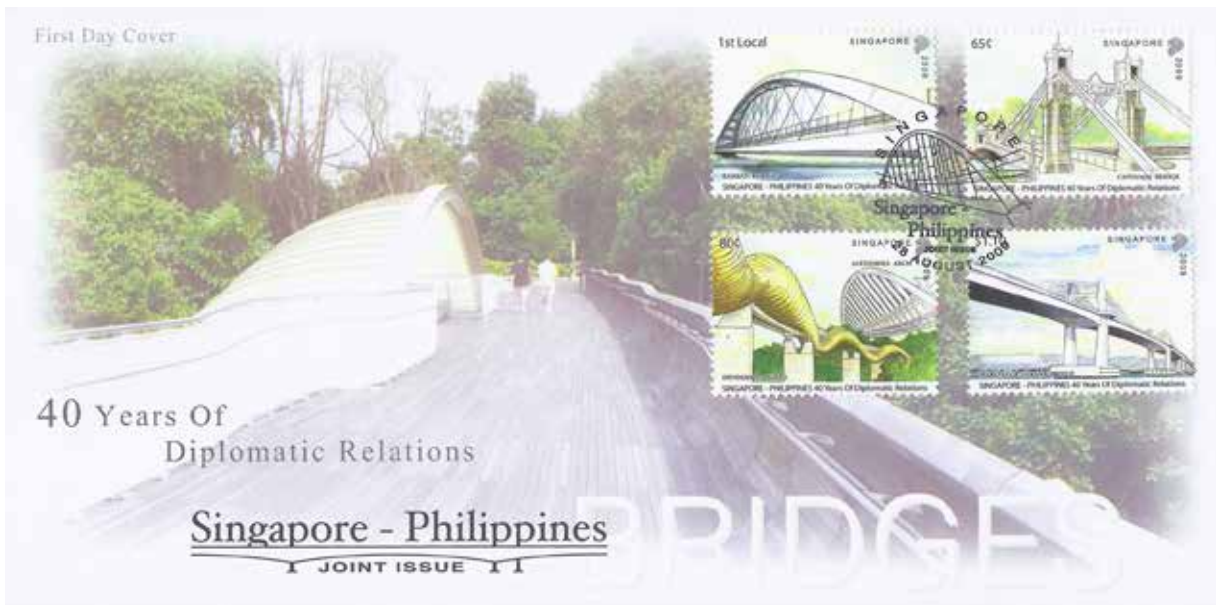


Figure 22. First Day Cover of “Singapore-Philippines Joint Issue: Bridging Strong Diplomatic Relationship”. Bridges featured are Henderson Waves and Alexandra Arch in Singapore, and Baman Bridge and Marcelo Fernan Bridge in the Philippines. 28 August 2009. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.



Figure 23. First Day Cover of “Singapore – Brunei Joint Issue: 45th Anniversary of Currency Interchangeability” Miniature Sheet. 27 November 2012. Collection of Singapore Philatelic Museum, National Heritage Board.

Singapore and Brunei issued a joint stamp issue to commemorate the 45th anniversary of the Currency Interchangeability Agreement (CIA) in 2012. The stamps featured the back of the 40th CIA anniversary commemorative note issued in 2007, while the other two showcase the respective iconic elements printed on Singapore and Brunei currency notes (Figure 23).

The deep and long-lasting friendship between Singapore and Brunei Darussalam is reflected in the fully interchangeable currencies of the two countries. Singapore and Brunei signed the CIA on 12 June 1967. Under this unique Agreement, the Brunei dollar and the Singapore dollar are regarded as “customary tender” when circulated in each other’s country. The Monetary Authority of Brunei Darussalam and the Monetary Authority of Singapore will accept the currency issued by the other, and to exchange it at par and without charge, into their own currency. Therefore, the public can use the respective currencies of Brunei

and Singapore in either country at par and banks in both countries will accept the currencies for deposit at par.

The Golden Jubilee of CIA was celebrated by both countries in 2017 with a joint stamp exhibition “Abode of Peace & the Lion City: A Brunei – Singapore Exhibition” held at the Singapore Philatelic Museum from July 2017 to March 2018 in Singapore, and at the Art Gallery from Nov 2017 to April 2018 in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam. The exhibition in Singapore was officially opened on 5 July 2017 by the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Hsien Loong and the Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu’izzaddin Waddaulah. The exhibition in Brunei Darussalam was opened by the Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore and Coordinating Minister for National Security, Mr Teo Chee Hean and Crown Prince of Brunei, Prince Haji Al-Muhtadee Billah on 4 November 2017.

Stamps – More Than Just Payment of Postage

To conclude, stamps are more than a receipt of prepayment of postage. As demonstrated in this essay, stamps carry national messages and statements, and play an important role in cultural diplomacy. The wide range of topics covered on stamps provides a wealth of information, ranging from history to geography, science, maths, arts and culture, heritage and tradition, life-style, and much more. Stamps are therefore excellent educational resources.

At the Singapore Philatelic Museum, stamps in the museum collections are used as teaching tools to introduce national history, heritage, and culture, and act as windows to the world to give visitors a glimpse of the world around us. □

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