

Does a 5-Centavos Violet Black ‘Babyhead’ Issue Exist? If So, Is it Rare?

by Don Peterson

A 5 centavos “violet black” “babyhead” stamp (**FIGURE 1**) is occasionally listed in auction catalogues or on Ebay (as it was recently), where it is often described as “rare” – sometimes selling for \$200-400. Yet, this color is not listed in “primary” references from the late 19th and early 20th century. It is not listed in the Scott Catalogue (not as “violet black” anyway), but it is listed in Edifil, Stanley Gibbons, and Minkus as a separate “violet black” issue at a high catalogue value.



FIGURE 1. 5 Centavos “Violet Black” Issue.

There is much confusion regarding this stamp. However, to keep you from any further suspense, **YES**, it exists. **NO**, it is not rare. First of all, it is a dark color variety of Scott #152 (5 centavos “dark olive gray” 1890 issue). Scott # 152 is valued at .70 mint and 1.10 used in the 2008 Scott Catalogue. Secondly, it is not uncommon to find mint and used “violet black” stamps, and also on cover. I have several such stamps in my collection, several in my extra’s stockbook, and one on cover (**FIGURE 2**). Thus, there are plenty of examples to study. It definitely is not rare, although in the confusing world of “scarcity” terminology, I might call it an “uncommon” color variety. Finally, from the very beginning, this 5 centavos stamp, and its dark color variety, have been mis-described. For example, Scott #152 is currently described as “dark olive gray”. However, it should be “slate green”, as it was in most “primary” references. The dark color variety, often referred to as “violet black”, should instead be called “dark slate green”. However, to reduce confusion, I will continue to refer to the dark color variety as “violet black” throughout the remainder of this article (at least until the conclusion). My analysis of this issue is as follows.

When was the Stamp Issued?

It is important to know when this stamp was issued. Knowing the year of issue substantially reduces the scope of the search for the stamp. One indicator of the date of issuance of an 1890 stamp is the gum type. The gum type of all Scott #152s, including the dark color variety, is Type A (Peterson, 1985). Stamps with Type A gum were only issued between 1890 and 1892.

Further, the date of issuance of most 1890s Spanish Philippine stamps can be narrowed down by its cliché type, which is characteristically unique to certain time periods. The cliché types were first described by Bartels et al. (1904) and Palmer (1912). However, Peterson (1984 and 1998) provided a more detailed description and summary of all 1890-1897 issues.



FIGURE 2. 1890 (june 18) Manila to Erfurt, Germany with two 2 centavos stamps and a 5 centavos “violet black” stamp (right side).

Two different cliché types exist (**FIGURE 3**). Type I cliché, which has shaded scroll cups in the corners, only occurs on the 1890-1891 issues. Type II cliché, which has a thin scroll line, only occurs on 1892 through 1897 issues. Some issues between 1892-1896 have both types. However, both types only occur on full sheets consisting of two panes - where one pane is Type I, and the other Type II.



FIGURE 3
 Type I Cliché Scroll with shaded cups. Type II Cliché Scroll in thin line.

A full sheet of Scott #152 consists of a 10 by 10 sheet of 100 stamps. Inspection of Scott #152s, including its dark color variety, reveals that they all have a Type I cliché. Thus, the stamp was issued in 1890 or 1891. However, since no 5 centavos stamps were issued in 1891, the stamp was issued in 1890. Therefore, some current catalogues, which indicate that the dark color variety was issued in 1892 or later, such as Edifil, Stanley Gibbons and Minkus, are incorrect.

The Problem of Color.

