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The semiotic status of the postage stamp is not easy to define. Like that of the poster, with which it has much in common, it is mixed. One may start off by saying that it incorporates in varying doses the categories of sign classified in Peirce’s Second Trichotomy of Signs – Icons, Indices and Symbols.¹ The visual images that it adapts – whether portraits, busts, monuments or landscapes can be classed as icons; the maps, diagrams, logos or other schematic representations contain indexical elements; and the stamp uses symbols in the form of numbers, letters, names, acronyms or other linguistic elements incorporated into its design. These classes are, of course, far from watertight, as Peirce was well aware: context and interaction often exert pressures on individual semiotic elements, causing them to take on functions that, in isolation, they would not adopt. A symbol, for example, can become an icon when it receives a noticeable degree of typographical definition or is placed in a prominent and isolated position. Even on the abstract level of theoretical definition, Peirce allows for the shifting of semiotic functions: thus symbols, he concedes, involve ‘a sort of index’ while indices involve ‘a sort of icon’. The full complexity of Peirce’s analysis of sign functions appears in his chapter on the Ten Classes of Signs in which he combines the categories singled out in his three Trichotomies of Signs. In this way, he attempts to pinpoint and define the semiotic mix constituting each category of sign, one which is often more complex than one might expect. The classes of sign – such as Indexical or Dicent Sinsigns – which straddle the area between Qualisign and Legisign in his First Trichotomy – are of particular relevance to the semiotic status of the postage stamp.

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The difficulty of precisely defining the semiotic structure of signs has a parallel in the semiotic ambiguity of the stamp, particularly in relation to its multiple functions. The first of these is that of indicating a country, that is, of playing an *indexical* role. This is the role of the *definitive* stamp. It is, moreover, the role of the stamp in general which has always been to indicate from which country the mail to which it is attached comes (the letter and the stamp affixed to it standing in a contiguous relation with the country of origin); the cost of postage of the letter or parcel; and the fact that the price of postage has indeed been paid. The role of conventional *symbols* (numbers and letters primarily) in clarifying the *indexical* function of stamps is of course paramount. A major role of the Universal Postal Union, set up in 1874, was precisely to agree, legislate and monitor international conventions in relation to the postage stamp’s indexical functions.

But as well as *indicating* a country the stamp has, as a second function, also to *represent* that country, that is, to offer a symbolic representation of it in conventionally recognizable terms. This it often does, as I shall show, by incorporating an *icon* – the profile of a reigning monarch, the national flag, an allegorical figure or national figurehead (as in the French Marianne) or even an abbreviation of the country’s name in some acronymic or logo-like form. This is the second function of the *definitive* stamp, the stamp that is normally used for regular mail and which, usually of a small format, is issued over a number of years. The pattern for it – format, iconic content, textual message – was established in one stroke in 1840 with Sir Roland Hill’s famous Penny Black stamp showing the profile of Queen Victoria, the device ‘Postage’ and the face value of one penny. The standard British definitive stamp, displaying the portrait bust of Elizabeth II by Arnold Machin, continues this convention almost without change; issued over a quarter of a century ago in 1967, it is still current, having been converted to decimal currency in 1970–1971.

A third function of the stamp is that of representing an *aspect* of a country. Here it also plays a primarily *iconic* role. This is the function of the *commemorative* stamp, which though a secondary function, has become an increasingly important consideration in recent stamp design. In this case, the stamp proposes a memento, a souvenir, the *icon* of an event, an anniversary or an object of national or international importance. Today by far the largest majority of stamps fulfil this function, one reflected in a vast range of formats, colours and designs. However, even when the stamp represents an aspect of a country (for example, a monument or site), it represents at the same time the country itself. For the image reproduced on the stamp is accompanied by the signs which establish the identity of the country. The postage stamp is therefore, strictly speaking, never merely an icon: while representing an aspect of the reality of a country or a culture, it continues at the same time to represent the country as a national unit. This is its primary function. That is why the stamp – even when it incorporates *iconic* elements or even when these elements seem, as increasingly they do, almost to eclipse all other signs – remains,
at bottom an *indexical* sign. It is this tension between *iconic* and *indexical* functions that I set out to explore, particularly in so far as it is reflected in the development of the French national image.

