

BRITISH WEST AFRICA STUDY CIRCLE

Some Notes on Double Embossing

by Colin McCaig

It has been suggested to me recently that Gambia Cameos described as "doubly embossed" must always be suspect, and it seems likely that such a view is held by others who have not made a study of these stamps. Accordingly the following notes may be of help and interest.

1. The Gambia Cameos were surface-printed by De La Rue from plates of 15 units (3 horizontal rows of 5 stamps) which were so constructed that the "downs", or non-printing part of the surface, bore the design to be embossed. These plates were first used to print the stamps in sheets of 15; then cleaned, set up in the embossing machine, and used in conjunction with a counterpart to emboss the printed sheets.
2. It is not surprising, therefore, that the embossing did not always coincide exactly with the printed design. Misalignments were usually small, but occasionally the difference was noticed and instead of scrapping such sheets they were put into the machine again and re-embossed. This second application of pressure was generally insufficient to eliminate traces of the original faulty strike - hence the doubly embossed examples we know.
3. Examples of double embossing have been found on most values of the 1880 and 1886/7 issues, and a complete sheet of the 1/- violet was shown by the late Mrs. Louise Boyd Dale. The degree of doubling varies considerably, and the most important examples I have studied are as follows:-
 - a. A complete sheet of the 1886/7 2d. value which was discovered many years ago by the late Dr. L. Kingsford. The two separate embossings show very clearly on the left hand stamps (Nos. 1, 6, & 11) where the original embossing is almost 1 mm. below the second, corrective, embossing. The displacement diminishes uniformly towards the SE corner where on stamp No. 15 it is only discernable using a strong side light and a powerful lens, although the distinction between the embossings on the upper stamps is

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readily seen - particularly a leftward shift of the curve of the G which appears approximately twice as great on No. 5 as it does on No. 10. These characteristics suggest that for the first embossing the sheet had twisted slightly in the embossing press in a clockwise direction on a centre in the neighbourhood of stamp No. 15.

b. Two blocks of 4, a pair, and a single of the 1886/7 2½d. value. These were all similar in colour and other printing characteristics, and I was able to show that they all formed part of one sheet which had been doubly embossed. The distinction was most pronounced on the right hand vertical row of 3 (Nos. 5, 10, & 15) where the original embossing showed approximately 2½ mm. below the printing and corrected embossing. The displacement lessened towards the left of the sheet until the bottom left hand stamp (No. 11, which was one of the pair examined) showed only slight doubling to the left of the printed design. In this case the partial reconstruction of the sheet indicated that for the first embossing the sheet may have pivoted in an anti-clockwise direction on a point close to the guide dot in the left hand margin of the sheet. I was able to predict the characteristics which would identify the missing 4 stamps of the sheet and two of these were discovered later in the same collection.

c. Blocks of 4 and 5, and a single which were shown to be parts of one sheet of the 1886/87 ½d. value. In this case the original embossing showed approximately ¾ mm. above the second impression, and the effect suggested that for the first embossing the sheet had slipped down slightly in relation to the design on the plate in the press.

4. There can be no doubt about the existence or authenticity of doubly embossed Cameos, but care must be taken to distinguish the numerous instances where the embossing does not coincide exactly with the printing thereby giving the appearance of a "double" on casual inspection although no second embossing took place.
5. Care must also be taken in valuing examples of double embossing. Catalogue values can only be an indication subject to condition; and in the case of double embossing distinction must be made between examples with clear well separated doubles and those which require detailed study under a strong lens for verification. The former should command a substantial premium but the latter may have little special value unless in blocks or sheet where their combination with other stamps is used to show the position of the plate when embossing or to help demonstrate the method by which these stamps were printed and embossed.

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