

The New Postage Stamps in France

In my long-distant childhood phase of collecting stamps – it was after the dinosaur phase which I now rather regret did not last the rest of my life – I thought that French stamps were among the most beautiful that there were. They were always engraved, they were monochrome, and generally had as their subject famous and beautiful buildings or men or women of achievement.

Recently I have noticed that French special-issue stamps are of much lower quality, both in their printing and design. They are no longer engraved; their designs are childish; they are garishly multi-coloured as if attempting to attract magpie-eyes. In the last two days, for example, I have received two letters from France with stamps of many colours, one with a crudely-drawn cartoon of a man on a beach and a woman in a field holding an umbrella, a rainbow in the background, and the words Bonnes vacances in red across the bright blue sky, the o of bonnes being a yellow sun; and the other a similarly-drawn cartoon of a woman in a bikini swimming underwater in the sea being approached with a fish using a snorkel (she is not), the fish wishing the woman Bonnes vacances in bubbles coming up through its snorkel.

Is the French post merely reacting to or is it creating public taste? Both, perhaps. There seems to me something bureaucratically condescending and infantilising about the message. Postage stamps have often conveyed messages – a little while ago I went to a very interesting little exhibition in the town of Les Vans, near where I live when I

am in France, of postage stamps used to raise public awareness of the campaign against tuberculosis – but ‘Bonnes vacances’ is a message hardly of the same ilk.

The crudity of the design and colouration of the stamps, however, is part of a general trend to the use of such designs and primary colours. One has only to think of MacDonald’s restaurants, or the logo of Toys-R-Us to understand this. Children’s toys, which make up in quantity what they lack in quality, are now largely of plastic in the brightest reds, blues, greens and yellows. Public playgrounds have slides and climbing-frames in the same colours; and the universally recognisable iconography of Winnie-the-Pooh has changed from the subtle and tender drawings of Ernest Shepherd to the crude and highly-coloured Disney drawings.

Children are attracted naturally by bright colours, of course. That is why their tastes should be educated and not just indulged, or we will end up with a world of Bonnes vacances.

First published in