Because of its reduced format and its heavy symbolic or emblematic load (that of representing a country or a specific aspect of a country, or both of these at the same time), the postage stamp manifests primarily *metonymic* tendencies, that is, it offers an image which represents a part rather than the whole of an object or a reality. In other words, it tends to propose *fragments* of images: allegorical figures, emblems, or logos. These forms are themselves often amalgamations of various elements which, brought together and abbreviated, represent a complex reality: a company, an institution, a country. As on banknotes (many of which are engraved or lithographed by the same companies that print stamps, or are designed by the same artists), the *head* becomes a principal motif of the postage stamp. In England, where the modern adhesive stamp was invented by Sir Roland Hill in 1840, no name appears on the country’s stamps: the monarch’s head is sufficient to identify the country which, in any case, having been the first to use stamps of this kind, did not need to offer further evidence of national identity. More recently, this fact has been seized on and exploited to great advantage by designers of British commemorative stamps. The cameo image of the royal head, in gold or in colour, like the stamp’s face value, can be added to a design at the very last minute without introducing into it distracting textual elements. The person looking at the stamp quickly abstracts the royal head and concentrates his or her attention on the commemorative image offered by the stamp. This phenomenon – and the stamp’s tendency towards metonymy – is well illustrated in the recent British series of semi-permanent commemoratives in which stamps bearing famous smiles are designed for use on birthday letters or other greetings mail. France, obliged to indicate in writing on its stamps the country from which they come, has however often tried to transform this written message into a more compact formula, either by using abbreviations – such as *Repub Franc* as on the first French stamp of 1849 (Fig. 1c) – or the acronym *RF* (see Figs. 1b and 16) which has virtually become the country’s *logo*. The different ways the country has been named – *République française*, *Empire français* – under Napoleon III (Fig. 2b) – *Postes françaises* – under the German Occupation 1940–1944 (Figs. 5b, 5c, 5d) – and *France* – beneath Giscard d’Estaing, 1974–1981 (Fig. 11a), – reflect the different ideologies of the country’s successive political powers or governments. In what follows, I shall examine both recurrent iconic elements in French definitive stamps over the last 140 years and the development of the commemorative stamp in France since its introduction in the first decades of this century. In doing so I shall try to clarify the image of itself that France offers to the world through its stamps, to pinpoint the philatelic icons of French nationhood and the extent to which they have changed over the last century and a half.
France has presented itself to the world in its definitive stamps using more than thirty different national icons over the last 140 years:

10 Marianne (from 1944 to today, the latest design dating from 1989)
2 Coq gaulois (1944 and 1962–65)
Ceres (with several variations dating from 1849 to 1941)
1 sower or semeuse (with several variations dating from 1903 to 1960–61)
1 harvester or moissonneuse (1957–1959)
Peace and Commerce or Paix et Commerce (1876–1900 with several variations)
1 Allegorical Woman, Marianne-like: le type Merson (1900–1924)
Love and Justice, Amour et Justice: le type Blanc (1900–1924)
Rights of Man: les Droits de l’homme: le type Mouchon (1900–1924)
Peace or Paix (1932–1933)
Mercury or Mercure (1938–1941)
Iris (1944)
Nearly all of the female figures enumerated above in fact relate in one way or another to the Marianne figure, but it was only after the Second World War that her profile and attributes were unambiguously portrayed on French stamps. In addition to these imaginary or mythological figures, French stamps have also shown three real or historical persons. These are:

- Napoleon III (1852–1870)
- Louis Pasteur (1923–1926)
- Maréchal Pétain (1941/42–1944)²

Apart from the Second Empire period (1850–1870), when the profile of Napoleon III appeared on French stamps (see Fig. 2b), and the years of German occupation during the Second World War (1940–1944), when three different designs incorporating the profile of Pétain were issued (see Figs. 5b, 5c and 5d), France has been a republic. Having no monarch since 1848, the French, unlike their German and Italian neighbours, also republican, have sought alternative symbols or figures to represent their identity and national aspirations. The country has notably tended towards the selection of female figures, often associated with maternity or the earth, many of which were more or less directly related to Marianne. As a symbol of liberty and republicanism and, later of France, Marianne emerged as a national figurehead at the end of the eighteenth century, but was only established, unambiguously, as the emblem of France with the third Republic in the 1880s. And, as we shall see, she looms large in French definitive stamp design only in the twentieth century.

