

The Stamps of Pierre Bequet

An example of this designer's creativity



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THE FRENCH SOUTHERN AND ANTARCTIC TERRITORIES.

“A chance to dream and to travel without leaving my studio”

The French artist Pierre Béquet who died in 2012 was one of the most talented stamp creators of the modern period. He produced over seven hundred stamps for many countries and during the 1960's he emerged as the principal designer for the French Southern and Antarctic Territories. He created over one hundred stamps for that region and was awarded the Grand-Prix of Philatelic Art on three occasions, in 1966, 1972 and 1976 for his work. His designs featured many topics including portraits, wildlife and ships, as one of his early leisure pursuits was sailing.

It is impossible to include all of his works in this article; I have chosen just a few examples which, in my opinion, portray the discovery of the various islands, the personalities involved, the wildlife and above all, demonstrating the sheer brilliance of the artist.

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Continuing the published article about his stamps.

I first met Pierre at an exhibition in Paris during the early 1980's and he immediately offered me an invitation to visit him and his wife, Gisele, at their home and studio at Porchefontaine, a district of Versailles. It was the first of many visits; I was impressed by his deep classical knowledge and above all, his gentleness and sense of humour. He produced many abstract creations, some very difficult to understand but took time out in explaining the details of the work. I learned a lot from him.

The French Southern and Antarctic Territories in the Indian Ocean consist of the Crozet archipelago, the islands of Saint-Paul, Amsterdam and Kerguelen. Adélie Land, part of the Antarctic continent, completes the group. Stamps from that region did not appear until the mid-1950's when the first research bases were set up. As more and more scientists and technicians arrived there was a need for post-offices for the transit of mail between the bases to France. There is a huge amount of ship-mail from the area, most bearing expedition markings, postal cancellations and above all, attractive stamps. There have been French expeditions to this region since the mid 18th century, mostly in pursuit of seals and whales.

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Pierre's first designs appeared in 1962, on a stamp featuring elephant seals in combat and an airmail stamp with Adélie penguins. These were part of a set of nine stamps that the artist was involved with, the final one being issued in 1972. This set featured the iconic Black-Browed Albatross, issued in 1968, a key stamp in any Antarctic collection. It is reported that only 30,000 were produced, the numbers not unusual for the Territories at that time.

Pierre's first award of the Grand Prix of Philatelic Art in 1966 was for the discovery of Adélie Land on the Antarctic continent, the stamp being issued in the previous year. Adélie was the name of the wife of the explorer Dumont d'Urville who set sail from Tasmania in 1840. His portrait appeared on a stamp issued in 1968 and that of his wife, on a 1981 issue.

The Crozet archipelago, a group of small islands, was discovered in 1772 by the navigator Nicolas Marion-Dufresne in his ship "Le Mascarin". His correct name was Marc-Joseph Marion du Fresne, born at Saint-Malo in Brittany. The islands were named after his second-in-command, Julian Marie Crozet. Nowadays a research base named "Alfred Faure" has been established on Possession Island, one of the group.

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Stamps and cover design



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The Kerguelen Islands were named after Yves-Joseph Kerguelen-Trémarec another Breton navigator, who also discovered them in the same year. The two men were born ten years apart but met only once, on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. The research base established at Kerguelen is known as “Port-Aux-Français”. It is interesting to note that the remaining two Grand Prix of Philatelic Art awards for the artist’s stamps feature scenes of Kerguelen. They were for the Bicentenary of the Discovery of the Kerguelen Islands in 1972 and the Bicentenary of Captain Cook’s Passage to Kerguelen in 1976.

Captain Cook and his ships “Resolution” and “Discovery” left Plymouth in July 1776. One of the objectives was to locate a group of islands in the Southern Ocean discovered a few years earlier by Marion Dufresne. On December 24th of that year they saw land which turned out to be an islet off the north-west coast of Kerguelen. The following day they entered a large bay and anchored near a sandy beach. On landing, some of the crew members found a bottle with an inscription recording the earlier French visits.

