

Ryukyu Islands: The often forgotten possession Jack Searles

There are a variety of countries that were at one time possessions of the United States. When collectors talk of US Possessions there are some territories that seem to readily come to mind. At the top of my list is the Canal Zone, Hawaii, maybe Guam and maybe the US Occupation of the Philippines. But there are several other possessions all of whom have issued stamps, including: Puerto Rico, the Marshall Islands, the Federal States of Micronesia, Cuba, Palau, and the Danish West Indies to name a few more. One “possession” that I often overlook is the Ryukyu Islands.



Map of Ryukyu Islands from Microsoft Mappoint

The Ryukyu Islands are an island Archipelago composed of sixty three islands stretching between Japan and Formosa (Taiwan) between the East China and Philippine seas. These islands consist of three principal groups, namely: the Arami Islands (in the north), Okinawa Islands and the Sakishima Islands (in the south).

The island of Okinawa is most frequently known by Americans as the site of a bloody campaign in World War II. This island was seized by allied troops during the period of April through June, 1945. During the battle for this island the US lost 48,000 troops and the Japanese 103,000 troops.

The Ryukyu Islands were incorporated into the Japanese empire in 1879. Prior to this date the Ryukyu Islands paid tribute to both China and Japan.

The United States occupied these islands in 1945. Under the peace treaty with the Japanese, the Allies, effective 1952, the islands were administered by the United States under a United Nations trusteeship. In 1953, the Amami Islands were returned by the US to Japan. The remainder of the archipelago, including Okinawa, was returned by the US to Japan in 1972. While the US returned Okinawa to Japan in 1972, it retained its military bases on the island; a matter which would later generate much local tension.

Between 1948 and 1972 stamps would be issued for the Ryukyu Islands which are listed in the Scott Catalogue as US Possessions. These stamps are quite colorful and provide the interested collector with a wide variety of types, color varieties and provisional issues. During this period there were really four different stamp issuing authorities. These authorities included: the US Military Government, the US Civil Administration, the Ryukyu Provisional Central Government and the Government of the Ryukyu Islands.

Under military command, there were four Ryukyu Gunto governments which operated within four island groups of Amami, Miyako, Okinawa and Yaeyama. By command of the US Military Government the Gunto groups issued postage stamps and postal stationary of post-war Japan validated for Ryukyu Island use by the Gunto Postmaster, who applied his personal seal or "chop" to the stamp. Under this system nothing was standardized and postal rates varied. Many collectors find this a very interesting period to collect because of the inherent variety of stationary and stamps available. By far these "provisional issues" are the most expensive and rarest group of Ryukyu Islands stamps. If you have any stamps of Japan issued during the period 1945 through 1950 with an overprint on them, you may have one of these stamps. For stamps issued during this period the Scott Catalogue only lists mint values, many valued well over \$100.00!



By around 1950 rates were standardized and the US Civil Administration began purview. Paper used for stamps was also standardized and issued by the authority of a deputy governor under General MacArthur. The stamps issued during this period are limited in variety, with one design having two printings. These two printings are differentiated by color of the gum/paper used, dullness/sharpness of the colors and how rough/clean the perforations are between stamps. Stamps that have yellow gum, gray paper, dull colors and rough perforations are indicative of the first printing. The first set of air mail stamps were issued during this period, with various denominations displaying a dove and a map of the Ryukyus.



In 1951, the Ryukyu Provisional Government was established. In August, 1951 civil communications, including the issuance of stamps and postal stationery was transferred to this provisional government. From August, 1951 until April, 1952 stamp issues were authorized by the chief executive of the provisional government. During this period there were four stamps issued; one stamp has two types.



On April 1, 1952 the Ryukyu Provisional Central Government was disestablished and replaced by the Government of the Ryukyu Islands. From April, 1952 through April 20, 1972 the Government of the Ryukyu Islands authorized and issued stamps.



Many of the colorful stamps so indicative of the Ryukyu Islands were issued. Some of the topics covered included: local points of interest, themes, girl/boy scouts, flora, fauna, local celebrities, karate, Olympics and musical instruments. One of the things I like about Ryukyu Islands stamps are that the stamps are quite colorful and make a great display with frequent use of the color gold. Further, in my opinion, the stamps issued seem to retain both a local importance and themes relevant to those living on the islands. As you can see from these stamps there certainly is a Japanese influence upon both subjects selected and style of presentation.

Between period 1945 through 1972 there are many interesting and diverse issues associated with the Ryukyu Islands. Why not look into this interesting area of stamp collecting; truly one of the forgotten possessions.



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