The first national icon of this kind to be reproduced on a French stamp – it was in fact the first French stamp – came to be called Ceres, because of her resemblance to the Roman goddess of agriculture (Fig. 1). It was the creation of the engraver Barre who in 1848 also designed the seal of the Second Republic. The Ceres figure was chosen in part, no doubt, for its regular, Roman profile, well adapted to insertion in a small format (Ceres’ head appeared on many Roman coins). It was also chosen for the discreet but evident symbolism it incorporates: a wheatsheaf, a bunch of grapes or a garland of laurels. Ceres appeared several times on French stamps from 1849 to 1941. The Semeuse (Fig. 4) and the Moissonneuse (Fig. 6d) are two other types which illustrate France’s agricultural wealth. The former is also generally accepted to be sowing liberal ideas as well as grain. Designed by Roty (originally for coins), it has become a classic image, having been retained on stamps over twenty years at the beginning of the century (1903 to 1924)

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² For fuller details of French stamp issues from 1849 to date, see Yvert et Tellier’s Catalogue de timbres-poste, 94 (1990) (Amiens: Yvert et Tellier; Paris: Champion, 1990), hereafter Y et T.
and throughout the century on French money. The graceful profile of the woman (whose Phrygian bonnet identifies her as Marianne) has been presented in successive issues as a cameo, against a background of engraved lines or with her feet on earth. In one version, the sun is seen to be rising in the distance while in 1960–1961, in the Sower’s latest incarnation, she is depicted in shocking pink against a turquoise background. Another figure associated with agriculture reproduced on French stamps is that of the coq gaulois. This image was used to announce, like the coming of dawn, the liberation of France in 1944. It was also used by Decaris in his stamp of 1960 (Fig. 10a); it was the first French definitive stamp to use more than two
colours. Like one of the *semeuse* designs, Decaris's cock appears against the background of the rising sun.

The other mythic types used by French stamps between 1849 and 1941 include *Paix et Commerce* (designed by Sage, 1876–1900), *Amour et Justice* (by Joseph Blanc, 1900–1924), the Rights of Man (Mouchon, 1900–1924) (see Fig. 3), Peace (1932–1933), Mercury (1938–1941) and Iris (1939–1941) (see Fig. 6). In both cases, the 'Peace' theme was taken up in periods after wars: in the 1870s, Peace is linked with Commerce, and presented as an alternative to the still radical Marianne image; and in the 1930s. Although they do not decorate airmail stamps, Iris and Mercury, the winged messengers of the Gods, appear on French stamps at precisely the time (the later 1930s) when aircraft were playing an increasingly important role in the delivery of mail. Mouchon's design incorporating the *Droits de l'homme* theme is particularly interesting from a semiotic point of view. In it the woman, who is an allegorical representation of France, holds in her hands a tablet on which are engraved the rights of man: the visual image and the visual emblem are both framed and underlined by the device *République française* which appears at the bottom of the stamp and which therefore *indicates* both the provenance of the stamp and the ideology of the nation which issued it. This use of an indexical sign — in this case the country-naming device — to support an iconic sign — the allegorical figure holding the sacred tablet with its message of political freedom — will be exploited, as I shall show, to great effect in a number of stamps commemorating the bicentenary of the French Revolution in 1989.

The image which has since the Second World War established itself in the world of French stamps as the foremost national icon is of course that of Marianne (see Figs. 7, 8 and 9). There have been no less than ten variations on the Marianne theme in 45 years. Marianne's evolution as an emblem of Liberty, of Republicanism and of France is explored by Maurice Agulhon in his classic studies *Marianne au combat: l'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1800* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979; English trans., Cambridge University Press, 1981) and *Marianne au pouvoir: l'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1880 à 1914* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), though in the latter (p. 29), his presentation of the 1900 definitive stamp issues is not quite accurate. See also the catalogue of the exhibition *Quand Paris dansait avec Marianne 1879–1889* held at the Musée du Petit Palais, Paris, 1989.