Every stamp collector has been frustrated from time to time with stamp colors. Most stamp catalogues cannot agree on stamp colors, particularly catalogues produced in different countries or in different languages (e.g., Edifil (in Spanish), Stanley Gibbons, Minkus, etc.) or in different centuries (e.g., 1896 Mencarini and 2008 Scott, etc.). Get a group of collectors together and they will not agree on color. Try to get agreement on what to call various shades of red, green, or blue. It's impossible. Regarding "violet black", some catalogues refer to "black"; while others call it "blackish". What do they mean? If you look at so-called "black" stamps, you may note that they are not all the same color. As it turns out, there are many shades of "black". "Violet" is a color in never-never land. It is somewhere between red and blue. Stamp color guides are equally confusing — some are too complex, others are too simple. Several popular color guides don't even show "violet black". Nonetheless, I confess that I am also resigned to rely on color guides. My personal guidance is: be cautious about "hanging your hat" solely on a color hook. I try to find other collaborating evidence. Furthermore, analysis of "violet black" stamps reveal that they are closely related to the primary color (in the light spectrum) "green", not the secondary color "violet". The term "violet" should not be any part of this stamp's color description.

There are color variations of every 1890-1897 issue. Some are subtle, while others are significant. Whether a color variation is subtle or significant, it can result from (1) different printings of the same stamp (e.g., Scott #142, 144, 153, 162, etc.), or (2) variations from the same printing (e.g., Scott #141, 150, 179, 180, etc.). The color variations of Scott #152 occur within the same printing. Based on my inspection of "violet black" stamps, it appears that about 20% of Scott #152s are a dark shade variety.

What do the Primary References Say?

My next step was to review the earliest references of this stamp. These earliest references are referred to as "primary" references. Primary references were usually written near the time of issuance of the stamps, and are usually the most authoritative accounts. Most authors of primary references lived in or regularly visited the Philippines, where they obtained first-hand knowledge about the stamps. **TABLE 1** lists six primary references associated with 5 centavos "dark olive gray" issue in chronological order.

TABLE 1. Comparison of "Primary" References Regarding the 5 Centavos "Dark Olive Gray" Issue

Catalogue/ Source	Cat. #	Cat. Value	Year Date	Stamp Color	Quantity	Others/Comments
Duro (1890)	160	.30/.30 pta.	1890	gris verdoso (greenish gray)	---	Cat. value low. Considered common.
Cotter y Quinto (1895)	159	.50/.25 cent.	1890	gris verdoso (greenish gray)	---	Cat. value low. Considered common.
Mencarini (1896)	163	---	1890	verde aceituna (olive green)	120,000	
Bartels et al. (1904)	187	---	1890 Jan.1	slate green, deep slate green	120,000	First listing of a "deep" color variation and Type I cliché.
Hanciau (1905)	---	---	1890 Jan.1	Bronze-green	---	
Palmer (1912)	161	---	1890 Jan.1	slate green, in shades	120,000	Lists this stamp with Type I cliché.

"---" means that the information was not available in the reference.

None of the late 19th and early 20th century primary references listed a “violet black” issue. However, all of them listed an 1890 issue in “greenish gray”, “slate green”, or related color. Bartels et al. (1904) was the first to recognize that the 1890 issue had a dark color variety, and listed the colors as “slate green, deep slate green”. Hanciau (1905) listed the stamp as “bronze green”, which is darker. Palmer (1912) listed the color as “slate green, in shades”. None of the early references indicated there were any additional printings of this issue. All data indicated that the color variations came from the same printing. Several references, beginning with Mencarini (1896) stated that 120,000 stamp were printed (of all shades), which is not a particularly small printing. No primary reference indicated that a dark shade of slate green or related dark variety was issued after 1890.

Other late 19th and early 20th century catalogues were also reviewed, such as Friederich (1894), Kohl, and Moens. None of these specifically listed a 5 centavos “violet black” color variation from any year.

How is the “Violet Black” Issue Treated in Current Worldwide Catalogues?

The earliest catalogue to list a “violet black” issue was **Galvez** (1900), where it listed an 1890 low-valued 5 centavos “gris verdos”(greenish gray) issue (#194), and an 1892-93 high-valued 5 centavos “violeta” (presumably meaning “violet black” issue (#211). In Galvez (1950-51) and later catalogues, both stamps were still listed, but the high-valued issue was now an 1892 “violeta negra” issue, which is not consistent with primary references.