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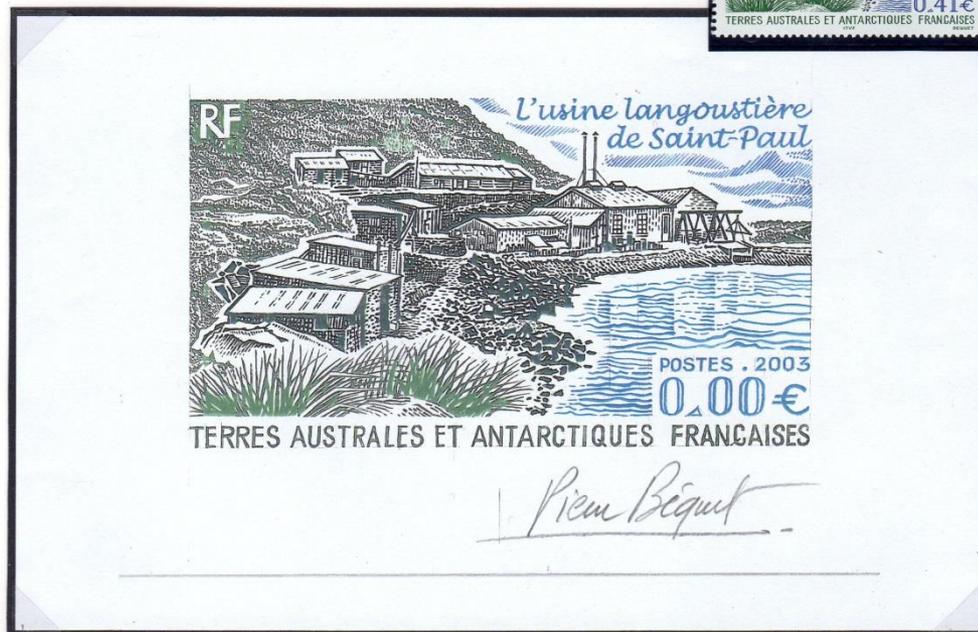
7. A NEW CENTURY BECKONS.

As an established leading independent artist, Pierre has maintained the link between himself and philatelists by continuing his work for the French Southern and Antarctic Territories.



"Programme Cartoker" – Geological surveys of the earth's crust.

The waters around the island of Saint Paul are rich in crayfish. Fishermen from Reunion first arrived during the 1840's and established a colony there.



Preliminary drawing with the issued stamp.

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More from the published article about his stamps.

Midway between the east coast of South Africa and the south-west coast of Australia lie the islands of Saint-Paul and Amsterdam. Admiral Joseph-Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux carried out the first exploration of Amsterdam in 1792. A research base named Martin de Vivies was established on the island in 1950.

A number of other explorers have appeared on Pierre's stamps, one of the most famous being Paul-Emile Victor (1907-1995) who was the father of French polar exploration. From 1934 he led many expeditions to Greenland, Lapland and Adelie Land. In 1947 he created the French Polar Expedition Group which he led until 1976. The central motif of the triptych was used on expedition covers.

Jean-Baptiste Charcot organised two expeditions to Antarctica, the first being in 1903-05 in his vessel "Le Francais". The second was in 1908-10 in another vessel named "Pourquoi-Pas". Both ships appear on Pierre's stamps. In 1936 he and his ship were lost off Greenland during an early Paul-Emile Victor expedition.

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It was planned that Pierre would design and engrave the 2005 Albert Seyrolle issue but owing to his deteriorating health he was unable to finish it. The engraving was completed by Elsa Catelin who had only commenced her career at the French Printing Works a year earlier. She is now regarded as one of the world's leading stamp artists. It is interesting to note that when I visited him just after the stamp was issued, he turned to me and remarked, "One day, that lady will be one of the world's greatest engravers". His words have come true. The Marthe-Emmanuel issue of 2007 was Pierre's final stamp creation and I was delighted when he presented me with the stage proof of the stamp. A prolific writer, Marthe-Emmanuel accompanied the explorer Jean-Baptiste Charcot on many of his voyages.

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So ended the career of Pierre Béquet. Sadly his name did not appear on any of the issues for The Scattered Islands (iles Eparses), a group of four islands in the Indian Ocean which became the fifth part of the French Southern and Antarctic Territories in 2007.

A reference book that has proved invaluable is titled :-

“L’Aventure Polaire Francaise”, (The French Polar Adventure); Text in French. By Gerard Janichon and Christian de Marliave; (Arthaud 1997).

As well as containing many map illustrations and photographs, it lists (in date order) most of the French visits to the Polar Regions, including those of the Paul-Emile Victor expeditions.

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Meet the designer



This display is a published article by David Roseveare.