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3 Mercure has also traditionally been associated with Commerce. It appears thus on the back of a Deputies' medal at the time of Louis-Philippe (1830–1848) where it accompanies Liberté and various other allegorical figures, including Agriculture (a female figure carrying sheaves of wheat) as well as in Sage's design for the *Paix et commerce* stamp of 1876–1900.

4 In 1940, a joint British and French stamp, for which essays were designed by Dulac and by Cheffer, both of whom were subsequently to create Marianne stamps, was planned to show Anglo-French solidarity in the face of the Nazi German menace. In Edmond Dulac's design, Marianne and Britannia's heads are seen together in profile. The project was dropped when, later in 1940, Germany invaded France. See the British Philatelic Journal, viii, no 8 (1971), 3–5 and xcv, no 4 (1987), 80–83.

whose Phrygian bonnet\textsuperscript{6} attests to her democratic origins. Her form and most of her symbolic attributes (which are fully thematized and documented in the French stamps issued in 1989–1990 to celebrate the French Revolution) derive indeed from paintings and engravings of the 1780s and 1790s, such as \textit{La Liberté et la mort} by J.-B. Regnault of 1794 (see Fig. 14). Having made her debut discreetly in the designs of Blanc, Merson and Mouchon, issued in

\textsuperscript{6} The Phrygian bonnet had traditionally been placed by the Romans on the heads of liberated slaves. For the Republic of 1792, it became the symbol of liberty and joined other Roman emblems in various allegorical combinations representing the new French state.
1900, and in the *semeuse* of 1903, she reappears in close-up in 1944. In the so-called Algiers series, issued at the liberation of France, she is crowned with laurels, while in Dulac's design of 1945 (the so-called 'London' series) she is framed in the garlands of victory. She appears in her most classic form in the later forties in the splendid head created by one of France's most famous stamp designers – Gandon (see Fig. 7c); this is the form in which she will appear for most of the next ten years. Wearing a Phrygian bonnet but without any further ornamentation, she is framed in a stamp the three textual elements of which are kept to a strict minimum; they comprise the acronym of the country – *RF*; the device *Postes* and the face value (plus, in minuscule letters in the margin, the name of the artist and the engraver). She is replaced in 1955 by the Marianne designed by Muller (Fig. 8a); here her profile is picked out against the background of the rising sun, and she is crowned with oak leaves. In 1959, she appears on a boat (the *Marianne à la nef*; Fig. 8b) and in 1960, her profile in grey on a dark red background is decorated with laurels and a sheaf of wheat (Fig. 8c). The witty Marianne invented by Jean Cocteau followed in 1961 (Fig. 8d); here she sports the Phrygian bonnet with tricolor rosette on a background of wheatsheaves and the French coat of arms. She is followed in turn in 1967–1969 by Cheffer's Marianne whose beautiful sculpted head is again decorated with wheatsheaves (Fig. 9a); in 1971 a Phrygian bonnet reappears on the head of the Marianne designed by Béquet (see Fig. 9b).

A new symbolic orientation is offered by the French stamp after 1977 when the right-wing government of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing launched the Sabine image (see Fig. 11). This fine head derives from Jacques-Louis David's famous painting *The Sabine Women*, but appears more smilingly on the stamp than on David's canvas. The device *France* replaces that of *République française* for the first time on a French definitive stamp although it had already been used on numerous commemorative stamps from the 1920s. However, the *France* etiquette was relinquished in favour of *République française* after the defeat of Giscard d'Estaing's party in 1981 and the election of the Socialist government under François Mitterrand. Another riposte of the latter, designed further to announce the reinstatement of the French republican tradition, was the restoration of the Marianne image, this time engraved by Gandon and based on the famous picture by Delacroix painted in 1830: *La Liberte aux barricades* (Fig. 9c).

