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Butterflies on Early Postage Stamps of the World

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Butterflies (constituting the insect order Lepidoptera) form a powerful symbol, inspirational in representing freedom, liberty and the human soul (Haynes, 2013). Their bright colours, rarity and fragility have attracted both scientists and collectors of both stamps and the insect itself. Unsurprisingly, therefore, they have formed secondary (as background fillers) or primary themes for philatelic releases by over 100 countries and postal agencies of the world (Domfil, 2002) starting from the end of the Nineteenth Century (Hessel, 1968). In this note, we shall discuss some of the early ones, and ending with the issues from the year 1950, when Sarawak's iconic butterfly species, the Rajah Brooke's Birdwing, was released. SG refers to Stanley Gibbons catalogue numbers.

The first postal stamp to depict a butterfly was one issued by the Kingdom of Hawaii, an independent nation at the time, on 8 November 1891 (according to the internet archives at Stampworld.com) or sometime in 1890 (SG catalogue). The image depicted is of its first queen (and last monarch), Lili'uokalani (born Lydia Lili'u Loloku Walania Kamaka'eha, 1838–1917). The ornament visible on her head is clearly a butterfly. The stamp (Fig. 1) is of 2 cent value (SG 22).

A hiatus between this early release and others is noticeable. On 8 April 1924, Hungary issued a three-set under its "Tuberculosis Relief Fund" campaign, one of which (Fig. 2), shows a butterfly on a 300 (x 2) korona stamp (SG 437).



Figure 1. Kingdom of Hawaii, 8 November 1891 or 1890. Definitive. 2 cent (SG 22).



Figure 2. Hungary, 8 April 1924. "Tuberculosis Relief Fund". 300 (x 2) korona (SG 437).

The first stamp with the primary theme of Lepidoptera was issued by Lebanon in February 1930. Issuance commemorated the 1930 Silk Congress, held in Beirut, and included six values (Fig. 3a–f) of the same design (SG 157–162)- 4, 4.5, 7.5, 10, 15 and 25 Piastres Syriennes (currency in French denominations). The species depicted, unsurprisingly, is *Bombyx mori*.