

COVID-19 Postage Stamps—Messages in a Message

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In living memory, no epidemic has generated a medical, scientific, social, and political response as massive, rapid, and global as that of COVID-19, which quickly became a global public health emergency recognized by the World Health Organization in January 2020.¹

The commemoration of major events takes many forms, including the issuing of postage stamps. It is a mass medium used to commemorate events or raise public awareness about topics of wide social interest or influence.

Supplemental content

Educational and financial messages about infectious diseases on stamps appeared in 1904 when Danish postal clerk Einar Holbøll developed the idea of raising money for tuberculosis by adding a surcharge to the sale of a “Christmas seal” stamp² (eFigure 1 in the [Supplement](#)). With the rise of email the popular cultural significance of postage stamps has diminished, but they still remain a way for governments and nongovernment organizations to communicate on a broad scale and to raise funds.³

We conducted a review of official postage stamps issued in 2020 related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We consulted an [online list](#) of national postal services and searched the philatelic section of each through December 2020 to identify 21 countries with pandemic-related postage series issues comprising 62 stamps, and 1 nonnational organization (the United Nations) with 1 issue comprising 6 stamps, for a total of 22 issues or series comprising 68 stamps. In the process we incidentally identified postage issues commemorating pre-SARS-CoV-2 respiratory disease outbreaks including 1918 influenza, SARS, and H5N1 (eFigure 1 in the [Supplement](#)).

We included only official stamps whose status was verified on postal sites because nonverified copies sometimes circulate without validation by the national postal office or as part of personalized prints, which is allowed in some jurisdictions when approved by a local private organization. We obtained images of most of the series from Yvert et Tellier, a global postage stamp company that maintains reference catalogs of global issues.

The first COVID-19 stamp was issued by Iran (stamp 21) on March 17, quickly after the first isolation and identification of SARS-CoV-2,⁴ followed by China on May 11 (stamps 24 and 25), with the 65 remaining released through December 2020. By comparison, the first AIDS-related stamp did not appear until years after the discovery of HIV. Many are commemorative, meaning they are issued for a short period and are not ongoing national postage issues. Two national stamps (Morocco [13]

and Switzerland [38]) and the United Nations series (6 stamps: 14-19) have surcharges, indicated with a + sign, to raise additional monies committed to charity funds.

Most often depicted, in descending order of frequency, are clinicians (n = 21), the virus (n = 14), scientists (n = 12), soldiers (n = 11), and patients (n = 7). Two scenes depict critically ill patients, both from nations hit early and hard by the pandemic, including a faint line drawing of an intubated patient in an ICU bed and an attending health worker checking IV fluids (eFigure 2 in the [Supplement](#), detail from stamp 25) from China; and an upright patient being ventilated noninvasively and attended to by an emergency or intensive care health care worker, from Brazil (33). A third drawing implies a critically ill patient tended to by a critical care team, fronted or led by a woman health care worker of color in heroic stance (44), 1 of a 12-part series of essential pandemic workers (including nonphysician hospital workers and civil servants) from France.

The virus itself is represented in both stylized (stamps 24, 38, 41, and 58) and more realistic illustrations (13, 28, 34-35) in the issue. A Swiss “solidarity” stamp features a Bauhaus-like image of a globe circumscribed by icons of people, the whole resolving into the coronavirus with its spike protein array (38).

Many of the images evoke combat imagery, honoring health care workers and armed forces and blurring the distinction between them as essential to combating the pandemic. Examples include a split masked face, half-caregiver half-soldier (stamp 40); a soldier wearing a gas mask paired with a physician flashing a victory sign (21; see also 58); masks symbolizing army, police, firefighters, and other civil servants (36-37); and a “superhero” health care worker with a floating red cape (1).