This stamp appeared in 1982 and presided over the decade until 1989, the bicentenary of the French Revolution, when, after a national competition, it was replaced by the Marianne designed by Briat (see Fig. 9d and 13). It is interesting to note that among the designs shortlisted for the stamp (see Fig. 13), the visual motifs traditionally associated with France – the Phrygian bonnet, the Revolutionary rosette, the *coq gaulois* – are still very much in evidence. Briat's design is a success to the extent that it succeeds in dressing an 80s fashion-model in a Phrygian bonnet decorated with the revolutionary rosette, but also – and this despite the monochrome of the design – in incorporating a
suggestion of the French national flag, the tricolor, through whose three vertical bands Marianne's heavily mascara'd eyes look out at the viewer. Briat has also minimized the impact of the symbolic and indexical elements of the design in favour of the iconic by aligning the former vertically with the bands of shading. Thus the viewer reads Marianne's face and conventional emblematic attributes before seeking textual confirmation that this is indeed a
postage stamp (La Poste) of French origin (République française). Here again, then, iconic elements are foregrounded at the expense of indexical signs, even in what is a definitive – as opposed to commemorative – stamp.

It is in this way that France proposes the image of a peaceful and fertile country, republican and democratic, defender of Liberty and the Rights of Man. The dominant feminine principle is only rarely and seldom auspiciously challenged by a masculine image: apart from that of Louis Pasteur (a scientist, not a politician) the male heads that have appeared on French stamps (those of Napoleon III and Pétain) have never augured well for France. It may be significant that General De Gaulle seems never to have been tempted to see his own profile on French stamps, though he was celebrated posthumously on a commemorative stamp in 1990 (Fig. 17b). Perhaps the male head is too much associated with the old monarchical tradition, the female head being connected rather with the Greek and Roman classical world and with goddesses as powerful and prestigious as Athene and Minerva. It has been therefore the head of a woman – fragment of sculpture or of painting, real or imaginary, invested with mythical or allegorical attributes – that France has mostly used to present itself to the world.

The choice of the head motif itself is significant from both a semantic and a formal point of view. ‘Head’ suggests a pre-eminent situation – that of a chief or monarch (chief derives of course from the French word chef or head) – but, at the same time, a human presence. The attractive if grave face of successive Mariannes7 offers an image with which a democratic society finds it easy to relate. (The general and continuing popularity in France of the name Marie-Anne has also been a factor.) From a formal point of view, the head incorporates itself easily into the small format of the conventional definitive stamp and can, if necessary, be fitted into the double format of commemorative issues. So in 1980 Marianne reappears in a stamp commemorating the Année du patrimoine (Fig. 12) or is adapted to special stamps associated with the philatelic exhibitions organized by Philexfrance (as in 1989, see Fig. 19).

The function of commemorative stamps is to promote an aspect of the country by offering an attractive and succinct image of it. Typical themes include:

- anniversaries and historical events
- art, architecture and sculpture
- famous people – scientists, military heroes, artists
- scientific inventions, technological achievements, communications
- national or international meetings or congresses
- national organizations or societies
- exhibitions, including philatelic exhibitions (the Philexfrance)
- regional coats-of-arms

7 Not forgetting, as Agulhon and others have pointed out, that at her inception in the late eighteenth century and even sometimes during the nineteenth, Marianne was taken by opponents to French republicanism as a figure of fun and caricatured in various ways. She was also parodied on a French stamp of 1983 which reproduced her image as humourously imagined by Jean Effel.
In the beginning, the commemorative stamp was a definitive stamp slightly modified – or even simply overprinted – with a supplementary sign, such as the red cross and surcharge added in 1914 to the *Semeuse* issue. Very quickly, however, the advantages of a larger framework were seen and, in France, a double definitive framework was adopted from 1917–1918 for an increasing number of commemorative stamps (see Fig. 16a, Paris Olympics, 1924) though the definitive format was still used by commemoratives up to about 1940 (see Fig. 15). The advantage of the double format was the opportunity it offered to present images either horizontally in the ‘landscape’ format (see
Fig. 16b) or vertically as ‘portraits’ (Figs. 17a and 17b). Most French commemorative stamps have since become, in effect, either landscapes (including towns, sites and monuments) or portraits (French men and women of historical or cultural importance). In the last twenty years, a greater variety of formats – mostly larger than hitherto – has been introduced (see Fig. 18). But, once again, these enlarged formats reflect conventional means of artistic representation. Thus the very large format – landscape or portrait – is used precisely for the famous series of stamps promoting great works of French art (see Fig. 18e, Yves Klein) and the extra-wide landscape format – the equivalent of three standard definitive stamps – is used to present very wide landscape views (see Fig. 18a, La Brenne). The importance of maintaining the artistic tradition in French culture is indicated also by the use of stamps which, until the 1970s at any rate, were often engraved rather than lithographed or photolithographed. The tradition of using engravings as a means of reproducing masterpieces was established in Europe during the Renaissance. For France, almost from the start, the commemorative stamp was conceived as a miniature engraving that one collected just as before one used to collect prints or etchings. Today, one can learn a great deal about a national
culture by collecting a country's stamps. In my final section, I want briefly to examine the way in which France has presented in terms of stamps one of its most important historical anniversaries: the bicentenary of the French Revolution in 1989.

