

Mycophilately in Mexico

Brian S. Luther

Mexico has issued five postage stamps fitting into the three main mycophilatelic (mushroom stamp) categories that I mentioned in an earlier article (Luther, 2012a): fungi as the main illustration (M), mushrooms or fungi in the design of the illustration (MID), and stamps commemorating Dr. Alexander Fleming and/or related to penicillin.

I recently discovered the last two items in the table below, which I'm delighted to bring to your attention here.

Fleming as well as Howard Florey and Ernst Chain were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1945 for their pioneering work. No fungus is shown on the stamp. The photo image of Fleming on the stamp has very annoying vertical lines that obliterate most of Fleming's features and become exaggerated when enlarged.

<i>Scott Cat. #</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1085	4/18/1975	80¢	Mushrooms on the Florentine Codex. MID
1241	8/6/1981	5.00	Alexander Fleming commemorative
1577 (set 1577–8)	12/20/1988	\$3.00	Corn smut, <i>Ustilago maydis</i> . M
1995u (set 1995 a–x)	10/2/1996	\$1.80	<i>Cookeina sulcipes</i> or <i>C. venezuelae</i> . M
2255	2/18/2002	\$1.80	“Forests” stamp with <i>Amanita muscaria</i> . MID
2255a	2003	\$1.80	“Forests” stamp with <i>Amanita muscaria</i> . MID

Scott 1085

There is considerable information that leads us to believe that the native people of Mexico and Central America used fungi, as well as plants and animals, for ritualistic and entheogenic purposes (Elferink et al., 1994). The Florentine Codex (Codice Florentino) is a pictographic history of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, and the illustration on this stamp is taken from this Codex. It shows merchants with mushrooms and seems to suggest their use. Further details related to this subject are well beyond the scope of this article, but another related and intriguing publication that you may find interesting is by Mayer (1977), who also provides extensive references.

Scott 1241

Scott 1241, issued in 1981, is the first North American stamp to commemorate Dr. Alexander Fleming. He and colleagues are credited with discovering penicillin.

Scott 1577

Scott 1577 shows corn smut (*Ustilago maydis*) and is the first stamp from Mexico with a fungus as the main illustration (the other stamp in the set illustrates a tree, *Mimosa tenuiflora*). If you've ever seen corn smut up close and personal, you know that it's pretty disgusting looking—like a grossly disturbed corn cob where something went drastically wrong. In fact, that's precisely the case. This disease can attack any part of the corn plant, but if it infects the ears, it prevents normal growth of the cob and kernels, and instead you get a misshapen, grotesque mass of tissue and eventually millions of black spores. It's rather alarming to look at compared to a normal, uninfected plant. Without prior knowledge, you wouldn't consider the remotest possibility that it could be edible. In fact, it's considered a delicacy and in Spanish is called *huitlacoche* (pronounced “wheat-la-coachay”). It's delicious and has been eaten for centuries, although the actual derivation of the word seems

to mean something akin to corn excrement or the like, in reference to its appearance. I think it's extra hard for those of us who grow our own vegetables and appreciate good sweet garden corn to ever look at corn smut and not be strongly put off. But looks are deceiving. It has a surprisingly sweet mushroomy flavor and aroma when cooked and eaten. The Aztecs actually cultivated the stuff, but also knew it could destroy their regular maize harvest. It's best picked when immature, still moist and whitish inside and hasn't formed the black spores yet. It's also called Corn Truffle or Mexican Corn Truffle. Many Latino markets carry it canned from Mexico, but it's not as good as the fresh stuff.

Scott 1995u

Scott 1995u is a single stamp I found on a beautiful sheet of 24 different wildlife stamps (with one cinderella, or nonpostage seal, at the center top), titled "Conservemos las especies de Mexico," issued in the year 1996. (Refer to Luther, 2012b, my introductory article about fungus-illustrated cinderellas, for a better appreciation of the diversity of paper ephemera products that I include in this category.) This is an extremely detailed sheet, and I spent a lot of time with a lens looking carefully at the illustrations. All of the stamps have a value of \$1.80 (Mexican). The fungus stamp itself is titled "Conservemos las especies de la Selva Humeda" and shows five pinkish-red *Discomycete* apothecia growing on wood which are labeled in super fine print as "hongos copita," meaning goblet-shaped or cup-shaped mushrooms. This is one of a couple of possible species of the genus *Cookeina*, as noted in the table. There are five other organisms shown on the same stamp—a crocodile, a plant, a butterfly, a boa, and a leaf-cutting ant. All are equally prominent and equally labeled. As a result, I consider this to be a main illustration myco stamp. If one of the other organisms had been obviously prominent and the mushrooms smaller or relegated to the background, then I would consider the fungus illustration to fit into my category of MID. The Scott Catalogue lists this stamp as "Crocodile," This stamp is not listed by McKenzie (1997) or Gimeno (1999–2000).