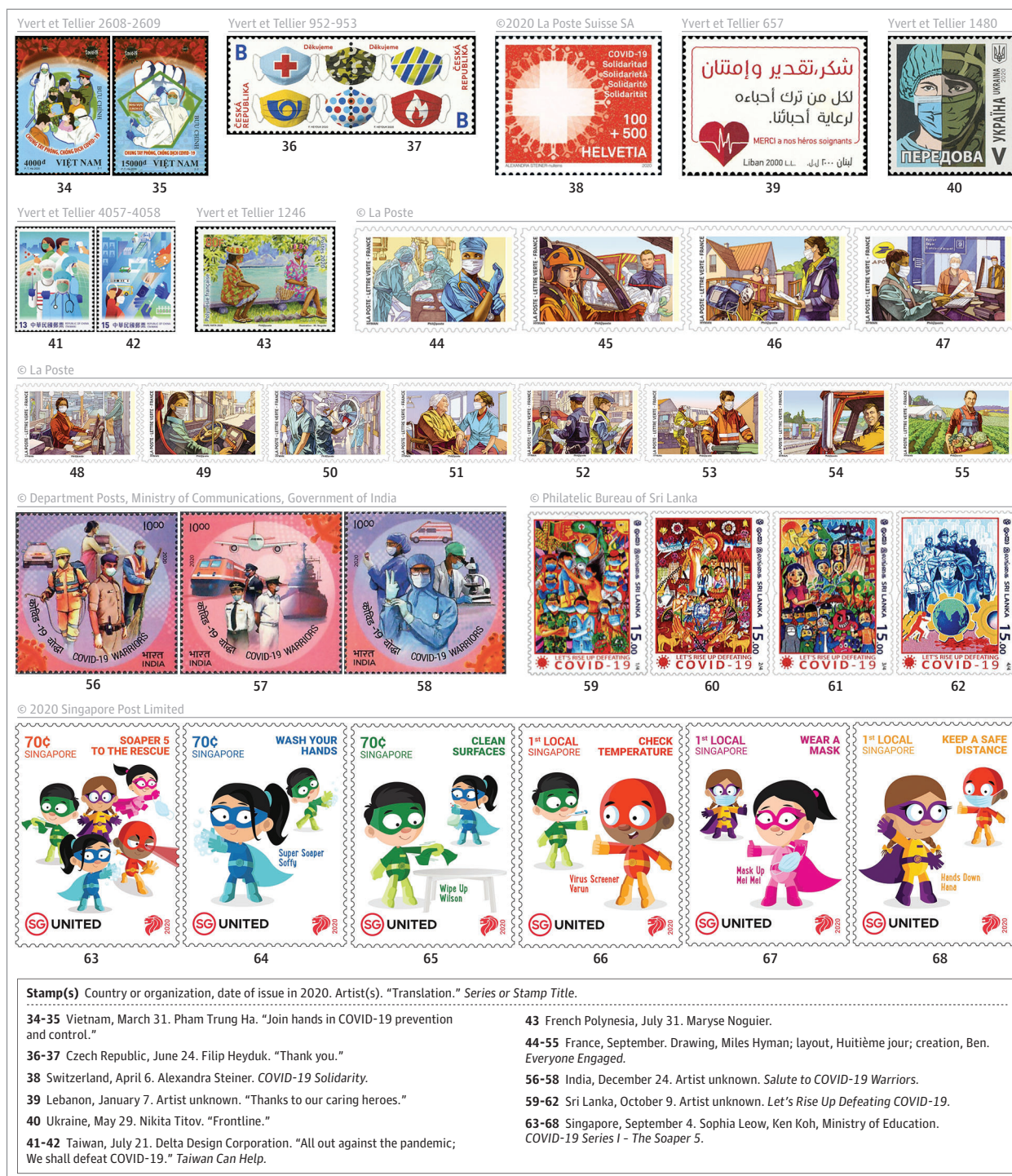
Others communicate public health mitigation measures, emphasizing recognition of symptoms (stamps 16, 30, 66), wearing of masks (12, 13, 36, 37, 46-51, 56-59, 67), social distancing, hand washing or surface disinfection, and other barrier measures (14-15, 42, 47, 63-68). A French Polynesian image illustrates 2 women with matching floral print masks separated by 6 coconuts, the recommended physical distance of 1 m (43).

In general the stamps signal governments' resolve to fight the epidemic (eg, clenched fists in stamps 26, 35, 41), reassure their populace, and educate and motivate them about public health best practices. Monaco's stamp, the only photograph, shows King Albert II holding a globe rotated to Asia where the epidemic began with a handwritten message urging “patience, trust, courage, [and] solidarity”(20).



All the images reflect a sentiment of global solidarity; mass public health efforts; and the hope of overcoming this new medical, scientific, and human challenge. These stamps prove they remain a creative medium for public health messaging, especially in global regions still reliant on land mail.

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