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Switzerland's Embroidered Stamp



Figure 1: The world's first embroidered stamp.

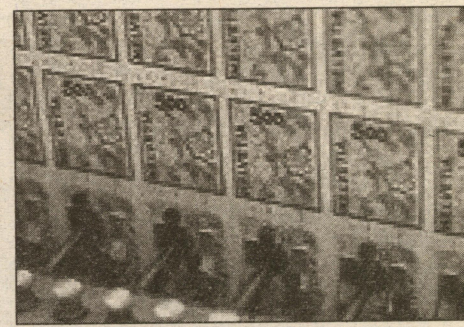


Figure 2: Stamps on the Saurer Pentamat 2040 embroidery machine.

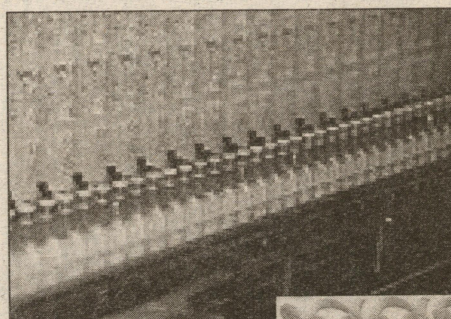


Figure 3: Samples of embroidery threads at the Bischof Textil AG firm.

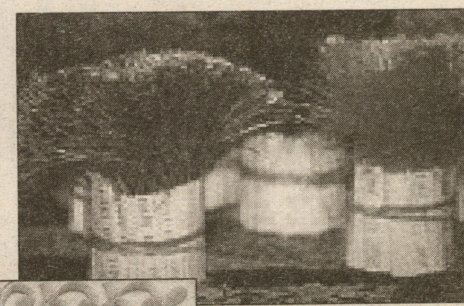


Figure 4: A wide view of the embroidery machine at work.



Figure 5: The souvenir sheet of four stamps.

▼ CHARLES J.G. VERGE

During the opening of Switzerland's national philatelic exhibition, NABA 2000, in St. Gall on June 21, the Swiss Post Office introduced the world's first embroidered stamp (Figure 1).

Embroidery has long been a tradition and a craft in Switzerland. By the end of the 19th century, it had become the principal industry in eastern Switzerland where more than one-fifth of the population made their living on it. The embroidered stamp, in a glossy satin weave finish, combines two shades of blue to create a typical motif from the famous St. Gall embroidery works.

The most modern techniques, allied with never-before-tried production processes contributed by many specialists, adapted this world-renown craft to the small size of the postage stamp.

Industrial production of such a small item (59mm x 48mm) is unique. It first started with pen and ink sketches on paper which, when finally approved, were scanned and then manipulated with a computer aided design (CAD) software before being transferred to the embroidering machine (Figure 2).

Peter Hostlettler designed the stamp. His inspiration came from a number of classical laces and embroideries from the private museum of his employer, Bischof Textil AG. Those selected for the stamp design were the Rosaline Point, Valenciennes lace and the Combination lace. The approved design was applied to a piece of polyester, giving a tridimensional aspect to the stamp. The fine embroidery twist 100 percent polyester thread used was specially made for Bischof (Figure 3) and will only be used for the production of this stamp.

The polyester sheets on which the stamps were embroidered were cut into strips of 9.4 meters and placed on Bischof's Saurer Pentamat 2040 embroidering machine. The machine is equipped with 340 needles capable of making 200 moves a minute and simultaneously producing 340 stamps at one time row after row (Figure 4).

The light blue was stitched first and then a second pass resulted in the dark blue embroidery for the design, Helvetia and 5.00 to be completed. To remedy the natural slight shift that occurs in any embroidery, the strips were restretched and kept in position with clamps before the second pass through.

As with any fine embroidery work, there are minor differences from one stamp to the other which, in this case, makes each stamp slightly different. Once the embroidering process was completed, the strips were subjected to quality control before the self-adhesive gum was applied.

As with the thread, the gum was specially made for these stamps. It is a multiple layered coating that allows removal of the stamps without leaving a residue. The coating is sealed with peelable foil. A cut in the foil allows for easy removal. After the stamps were die cut by computer they again underwent a checking process. Throughout the process, quality control was extensive to reduce the possibility of errors and varieties. The small differences remaining in the stamps are more in the order of freaks or oddities rather than varieties or errors.

The stamps were produced in sheet format and souvenir sheets of four (Figure 5). The Swiss Post Office did not release the number of stamps or souvenir sheets produced. ▼