

Unique Vatican Proofs sold in Controversial Swiss Auction

By Daniel A. Piazza

On April 21 David Feldman S.A., the Geneva auction house, sold 40,000 plate proofs from the archives of Swiss security printers Hélio Courvoisier. More than 1000 Vatican items mounted in two albums—including imperforate plate proofs and progressive color proofs of most Vatican stamps printed by Courvoisier from 1989–2001—were offered as a single lot, #10259, and brought €48,000 against a presale estimate of €10,000–20,000.

According to the Feldman auction catalogue, only one example of each proof in the Courvoisier archives was saved; all remaining copies were destroyed. The survivors were mounted on “specially printed Courvoisier archive pages” and assembled in about 100 albums that were donated to the somewhat oddly-named “*International Life Giving Project Corporation*,” an obscure Swiss charity. This organization, in turn, consigned the albums to Feldman. Most of the albums were broken up and the proofs sold individually; the two Vatican albums, however, were sold intact.

Significant controversy attended the sale. While philatelists expressed outrage that so many proofs had been ruined, some postal administrations were upset that any survived! Three days before the sale, San Marino’s philatelic agency sent a letter to Feldman asserting that their contract with Courvoisier had called for all proofs to be destroyed. Dr. Ottaviano Rossi, head of the Sammarinese philatelic bureau, hinted that San Marino might legally contest ownership of the proofs, and there have been reports that Luxembourg and Iceland are considering similar steps.

Courvoisier, a family *imprimerie* with roots back to the eighteenth century, began executing photogravure illustrations in 1928. Their work soon attracted attention, and Swiss postal authorities awarded the firm its first stamp contract in 1931. During the ensuing seven decades, Courvoisier produced stamps for more than 70 countries, including Vatican City. Despite the consistently high quality of their output, the firm closed in May 2001, citing “too much competition in the international market.” A British firm, Walsall, purchased Courvoisier’s

assets the following month and closed the plant in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland.



Figure 1. One of the Vatican items sold in the Courvoisier auction: a set of progressive color proofs of Scott #831, the L150 value of the Birds set issued June 13, 1989. From the Feldman auction catalog.



Figure 2. A typical page from the approximately 100 albums of Courvoisier proofs sold on April 21, 2007. Although imperforate progressives of India’s 1948 Mahatma Gandhi issue are shown, the two albums of Vatican proofs were similarly mounted. From the Feldman auction catalog.

(Continued from page 17)

Sources:

David Feldman auction catalog, https://www.davidfeldman.com/PDF_2007/065/Courvoisier/Courvoisier.htm, accessed May 10, 2007.

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"Unberechtigter Verkauf?" ["Unauthorized Sales?"], Michel Web site, http://www.michel.de/allgemein/aktuelles_detail.php?pld=231, accessed May 10, 2007.

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Watson, James. "Helio Courvoisier S.A." *Gibbons' Stamp Monthly* 3:7 (December 1972), pp. 123-124.

Wehrle, Walt. "Helio Courvoisier to Close," *Linn's Stamp News* 74:3777 (March 19, 2001), p. 8.

Vatican Stamps Printed by Hélio Courvoisier, S.A. 1989-2001

All catalog numbers are Scott.

1989

#830-37, Birds

#842-44, U.S. Hierarchy

1990

#853-57, Caritas

1991

#870-81, Sistine Chapel

#885-87, Vatican Observatory

1992

#898-903, Discovery of America

#908-09, St. Joseph Benedict Cottolengo

#910, Plants of the New World

#912-15, Holy Christmas

1993

#917-26, Architectural Treasures

#936-38, Apostolic Voyages

1994

#944-51, Sistine Chapel

#968-70, Holy Christmas

1995

#973-77, Holy House of Loreto

#980-87, Conservation of Nature

#996-99, Holy Year 2000 (I)

#1004-08, Marco Polo

1996

#1015-18, Holy Year 2000 (II)

#1028-37, Papal Vehicles

1997

#1052-55, Holy Year 2000 (III)

1998

#1075-80, Angels

#1081-84, Holy Year 2000 (IV)

#1086-87, Italia '98

1999

#1107-12, Holy Land

#1113-16, Holy Year 2000

#1117, Kosovar Refugees

#1123, Council of Europe

#1128-36, Opening the Holy Door

2000

#1137-40, Holy Year 2000 (VI)

#1156-59, Sistine Chapel (I)

#1167, Apostolic Voyages 1999

#1168-71, Holy Christmas

2001

#1172-75, Sistine Chapel (II)

#1176-78, Armenian Christianity

