



Collecting Complexity

A Quandary of Quetzals - Part 1



What a lovely bird. The picture doesn't do it full justice for as well as its glowing plumage, its tail is longer than its body. The Resplendent Quetzal; resplendent because of that greeny gold iridescence as well as its other rich red, black and white plumage. For the ornithologists - Genus *Pharomachrus* or Quetzals, and of the Trogon family.

Its name comes from the Nahuatl (Aztec/Mayan) language and means, "tall upstanding plume." Yes, it was highly sought after for its feathers, not just to wear, but used as money too. It is only found in the mountainous parts of Central America, roughly from southern Mexico, through Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica to western Panama. A shy, and threatened species, now on the Red List.

Given the Mayan background, the Quetzal has remained an important aspect of Guatemalan culture. It forms part of Guatemalan folklore. It's their national bird; it's on the country's coat-of-arms; it appears on the national flag; indeed, just as the feathers were once a form of payment, since 1925 even their main unit of currency is called the Quetzal. Quetzals are a big thing in Guatemala.



In philatelic terms, we are back with one country and one bird again, but this time appearing in many different guises across a large number of editions. The Quetzal can be found forming part of the design in Guatemalan stamps issued from 1879 until 2007. That's 128 years. I know one appeared in a mini-sheet in late 2008, but it was part of the border surround not the actual featured stamp.

Within this period, I have identified scores of distinct design types using the Quetzal, consisting of 354 individual stamps. Taking used as well as mint (if you are lucky enough to find them), that's over 700 stamps, but add in colour variations - there's lots - blocks, cover

combinations, postmarks with heaps of varieties, faults and forgeries, and you can probably double, or perhaps even treble that figure again.

Yes, we are talking a lot of stamps here. So many in fact, that I don't think it is possible to do justice to them in just one article. Normally, the logical approach to this quandary would be to break things up into historical periods, but as we shall see, that doesn't work very neatly for this bird. So, I have adopted a different approach.

Whilst there are 35 distinct designs types I believe that some of them can be placed into two distinct groups. These include the iconic Quetzal design, the bird on a pedestal - I call these the "Classic Quetzals" - and then there are those with the coat of arms, normally referred to as the, "National Emblem" design. See figures 1 and 2 below.



Fig.1 - Classic Quetzal



Fig.2 - National Emblem

Together, these two basic formats can be found in at least thirteen separate designs, amounting to 141 separate stamps. That's nearly 40% of all stamps issued with Quetzals. I think this justifies singling them out to examine their complexities more closely.



Fig.3 - 1879 1/4r issue

As there is far too much material than could be covered in just one article, I have divided them up into two separate parts, starting with the classic Quetzal design. This is designated as Type 5 in the SG catalogue and whilst it's the more straightforward of the two formats, its issues span a much longer period of time.

The first two, a well known pair of a quarter Real brown and green, and 1 Real Black and green were issued in 1879. (see figure 3 above) Note, they have the legend "CORREOS DE GUATEMALA" in the oval surround to the design. They were repeated in July two years later with an overprinted surcharge of 1 cent for the quarter Real and 10 cents for the one Real. As well as the overprint to distinguish them, the originals were perforated 12 but the surcharges 11.5.

Later in 1881, the surcharges were replaced with five new values in cents and all perforated 12. Figure 1 is an example of this issue and Table.1 below gives the details, however, now observe the change in legend to: "UNION POSTAL UNIVERSAL GUATEMALA".

Table.1 - 1881 Classic Quetzal Issues

Value	Colour	Perf
1c	Black & green	12
2c	Brown & green	12
5c	Orange red & green	12
10c	Greyish purple & green	12
20c	Yellow & green	12

And that was that for the time being until, out of the blue, Guatemala issued one further stamp but with a modified design in 1924. SG refer to it as Type 83 but it is clearly based on the original design. It is a higher value 1 Pesos, but only in one colour, described as bluish green, although I personally think it closer to a slate grey. As you can see from figure 4 below, whilst keeping to the same design formula, it is quite distinctive and could not be confused with any of the previous issues. Note the “UPU 1924” script beneath the value.



Fig.4 - 1924 Issue

Another gap, and then two more classic Quetzals were issued in 1935, both 3 cents and perforation 12 but with a further twist to the design. With the same values, they have similar colouring - carmine and bluish green, and reddish orange and bluish green, but side by side are easy to tell apart.



Fig.5 - 1935 issue & 1937 Overprint

These are SG Type 121 and they were to reappear two years later overprinted and surcharged for the Philatelic exhibition for that year - “EXPOSICION FILATELICA 1937.” Examples of both are provided in figure 5 above.

Both in typography and ornamentation I think the 1935/37 issues are very “thirties” in design with touches of Art Deco about them. However, in 1939 there is a step back towards the original arrangement with two more bi-colour 3 cent issues. One is yellowish brown and green, the other reddish orange and green. They are very “Type 5” in appearance, but the perforation this time is 12.75 and the ascription simplified again to just, “CORREOS DE GUATEMALA.” They are easy to distinguish because as well as the perforation, they are a little squarer in format and the tail of the Quetzal extends outside the encompassing oval.

This and the 1935/37 issues are the only designs that follow this pattern. Figure 6 shows examples of both stamps.



