

# Got Guatemala?

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INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF GUATEMALA COLLECTORS

Guatemalan philately is a window on Latin America. Documented in its postage stamps, its history parallels that of the continent — from liberal revolutions of the 1800s to the Cold War.

Roughly the size of Pennsylvania, Guatemala is only separated from the United States by Mexico. The Spanish conquest of the Mayan Indians who inhabited Guatemala for the past millennium began in 1523. In 1620, the first Postmaster was named and a formal fee structure was gradually put in place for mail back to Spain and the neighboring Spanish colonies.

In 1821, Guatemala achieved independence from Spain. After an occasionally bloody succession of conservative and liberal regimes, General Justo Rufino Barrios brought the Liberals and their greater openness to the world to power in the Liberal Revolution of 1871.

The deposed Conservative government of Vicente Cerna had begun the modernization of the postal service and had ordered Guatemala's first postage stamps, which were printed in France. The first Coat of Arms stamps, Scott 1–4, went on sale on March 1, 1871, four months before the Liberals deposed Cerna and took power. Higher denominations with somewhat different designs were introduced in 1873. Both are shown in Figure 1.

The Liberal Revolution opened Guatemala's economy to trade with Europe and brought in a flood of European (largely German) immigrants. They established Guatemala as a major coffee producer and brought in technological developments such as railways and electric power. Much of Guatemalan postal history after 1880 is made up of the covers and postal cards sent by German coffee plantation owners to others living in Guatemala, and to relatives in Germany.

During the past 150 years, Guatemalan postage stamps were printed by major security printing companies of the United States and Europe, as well as by the Guatemalan National Printing Office (Tipografía Nacional de Guatemala). During years of economic recession, postal authorities overprinted existing stocks creating a number of provisional series. Unlike much of Latin America, Guatemala never had stamps produced by Nicholas Seebeck.



Figure 1. Guatemala's first postage stamps picturing its Coat of Arms were issued in 1871-73. The 1-centavo stamp at left and the 4-real at right show the designs used for low and high denominations, respectively.

# Maybe it's time you should

Beginning in 1879, the quetzal, Guatemala's national symbol, appears on many of its stamps, including those in Figure 2. Perhaps the most iconic of Guatemalan stamps is the bicolored Small Quetzal issue of 1881, Scott 21–25. These were made famous when collectors discovered the 2-, 5- and 20-centavo stamps with the centers inverted. A number of the 2- and 20-centavo errors reached collectors in mint condition, but it is believed that only one sheet of the 5-centavo stamp was produced with an inverted center and it was sold for use as postage. Only 20 or so of these are known used, and three or four without cancellations.

In 1897, President José María Reyna Barrios held the first Central American Exposition. It was modeled on the Columbian Exposition of 1893, for the purpose of convincing his countrymen of the merits of his modernization programs and to show the world that Guatemala was a good place to invest. On January 1, 1897, he issued a set of commemoratives, Scott 60–73, with the design shown in Figure 3. All of these bore his portrait next to depictions of a railroad and steamship, symbols of progress and development. The lower values of the stamps were used extensively for postage, but three weeks after President Reyna Barrios was assassinated on February 8, 1898, the stamps were withdrawn from circulation.

Other Guatemalan Presidents were tempted to put their portraits on postage stamps only to have the stamps removed from circulation when they were deposed. President Manuel Estrada Cabrera, who ruled Guatemala from 1898 to 1920, had three stamps issued bearing his portrait, Scott 142, 158 and 161. Figure 4 shows the first of these, a 5-peso stamp (Scott 142), alongside its relatively affordable inverted-center error (142a).

On April 14, 1920, Cabrera was overthrown and the stamps bearing his likeness were taken out of circulation. That forced postal authorities to quickly overprint existing stocks of telegraph and postage stamps to ensure that the most commonly used values were available for postage. Between 1920 and 1924, Guatemala issued 36 provisional stamps. The errors and varieties of these provisional issues remain relatively cheap despite their scarcity, and have been a focus of many specialized collectors.

