

## Mechanical Philately

MELVIN GETLAN OPERATED A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS IN AMUSEMENT GAMES and coin-operated slot machines. Over a lifetime of collecting, he formed an extremely important collection of “coin op” machines, which was sold at auction after his passing in March 2020. It is fitting that one of his philatelic interests—probably his favorite collection—was United States vending and affixing machine perforations (VAMPs). This sale is the first in a series of three that will bring to market the truly legendary Getlan collection.

The history of VAMPs is closely tied to the development of mass marketing and mechanized *everything* at the start of the 20th century. Coin-operated machines delivered products to the public, and machine inventions were designed to automate and speed up a wide range of labor processes. To understand how mechanization played a role in philately, it is helpful to separate the machines’ functions of vending and affixing.

Vending machines were designed to store and dispense stamps. The customer inserted one or more coins into the slot and received the denomination or number of stamps corresponding to the amount paid. The first stamp-vending machine was patented in 1889, but it was not until 1905 that U.S. Post Office Department officials began showing interest in placing vending machines in post offices and other public locations. They tested a number of machines in early 1908 and produced the first government coils for this specific purpose (Scott 316, 317, 318, 321 and 322). The five cities where vending machines were tested are Baltimore (International Vending Machine Co.), Indianapolis (The Parkhurst Co.), Minneapolis (Thexton Stamp-Vending Machine Co., which used small envelopes containing stamps), New York City (U.S. Automatic Vending Machine Co.), and Washington D.C. (American Stamp and Ticket Vending Co.). In the end, the USPOD decided not to purchase and distribute machines, leaving it to the private companies to market their products. Some of these firms used government coils, while others applied perforations specifically designed for their machines.

Affixing machines—also known as envelope sealing and stamping machines—were designed to automate and speed up the process of preparing stamped and addressed envelopes for mass mailings. The first stamp-affixing machine was invented in 1858, but in 1906 Joseph Schermack patented the first modern machine that could seal the envelope and apply a stamp. Schermack worked for the Detroit Mailing Machine Co., which changed its name to the Schermack Mailing Machine Co. in 1908 and then, after his departure in 1909, to the Mailometer Co. (later Mail-o-Meter). The earliest Schermack machines were displayed at a business event in Madison Square Garden in October 1906. One year later Schermack started selling machines which had a speed of 150 envelopes a minute. The stress of the mechanism made 12-gauge government perforations unsuitable for use, because the strips broke apart too easily. Schermack experimented with Type I and Type II perforations—the Type I stamps are the first true United States coils—but he finally settled on the hyphen-hole Type III perforation invented by an employee. The notches were not designed for separation, but rather allowed the fingers of the machine to correctly align the stamps as they advanced at 250 envelopes per minute. The Type III perforations were also used in vending machines in 1910 and 1911 by Joseph Schermack after he left the affixing-machine enterprise to focus on his Schermack Vending Machine Co. (see lot 227).

Vending and affixing machine perforations are listed in the Scott U.S. Specialized Catalogue, but two of them have full status as imperforate stamps, because they are only known with Schermack Type III perforations: the 4¢ 1908 Imperforate, Scott 314A (lots 271-272), and 2¢ Type Ia 1920 Imperforate, Scott 482A (lots 297-298). These stamps have the highest values because they are needed to complete a collection of basic U.S. stamps. However, there are many stamps in this collecting field which are much rarer, such as the 2¢ Attleboro, Scott 344 (lot 9) and 5¢ Schermack Type II, Scott 315 (lots 257-259).

To describe the Getlan collection as “comprehensive” or “major” fails to capture the breadth and depth of this collecting achievement. Collectors who acquire the rare stamps, multiples, varieties and covers in these sales are participating in a rare event in philatelic history.