

# A small world

Postal museum holds international treasures

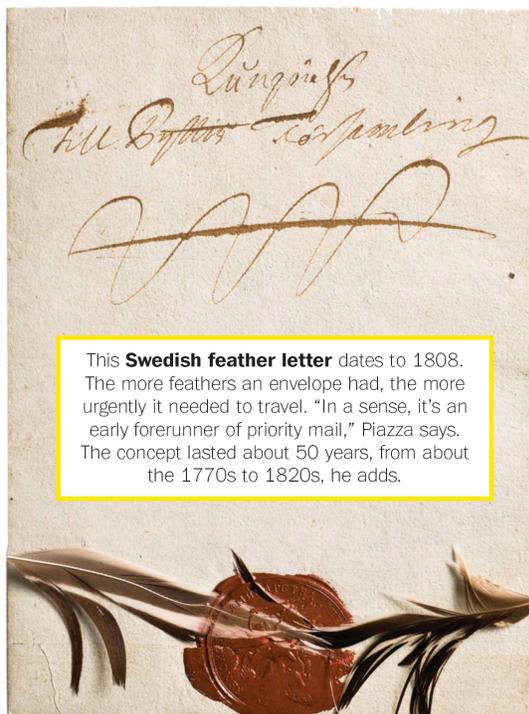
BY KRIS CORONADO

With a name like the National Postal Museum, it's easy to get an inaccurate idea of what the Smithsonian Institution holds in its collection. "People think our collection is entirely U.S. or even mostly U.S., and it isn't," says curator Daniel Piazza. "The majority of our collection is international stamps."

That's saying a lot considering the museum (2 Massachusetts Ave. NE, 202-633-5555, [postalmuseum.si.edu](http://postalmuseum.si.edu)) has more than 5.9 million items (each stamp counts as one piece). Most of this vast collection is not available for public viewing; here, Piazza highlights some of the museum's most intriguing international pieces.



South Sudan's stamps, created in 2011, "were done in and by China as a gift to the South Sudanese government from the Chinese government," Piazza says.



This Swedish feather letter dates to 1808. The more feathers an envelope had, the more urgently it needed to travel. "In a sense, it's an early forerunner of priority mail," Piazza says. The concept lasted about 50 years, from about the 1770s to 1820s, he adds.



The Penny Black, the world's first postage stamp, was issued by Great Britain's Royal Mail in 1840. It portrays Queen Victoria at age 15. "Even as she became kind of ... frumpy, she was always 15 on her stamps," Piazza says.

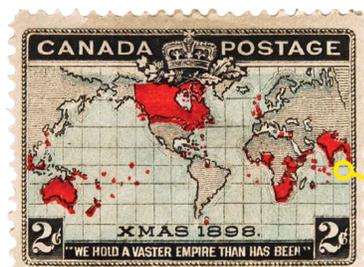


Sierra Leone's climate caused gum-backed stamps to stick together, so the country issued self-adhesive stamps in the 1960s and '70s. Known for its diamonds, the country sold ads on the backing paper, which sometimes featured Harry Winston Diamond Corp.



Some of the smallest stamps ever were issued in Mecklenburg-Schwerin in 1856. The former German state printed a standard postage stamp that could be split into four stamps measuring 10 square millimeters.

In India, the British East India Company introduced the scinde dawk stamp, a thin wax wafer, in 1852. It was recalled two years later. Because of their limited time in use and their fragility, fewer than 40 are known to still exist.



This 1898 Canadian stamp depicts the British empire in red. But it's not accurate: "This is a very small and inexact map," Piazza says. "There are areas in red that were not really British. They were German; they were French."

 To view more stamps, go to [washingtonpost.com/magazine](http://washingtonpost.com/magazine).