In February 1931, General Jorge Ubico rose to power. In his 13 years in office he undertook a building campaign that linked Guatemala's towns and cities together



Figure 2. The quetzal is the symbol of Guatemala on many of its stamps, including this threesome: the 1879 ¼r and 1r bicolored, Scott 15-16, and the rare 1881 20c inverted center error, Scott 25a.



Figure 3. This busy design was repeated on a 14-stamp set issued January 1, 1897, to commemorate President J.M. Reyna Barrios and his Central American Exposition.



Figure 4. President Cabrera on a 1911 5-peso stamp shown next to its inverted-center counterpart, Scott 142 and 142a. He was overthrown in 1920. Image of invert courtesy <http://bigblue1840-1940.blogspot.com>

by roads suitable for cars and buses, and turned Guatemala City into a modern capital. He felt he was continuing the legacy begun by the Liberals under Barrios, with whom Ubico is pictured on the 25c high value, Scott 272, from a 1935 set honoring Barrios' achievements in Figure 5.

Ubico contracted with the Dutch printing company of Johan Enschede & Sons to produce some of the most beautiful stamps Guatemala has ever known. The combination of extraordinary stamp designs by Carlos Marckwordt and high-quality printing by Enschede & Sons produced stamps of remarkable eye appeal portraying scenes of Guatemala's legendary natural beauty, cultural sites and modern public buildings built by Ubico, as on the airmail stamps in Figure 6. The production of these and other stamps showcasing tantalizingly beautiful locations coincided with Guatemala's emergence as a world-

class tourist destination.

The outbreak of World War II put an end to trade between the Americas and occupied Europe, and the stamps that Enschede had printed for Guatemala to celebrate the centenary, in 1940, of the first postage stamps had to wait until 1946 to cross the Atlantic and be issued.

During the war years, Tipografía Nacional printed most of the stamps Guatemala used, Scott 304–17. These were monochromatic and printed through a recess engraved process. Reprintings and later perforation of imperforate stocks led to a small number of perforation varieties of many of the stamps from that period. For the most part these perforation varieties are not captured by Scott or other catalogs. Some are quite scarce and are only now getting serious study in the Guatemalan philatelic press.

Ubico was overthrown in the October Revolution of 1944. The election of Juan José Arévalo in 1945 ushered in a period of social change, documented by stamps commemorating the revolution, technological innovations to agriculture and the adoption of Guatemala's first national labor code in 1948.

Arévalo was succeeded through democratic elections by the controversial Colonel Jacobo Árbenz in 1951. Árbenz was determined to take the progressive reforms of the Arévalo government several steps further with a large-scale land reform program. He developed strong ties to the Eastern Bloc, leading some to call him a Communist. The stamps of his era highlight the construction of schools and nationalist themes like the flag, the "Revolutionary Army," and the national anthem. The policies of Arbenz alienated the church, the private sector, much of the army and ultimately the United States, and he was overthrown in 1954.

In 1956 the government of Carlos Castillo Armas issued a series of stamps commemorating the 1954 revolution, Scott 363–65, C210–18. The airmail stamps included a 5 centavo showing the National Liberation Army's symbolic bayonet destroying the hammer and sickle, and the 5-quetzal high value portraying President Castillo Armas himself.

But successive presidents didn't use stamps only to draw attention to themselves and their achievements in office. They also printed stamps to honor Guatemala's greatest passion — soccer! Beginning with the airmail series, printed to commemorate the Central American and Caribbean Football Championship of 1948, Scott C158–62, Guatemala issued numerous stamps honoring the national pastime, including those in Figure 7. These remain some of Guatemala's most popular stamps today.

Guatemala privatized its postal service in 2009, but in August 2016 the Guatemalan Congress did not renew the contract of the Canadian company that had been delivering the mail. Abruptly all mail service ceased, and since that time postal service has been provided solely by small private companies.