The semiotic complexity of the commemorative stamp which, as I suggested at the beginning of this article, plays both an iconic and an indexical role, is well illustrated by French stamps celebrating the bicentenary of the French Revolution. For these stamps set out systematically to transform the stamp, whose original function is indexical, into an icon. They do this by marginalizing as far as possible all indexical elements. This is evident particularly in the chief indexical element of the stamp, the device République française, which is very often (on at least ten occasions) incorporated vertically to the left or right of the main image like a border. This point has already been noted in the context of the latest French definitive stamp, Briat's Marianne design, which, of all the stamps short-listed in the Philexfrance competition in 1989, was the only one to place the identifying device vertically. (Furthermore, with Béquet's design of 1971, Briat's stamp is the only French definitive ever to have placed the device République française in this position.) The functional indicator Postes is similarly aligned on a vertical axis, that established by the tricolor shading of the stamp's surface. Symbols (letters) and index (name of country) are in this way incorporated into what is an essentially iconic scheme.

This has very often, of course, been the case with French commemorative stamps. What is striking about the various Bicentenary series is the systematic iconization of the sign. This development is, moreover, evident on two levels: within each stamp and on the level of individual sets which are almost always presented in se-tenant blocks or even as indivisible or with decorative vignettes attached. On the level of the individual stamp, one notices a tendency for certain iconic elements to be incorporated in further iconic motifs, creating the effect of a kind of iconic mise en abyme. In the Personnages célèbres de la Révolution (first series), for example, a scene from the life of each historical figure is framed by the profile of Marianne decked out in Phrygian bonnet with revolutionary rosette (see Fig. 20). In turn this profile is itself delineated with three bands of colour – the red, white and blue of the tricolor. We see thus a visual image constructed on three levels of iconic development. The functional or indexical elements of the stamp – its face value plus any surcharge, the country's name and the title of the scene illustrated on the stamp – are all inscribed, in a somewhat jumbled way, on the right hand side of the stamp. It is in this that the exemplary icon of France – the profile of Marianne – opens like a Chinese box to display the wealth of its iconography and its historical pertinence. In the Philexfrance stamps issued in 1987 and 1988 announcing the great philatelic exhibition of 1989, these elements are juxtaposed rather than integrated into the same design: Gandon's Marianne is juxtaposed with the Phrygian bonnet, itself juxtaposed
with a blue stamp showing the Eiffel tower (the *stamp within a stamp* motif being another example of iconic *mise en abyme*). In the second version of this stamp (1988), these elements appear within an indivisible double-definitive format (Fig. 19).

But it is above all on the level of sets or on that of the stamp plus explicatory or decorative vignette that the iconic tendencies of the French bicentenary stamps are most evident. Let me point out first of all the various ways in which iconographic elements are incorporated into the external framework of the stamps:

- stamp with se-tenant vignette (Philexfrance, 1987)
- stamp with indivisible vignette (Philexfrance 1988, Fig. 19)
- se-tenant block of 6 stamps sold as a carnet with vignette (*Personnages de la Révolution*, first series, 1989, Fig. 20)
- se-tenant block of 4 stamps with decorative border surrounding (*Personnages de la Révolution*, second series, 1989, Fig. 21)
- se-tenant and indivisible blocks of 4 stamps with vignette (*Déclaration des droits de l’homme*, 1989, Fig. 22)
This use of se-tenant or indivisible blocks of stamps manifests a desire to reproduce as far as possible the form as well as the semantic content of the semiotic elements used, be they text, engraving or painting. What is offered in effect is a complete and as far as possible authentic documentation of the Revolutionary period, like that which one might find in a well-illustrated and apparently objective history textbook. It is for this reason that, as far as possible, authentic documents and engravings from the 1780s and 90s have been used. So in the series celebrating the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the text of the first seventeen articles has been spread across four stamps which one thus reads as one would the original text. The divisions marked by the stamps’ perforations (eliminated moreover in the Philexfrance version of this set which was presented as an indivisible whole) and by the discreet insertion (once more, vertical) of the device République française, are scarcely noticed by the stamp enthusiast who is rather struck by the unusual
continuity of the text as it spreads across the stamps and the repetition of the
faisceaux d’armes motif reproduced (as on many bicentenary stamps) in the
revolutionary colours. Perhaps even more appealing to collectors is the
second series of Personnages de la Révolution (Fig. 20) in which the mise en
abyme effect of the first is applied to a se-tenant block of stamps. Here the
exploits of Madame Roland, Camille Desmoulins, Condorcet and Kellerman,
individually illustrated in the four stamps, are further elaborated icono-
graphically by the decorative border framing the block: pikes swathed in
tricolors, topped by the Phrygian bonnet and the revolutionary rosette, are
picked out in the same colours as the stamps themselves – red, white, blue
and green: the tricolor crowned with laurels – and therefore further bind
together internal and external iconographic elements. It is through such icons
that the sacred texts and images of democratic and revolutionary France are
proclaimed, conventional indices being relatively marginalized. These stamps
were conceived of course principally for collectors (a fact underlined by
Philexfrance’s close co-operation in their design and launch): elements of
national culture are packaged and marketed to consumers as more or less
autonomous icons to be collected as objects, for themselves.

But marketing aside, what is the ideological function of the iconic
pleonasms that are evident throughout French bicentenary stamps issues?
First, it seems that the superabundance of icons offered reinforces the desired
message (I shall return in a moment to the content of this ‘message’) without
articulating it too clearly or literally. It is for this reason that images
predominate over text – except where the text is itself a sacred icon of the
nation. An attempt has therefore been made to present positive and attractive
images of the French Revolution and to avoid the ambiguities, horrors or
disasters that were also attendant on it. It is as interesting to note in this
respect the images of the French Revolution that have been avoided as those that have been promoted: no, or very few, scenes of violence; no evocation of the guillotine, or scenes of the Terror or even of the storming of the Bastille, the unfortunate Louis XVI is absent from the scene except in the stamp devoted to Drouet (in the first Personnages célèbres de la Révolution series, Fig. 20) where the monarch is glimpsed in the background as he tries to make his escape from France with Marie-Antoinette. There are no battle scenes (despite the presence of Kellerman in the second Personnages célèbres series) except for the Journée des tuiles at Grenoble which is reproduced after a nineteenth-century painting which reduces somewhat the violence of the scene. Rather do we see proposed a plethora of 'documents' and of engravings; in other words, the Bicentenary propaganda is pursued rather as it was at the time, using emblems and caricatures, except that in 1989 the revolutionary pikes are purely symbolic and visual images have for the most part been transformed by art and been tamed in the process. The stamps of the Bicentenary, like modern French politicians, speak therefore essentially the language of gestures – rhetorical or theatrical. They prefer conventions and declarations, allegorical representations (based, as I have said, as far as possible on authentic period documents) which draw general and relatively uncritical assent. Like the propaganda of the revolutionary period itself, the stamps themselves illustrate the various ways in which the ideological image can be constructed, that is, in particular through the synthesis of a number of

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8 In 1971, a French stamp in the Histoire de France series reproduced La Prise de la Bastille after a print by Monnet; see Y et T no. 1680.
iconographical elements (logos, emblems, coats of arms, etc.) and the reduction to a strict minimum of textual elements. The very fact of re-inventing the image of Marianne, who in 1989 is reborn as a fashion model, is sufficient to confirm that the myth of itself that France presents to the world has not substantially changed, that it is still the same country with the same generous and democratic aspirations as those that inspired the French Revolution, touched up only with a bit of 80s glamour. This message is, in theory, reinforced millions of times each week when citizens of the Hexagon and of the overseas départements stick their little squares of coloured paper on to envelopes or parcels and send them to destinations in France or abroad.