



Skill: Classifying

Olymphelex Lesson 6

Mint and Used Stamps



Philatelists have additional ways of classifying stamps. Because it affects a stamp's value, one of the most important is whether or not the stamp has been used. The following are four widely accepted terms used to describe the condition of a stamp:

- **Mint, Never Hinged** (abbreviated MNH) refers to a stamp that is unused, undamaged on both sides, and in the same condition as when originally issued by the post office. For a stamp to be MNH, there can be no hinge marks or missing glue on the back. Due to age, some older MNH stamps may have some cracking of the glue (which may affect their value), but the key is that no hinge has ever been applied. As a general rule, MNH stamps are the most valuable—particularly in the case of older stamps.



- **Unused** refers to a stamp that has not been used—but does not qualify as a mint stamp. Usually, an “unused” stamp has no damage to its face—but by turning it over, you'll see that it was once attached by a hinge to a page in some collector's album. Or, you may find no gum at all on the back. This often happens when a group of mint stamps get wet and stick together. The only way to separate them is to soak them in water, which removes the gum.

MNH or unused?
To really know, you'd have to check the back of the stamp to see if the gum is undisturbed. In this case, it is MNH.

Stamps that have never been used but have visible damage (such as a crease, missing or short perforations, stains, and other faults) are also described as “unused.” Even though they still might have full glue, they cannot be considered “post office fresh.” Naturally, this makes them less valuable than MNH versions of the same stamp.

- **Used** stamps, as the name says, are those which have been used on mail (which usually means they bear a cancel or postmark). You will find used stamps as either (1) soaked off paper or (2) still attached to a piece of the envelope that was cut out. Used stamps which have been soaked off paper will have no glue on the back.



Used stamp from Great Britain. As shown here, British stamps do not indicate the country name, but instead show the head of the king or queen.

a particular type of cancel sometimes can make a used stamp more valuable than mint. Also, older used stamps may be worth much more if left on cover (the term philatelists use for “envelopes”).

- **Canceled-to-Order** (abbreviated **CTO**) stamps have a cancel and appear to be “used” stamps. However, if you turn a CTO stamp over, often you will see that it still has full glue. You might ask how a stamp could be canceled and still have glue on the back. The answer is that the stamp was never used on a cover. Rather, the country that issued the stamp (or the company which printed the stamps) applied cancels to sheets of stamps, which are then torn up into individual stamps and sold to collectors. Countries that issue CTOs do so to make money. CTOs tend to be large, colorful stamps—often printed in sets—which depict popular topics (such as the Olympic Games). It costs almost nothing to print a stamp, so by canceling it to prevent its use for postage, the country makes money off stamp collectors.

Because of this—and the fact that CTOs are neither “mint” nor “used”—many advanced collectors won’t buy them. On the other hand, CTOs are usually cheap and their designs are popular with many collectors. Because CTOs are worth less than stamps that have actually been used, how can you tell the difference? Experienced collectors know which countries issue CTOs and which do not. Also, CTOs are usually canceled in one of the corners (so that by applying a single strike, four stamps are canceled at one time), and the cancel tends to be neatly applied. Another common characteristic of CTOs is that the subject of the stamp has nothing to do with the country issuing the stamp, so it is unlikely the stamps would have ever been used in that country for mail. For example, a desert country with no mountains or snow would probably not issue a stamp showing snow skiers for use on ordinary mail in that country.



Portion of a pane (sheet) of 1967 Panama Olympic stamps made into CTOs. Back of pane has full glue.

Putting Your Skills to Action:

To see if you can tell the difference between mint, unused, used, and CTO stamps, look at **Handout H**. All four types are represented here. Why can you not tell which stamps on the handout are mint and which are used? As for “used” and “CTO” can you tell which is which?

Topical Panorama

1

2

3

4

A



B



C



D



E

