

The following article is the Introduction to a two-volume catalogue ('Images of the Great War' compiled by Walter E. Schmidt) on Delandre's vignettes. Unfortunately, the catalogue gives no addresses - not even a publisher's - so it has not been possible to seek Mr. Schmidt's permission to use his Introduction as an article in 'Bicycle Stamps'. The spelling (colorful - theater - honor) in the Introduction suggests that the catalogue was published in the United States of America. Delandre's vignettes are keenly-sought-after today; possibly as a result of the publication of 'Images of the Great War'. The vignettes decorating the article appear in the catalogue as do the bicycle infantry vignettes immediately following

During the years of the first World War, many countries issued a variety of colorful seals. Some of these seals were designed to raise money for the Red Cross and other Charities. Others were propaganda issues which often portrayed the brutality of the enemy. A third type were the regimental and military seals produced by a notorious French printer who called himself Delandre. To this day, the name Delandre evokes a negative response among many collectors in France and elsewhere. The reason for this is not a mystery to anyone familiar with Delandre's career.

He was born in the 1880's and his given name was Gaston Fontanille. His father was a judge who served on the High Court in the city of Valence in southeastern France. Very little is known of his early years but by the time he had become a young adult, Delandre was being referred to in the literature as a scoundrel, a swindler, and a crook. To the best of my knowledge, there is no evidence whatsoever to refute any of these accusations. The list of his transgressions is indeed a matter of record. It is known, for example, that he was sentenced to jail at least seven times for committing acts of fraud. His exploits however, indicate that Delandre was not just a common criminal. He seemed more like an imaginative, amoral genius, attempting to achieve financial success by fair means or foul.

In his early twenties, after having given himself several impressive titles such as "The Baron Allard," "Count of Chabanes," and "The Marquis of Vaurens," he convinced a number of young peasants in the provinces that having a title would offer them a much greater opportunity for a better life. He then proceeded to sell them official looking documents that were designed to convince them and others that they were related to members of the ruling class. He was arrested for swindling.

Later we find Delandre operating a theater and producing motion pictures long before anyone realized the potential for such an industry. Of course Delandre made sure that the cost of making a "flicker" always exceeded any profit that investors had been promised. After twelve years as a theater operator, Delandre embarked on a new career. He became Commander Deville, Knight of the Legion of Honor, and the director of a chemical corporation that developed a new product to replace the highly flammable celuloid widely used in photography. All went well until a blind disabled aristocrat in his eighties learned, quite by accident, that he had been named the president of the board of directors. Subsequent inquiries by the authorities revealed other irregularities that soon ended Delandre's career as a giant of industry.

The Great War had started when Delandre sallied forth again. This time he persuaded some wealthy friends that money could be made by publishing military literature and war maps. He borrowed large sums of money and began to publish his "War Notes." Again all went well until in one issue of "War Notes" he solicited public funds to purchase a mechanical device that could be attached to the wings of an airplane and then, at the touch of a finger, shoot arrows at enemy planes. When this came to the attention of the government, the military authorities were not amused and he faced further legal difficulties. Undaunted, Delandre continued to borrow large sums, this time from private citizens, in order to help him design and develop a periscope that would have the capability of detecting submarines under water.

It was sometime in 1914 that Delandre, perhaps in a sudden flash of brilliance, envisioned a way to profit directly from the war. He became a printer of what he called "war stamps." Patterning his idea after the regimental seals produced in Italy around the turn of the century, Delandre persuaded the finest artists and the most knowledgeable military experts in France to aid him in creating one of the loveliest arrays of military vignettes ever printed. With his usual flair, he gave himself the title of General Director of the Administration of War Stamps. His original plan, as outlined in his prospectus, was to print a semi-official stamp for use by each of the French regiments, similar to those used in Italy. The plan failed almost immediately when the government refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of such issues and the military censors prohibited their distribution to the soldiers. It was then that Delandre simply changed his advertising tactics and offered his "war stamps" in cleverly designed packets directly to the public. He was an immediate success, in part because of the wave of patriotic fervor that was sweeping over the country and in part because of his effective advertising campaign. He placed posters in the subways and full-page ads in the newspapers and trade magazines. He used the covers of booklets legitimately commissioned by the Red Cross to tout his not-so-legitimate war stamps. He even published seals to advertize his seals.

Because Delandre's vision and egocentricity did not allow him to do anything in a small way, he also produced military seals for Great Britain, Belgium, Russia, Serbia, Montenegro and Italy.