Scott 2255 & 2255a

In 2002 Mexico issued a set of 22 conservation stamps (Mexico Conserva) focusing on different specific subjects. One of these, Scott 2255, is titled *bosques* (forests). On it you can see an enlarged pine cone on the left, with the dark silhouette of a tree trunk and leaves, a bird in the middle right, and a single *Amanita muscaria* below this tree on the left, along with forest in

the background. Scott 2255a issued in 2003 has exactly the same illustration, except it has minutely different perforations (13 × 13.25 per 2 cm vs 14 for Scott 2255).

In addition to these genuine postal items, in 1985 Mexico issued a really lovely anti-tuberculosis (TB) sheet with 50 different mushroom cinderellas on it. These colorful non-postage items are stamp-like, gummed seals, each with a scientific name, and all have a value of \$1.00. I've previously documented all the other myco-postage stamps and postal items from North American countries (from Mexico north), as well as for the Central American country of Honduras, and one North American territory in several previous articles (Luther, 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2013d; 2014a; 2014b & 2016).

For those of you interested in the macrofungi of Mexico, I can recommend the following older field guides: Guzman (1978, 1979), Tablada (1983).



Mexico Scott 1085.

Stylized mushrooms are shown, presumably used in rituals.



Mexico Scott 1241.



Mexico Scott 1577 - Corn Smut (*Ustilago maydis*).



Close up of Mexico Scott 1995u.



Mexico Scott 1995a-x.

Full sheet of 24 different wildlife and nature stamps, plus one seal. Mushroom stamp in lower left.



Mexico, Scott 2255 showing a single *Amanita muscaria*.



Mexico - TB seals (non-postage). Sheet of 50 different mushrooms.

References

- Elferink, Jan G. R., Jose A. Flores & Charles D. Kaplan. 1994. The use of plants and other natural products for malevolent practices among the Aztecs and their successors. *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl*, Vol. 24.
- Gimeno, Jordi Domingo. 1999–2000. Setas, Mushrooms, Champignons, Pilze, Funghi. *Domfil Thematic Stamp Catalogue*. 2nd ed. Barcelona, 258 pp. In Spanish and English.
- Guzman, Gaston. 1978. *Hongos*. Editorial Limusa, Mexico. 194 pp.
- Guzman, Gaston. 1979. *Identificacion de los Hongos—comestibles, venenosos, alucinantes y destructores de la Madera*. Editorial Limusa, Mexico. 452 pp.
- Luther, Brian S. 2012a. The earliest postage stamps with fungi. *Spore Prints* 483 (June), pp. 4–6. Online and in color at www.psms.org.
- Luther, Brian S. 2012b. An Introduction to Fungus-Illustrated Cinderellas. *Spore Prints*. 486 (Nov.), pp. 6–7. Online and in color at www.psms.org.
- Luther, Brian S. 2013a. Mycophilately in Mexico. *Spore Prints* 489 (Feb.), pp. 4–5. Online and in color at www.psms.org.
- Luther, Brian S. 2013b. Mushroom stamps from St. Pierre & Miquelon. *Spore Prints* 492 (May), pp. 3–4. Online and in color at www.psms.org.
- Luther, Brian S. 2013c. Fungus-illustrated stamps from Greenland. *Spore Prints* 494 (Sept.), pp. 4–5. Online and in color at www.psms.org.
- Luther, Brian S. 2013d. United States Postage Stamps with Fungi— in Color. Online and in color on the PSMS homepage under “Education” at www.psms.org
- Luther, Brian S. 2014a. Canadian Postage & Postal Items with Fungi. *Spore Prints* 505 (Oct.), pp. 4–6. Online and in color at www.psms.org and also on the homepage of this website under “Education.”
- Luther, Brian S. 2014b. Icelandic Mushroom Stamps. *Spore Prints* No. 506 (Nov.), pp. 4–5. Online and in color at www.psms.org.
- Luther, Brian S. 2016. Fungus-illustrated postage stamps from Honduras. *Spore Prints* 526 (Nov.), pp. 4–5.
- Mayer, Karl Herbert. 1977. *The Mushroom Stones of Mesoamerica*. Acoma Books, Ramona CA, 46 pp.
- Tablada, Jose Juan. 1983. *Hongos Mexicanos Comestibles: Micologia Economica*, ed. Andrea Martinez. Fondo de Cultura Economica, Academia Mexicana de la Lengua, 185 pp.