Edifil (2002) does not list any 5 centavos “dark olive gray” (or shade) issue in 1890, which is inconsistent with primary references. However, it lists a (1) low-valued 5 centavos “blackish green” issue in 1891-1893 (#95), and (2) high-valued 5 centavos “blackish violet” issue in 1891-93 (#96) – neither of which are supported by primary references.

In the late 19th century through 1966, **Stanley Gibbons** Catalogue correctly listed a 5 centavos “slate green” stamp (#161), but incorrectly stated it was issued in 1889. However, in 1968, Stanley Gibbons first listed an additional 1892 high-value “violet black” issue, which is not consistent with primary references regarding year of issue and color.

The **Minkus** Catalogues (1957 to present) list a high-valued 1892 “black violet” issue (#188), in which the date and stamp color are inconsistent with primary references. However, it also (and correctly) includes the low-valued 1890 “slate green” issue (#168).

In the late 19th century, the **Scott** Catalogue chaotically listed this stamp in various colors and years of issue. In fact, for several years, it listed all the “babyheads” (except the 1898 issues) as being issued (incorrectly) in 1889. The 1902 Scott Catalogue listed the low-valued 1890 stamp (#73) as “dark olive”, which is a more accurate color descriptor than in the current Scott Catalogue. However, the 1912 Catalogue changed the color to “dark olive gray”, which it has been ever since (#152).

Harradine (1987) and Peterson (2005) were also checked to determine if a “violet black” stamp existed as a proof. However, no evidence of a 5 centavos “violet black” proof exists.

Conclusions

1. A “dark olive gray” or “slate green” 5 centavos stamp was issued in 1890 (Scott #152), confirmed by early primary references.
2. A dark shade variety of #152, currently referred in some current catalogues as “violet black”, exists, which was first incorrectly identified as a separate issue by Galvez (1900). Some modern catalogues continue to perpetuate this mistake.
3. The dark shade variety came from the same printing.
4. The dark shade variety is not rare, but should be considered “uncommon”.
5. The color of #152 in the Scott Catalogue should be revised to be “slate green”, instead of “dark olive gray”.

6. The dark shade variety of Scott #152 should be referred to as "dark slate green", rather than "violet black". All shades of Scott #152 are closely related to the "primary" color (in the light spectrum) "green", not from the secondary color "violet".
7. Like other color variations of the 1890s issues, the "dark slate green" color variety should not be listed in the Scott Catalogue, but should be listed in specialized catalogues, where most color varieties are listed.

References

The references for this article included review of numerous catalogues, such as Kohl, Moens, M. Galvez, Edifil, Stanley Gibbons, Minkus, and Scott; as well as the following specialized catalogues and articles:

- Bartels, J. M., F. A. Foster, and Captain F. L. Palmer. *Postage Stamps of the Philippines*. Boston. 1904.
- Cotter, Balbino and Francisco de Quinto. *Catalogo Descriptivo De Los Sellos De Correos Telegrafos y Tarjetas Postales De Las Islas Filipinas*. Manila. 1895.
- Duro, Antonio Fernandez. *Segunda Edicion Del Catalogo Descriptivo De Los Sellos De Correos De Espana y Sus Colonias*. Madrid. 1890.
- Friederich, Rudolf. *Die Postwertzeichen Spaniens und seiner Kolonien*. Berlin. 1884.
- Galvez, M. *Catalogo Galvez: Sellos de Correos y Telegrafos*. Segundo Edicion. Madrid. 1900. Other Galvez catalogues include the 1950-51 and 1962-63 editions.
- Hanciau, L. "The Postal Issues of the Spanish Colony of the Philippines". *Stanley Gibbons Monthly Journal*. London. February 28, 1906.
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