In addition to these seals, he sometimes printed and sold unsolicited Red Cross seals of other countries to help him finance his growing empire. The most well-known case involves the bogus Red Cross seals of Montenegro.

Delandre printed and distributed these seals from his Paris office for slightly above face value. The government of Montenegro not only received no revenue from the sale of these seals but also was totally unaware of their existence.

Because Delandre was at times commissioned by the Red Cross to print seals that were legitimate in every way, it is often difficult to distinguish between his legitimate business practices and his fraudulent manipulations. One illustration of the latter concerns Delandre's sale of Italian regimental seals to collectors who were eager to obtain them. When his stock of popular items ran low, he simply made copies of the originals and printed more.

He then added insult to injury by designing a vast number of bogus Italian regimentals (fantasies) which he sold along with the original seals. This practice hopelessly confused dealers and serious collectors alike. One well-informed collector, however, wrote to a dealer in Italy regarding several Italian seals that he had purchased from Delandre. The dealer replied that the seals in question were fakes and that the dealer who sold them was an unscrupulous man. The collector then wrote to Delandre and confronted him with this information. The following was Delandre's reply:

Paris 11 August 1916

Dear Sir,

Your Italian merchant does not know what he is talking about; the two stamps attached, that you sent me; are not fakes; they are re-impressions.

The House of Delandre sells three kinds of stamps of Italian regiments:

- (1) the real ones
- (2) re-impressions
- (3) new stamps that we create ourselves.

The House has also printed some facsimilies; some have been rather successful, but may leave something to be desired.

My best wishes to you, Sir

To my knowledge, Delandre forged only non-postal issues of other countries and never postage stamps of any kind. Apparently he realized that the risk of so obviously breaking the law was too great and chose to operate only within those areas of questionable legality. There is considerable evidence, not yet fully verified, that he forged some charity seals of Russia in 1917 about the time that the czar was overthrown. Exactly four months after this event, Delandre's own empire collapsed.

On June 20th, 1917 he was arrested and later found guilty of failing to share the profits from the sale of his Red Cross seals according to the terms agreed upon. Still another suit was pending against him brought by several stamp dealers who had charged him with the illegal trafficking in Italian military seals. A judge sentenced him to prison where he remained until his death in 1923.

For a long time there has been some speculation about what happened to the vast stock of material Delandre had in his possession at the time of his arrest. Was it confiscated by the authorities and destroyed? Was it sold at massive discounts to anyone who would buy? Did it still exist in someone's attic? Daniel Van Treeck, a friend of Delandre's only son, tells us what happened. After his arrest, a lock was placed on the door and Delandre's printing press was silenced forever. All of his records, correspondence, and stock of seals were removed and stored in the cellar of a friend. There, in this dark and damp place, most of the material slowly rotted away. Sometime later, Mr Van Treeck purchased what was left intact from Delandre's son and to my knowledge Mr Van Treeck is in possession of this material to this day.

As for those of us who have derived great pleasure from the study of Delandre's vignettes, we can only express a deep sense of gratitude. However, it must be said that the status of these seals is in doubt. Many classify this kind of material as album weeds, unworthy of serious consideration or study. Others, however, are convinced that these seals are highly desirable and collectable masterpieces of graphic art that, as Delandre himself says, "Evoke such glory in so small a space." I am content to allow readers to decide this question for themselves.



Some of the "loveliest array of military vignettes ever printed"



BICYCLE INFANTRY

Groupes cyclistes



971.1 - 1st Group. Border blue - center olive. Group No. in gold (appears in all four corners)
971.2 - variation. center brown Group No. smaller and in red.

972.1 - 2nd Group. Border blue center light green. No. in gold.
972.2 - variation. No. smaller.
972.3 - second variation. Group No. smaller and in red.



973.1 - 3rd Group. Border green - center blue. Group No. in gold.
973.2 - variation. Border dark green. Group No. smaller and in red.
973.3 - second variation. As 973.2, but border light green.



964.1 - 4th Group. Border olive - center blue. Group No. in gold.
974.2 - variation. Group No. smaller.
974, 3 - second variation. Border brown. Group No. smaller and in red.



975.1 - 5th Group. Border red - center green. Group No. in gold.
975.2 - variation. Group No. smaller and in blue.



976 - 6th Group. Completely different design



977.1 - 7th Group. Border green - center rose. Group No. in gold.
977.2 - variation. Center red. Group No. smaller and in blue.



978.1 - 8th Group. Border light green - center carmine-rose. Group No. in gold.
978.2 - variation. Group No. smaller and in red.