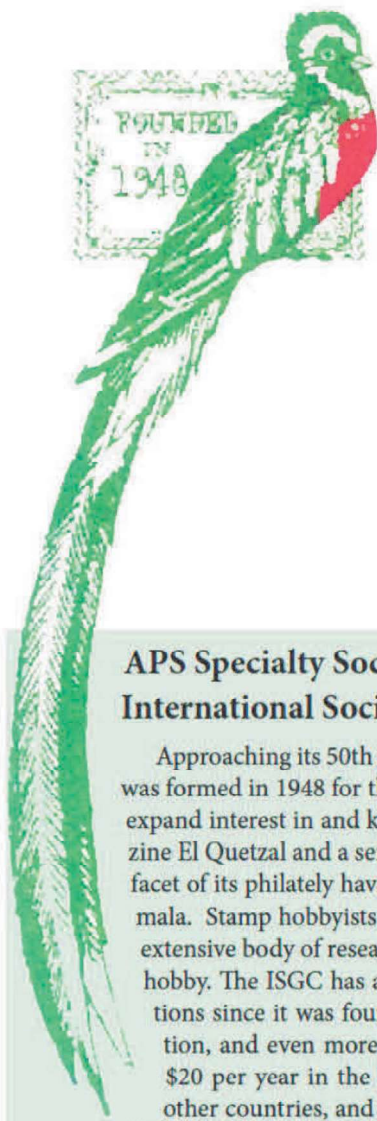
Figure 5. Reform-minded General Jorge Ubico felt he was continuing the legacy begun by the Liberals under General Barrios, with whom Ubico is pictured on the 25c high value from a 1935 set honoring Barrios' achievements, Scott 272.



Figure 6. These 1939 airmail stamps for use to destinations abroad "Aero Internacional" pictured tourist attractions of Guatemala.



Figure 7. (Items 7a + 7b + 7c) One of Guatemala's most popular stamp subjects is the national pastime, pictured on these stamps of 1948-52.



To collect Guatemala's stamps and postal history is to immerse oneself in the history and geography of one of the most enigmatic and fascinating countries in the hemisphere. The stamps tell tales of political calculation, historical achievement, destructive earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, breathtaking natural beauty and the men and women who have shaped the country's destiny since the time of the Mayas.

*"Got Guatemala?" — an 18-minute YouTube video presentation by Michael Bloom with additional stamps, material, insights and information — has recently been posted on the Internet. If you'd like to learn more about this engaging collecting option, its appealing advantages and affordability, take a look online at <https://tinyurl.com/y8gsuown>.*

**The Author**

David Lindwall is a retired American diplomat who served most of his career in Latin America. He lived 22 years in Guatemala, has collected Guatemalan stamps for more than 50 years and has been a member of the APS and the ISGC since the early 1970s. In addition to Guatemala, David collects stamps of the United States, Canal Zone, the first issues of Ecuador and the postal history of the U.S. Marine occupations of Haiti and Nicaragua.

**APS Specialty Society:  
International Society of Guatemala Collectors**

Approaching its 50th year as an affiliate of the APS, the International Society of Guatemala Collectors (ISGC) was formed in 1948 for the purpose of putting collectors of Guatemalan stamps in touch with each other and to expand interest in and knowledge of Guatemalan philately. Over the ensuing years, the ISGC quarterly magazine *El Quetzal* and a series of published handbooks on virtually every facet of its philately have nurtured collectors who specialize in Guatemala. Stamp hobbyists from few countries in the world have such an extensive body of research and reference material underpinning their hobby. The ISGC has a fine website with all of the Society's publications since it was founded and lots of constantly updated information, and even more is available to members. ISGC dues are only \$20 per year in the U.S., Canada, Mexico and Guatemala, \$25 in other countries, and just \$10 anywhere for members under age 18. To apply, visit [www.guatemalastamps.com](http://www.guatemalastamps.com)

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