Fig.6 - 1939 issues

Another long gap and then in 1951 an imperforate sheetlet (111 x 69mm) was issued for the 75th anniversary of the UPU, although why late I am uncertain. It shows the first two stamps issued, including the classic quetzal with the values 1 cent and 10 cents. See figure 7 below. This sheet was to reappear again in 1972, but overprinted "JUEGOS OLIMPICOS" with Olympic symbols, all in orange/red, for the Munich Olympic Games.



Fig.7 - 1951 Imperforate sheet

And that seemed to be that. Except it wasn't. In fact, things now liven up again. In 1954 another classic Quetzal was issued. Some catalogues, including SG, lump the issuing dates into one or two parcels, but in fact perhaps 23 stamps, plus an overprint came out between 1954 and 1987 - a thirty three year period. I say perhaps 23 stamps, when my SG simplified gives less and the Free Catalogue and Scharning suggest more but don't quite agree on the final figure. All made quite delightful by the replication of certain values. So, this is where some of the identification fun begins!

As a group they are effectively the traditional Type 5 design again, perhaps in a slightly squarer format but crisply printed on better quality papers. In fact, they are distinctive because they are well printed. They look clean and tidy and, well, almost facsimiles. Take a look at the couple in figure 8 below and then compare them with figure 9 next to them and I think you should see what I mean.



Fig.8 - 3c 1954-87 issues



Fig.9 - 2c 1881 issue

The later issues have a clear imprint at the bottom; they have a crisp print quality; they are well centred; the inner ring of the oval surround is simply lined and not dotted; the values are only given in figures at the top and the currency is written as just, “CENTAVOS” without the value as well; in addition, the value figures for these issues are always in a circular scroll design, while the originals are sometimes circular, but sometimes rectangular; and finally, they are obviously mono-colour not dual. Easy.

As far as I can determine, they were issued normally as one or two at a time through the rest of the 50’s, the 60’s and then, after a gap, again in the 80’s. Scharning gives the last stamp to be issued as the 2c blue in March 1987. There is nothing after that except an image for the stamp on stamp high values with the 75th anniversary of the Guatemalan Philatelic Association. That was it. At least for now.

Table.2 - Classic Quetzals 1954 - 1987

Values	SG Catalogue	Free Catalogue	Scharning
1c	Blue	Bluish violet	Blue
1c	Green	Green	Green
2c	Violet	Violet	Violet
2c	Brown	NO MATCH	Brown
2c	Blue	Blue	Blue
3c	Red	Carmine rose	Red
3c	NO MATCH	Red	Red
3c	Blue	Ultramarine	Blue
3c	NO MATCH	Light blue	Light blue
3c	Brown	Brown	Brown
3c	Orange	Orange	Orange
3c	Green	Olive green	Green
3c	NO MATCH	Vermilion	Vermilion
4c	Orange	Orange	Orange
4c	Violet	Violet	Violet
4c	Brown	Brown	Brown
5c	Brown	Brown	Brown
5c	Red	Reddish orange	Red
5c	Green	Bluish green	Green
5c	Grey	NO MATCH	Grey
5c	Mauve	Mauve	Mauve
6c	Green	Olive green	Green
6c	Blue	Blue	Blue

I have a spreadsheet with the precise issue dates, but about half are 50’s/60’s and the other half in the 80’s. But I wouldn’t worry about the dates, it’s the proliferation of the same values and colour similarities that can give a headache. I have produced a table based on all the listings above. Scharning’s list, the Free Catalogue (largely derived from Scott) and the SG simplified largely agree with one another, but there are some mismatches and the precision of colour description can be confusing.

You can see from Table 2 that the main area for possible confusion lies with the 3 cent issues. For a start there appear to be no less than eight issues with this value, the bulk of them coming out in the eighties. But some of them clash. There are two reds, one issued in 1957 and another in 1984, followed by a vermilion in 1986. Side by side, the 1957 red is a tad darker and the Free Catalogue/Scott more accurately describes the colour as carmine Rose. And the 1984 orange and the 1986 vermilion whilst discernible, are nevertheless also relatively close. Oh, dear. So, care needed here. Take a look with figures 10 to 13.



Fig.10 - 1957 3c Red

Fig.11 - 1984 3c Red

Fig.12 - 1986 3c Vermilion



Fig.13 - 1984 3c Orange

And then there are the blues. There is one in 1957 followed by a light blue in 1984. Easier perhaps? I am not so sure. Scott gives the colour of the earlier stamp as ultramarine, which seems fair, but does it help? Examine figures 14 and 15 and decide for yourselves. Guatemala never provided issue dates on these stamps, so in the end you have to fall upon your own judgement and experience.



Fig.14 - 1957 3c Blue

Fig.15 - 1984 3c Light blue

Oh, and I almost forgot the one overprint. This was issued in 1964 and uses the 4 cent orange. It is overprinted, "HOMENAJE A LA IS.G.C. 1948-1963," and is to commemorate the

15th anniversary of the International Society of Guatemala Collectors. A small but appropriate slap on the back for dedicated collectors of Guatemalan stamps. With the two imperforate sheets, that now makes 42 stamps in total, nearly 16% of all Quetzal issues . Also see figure 16 below, with apologies for the quality of the image.



Fig.16 - 1964 0/ptd

These are famous stamps, classical in every respect and with a world-wide following of collectors. Like many Guatemalan stamps they are usually inexpensive and relatively easy to acquire, although that is no doubt less the case with varieties and cover combinations. That said, there are few rarities. The most famous are the inverted Quetzals of the 1881 issues, found on the 2, 5 and 20 centavos values, and of which only a few hundred are believed to exist. (See figure 17) Nice to have perhaps, but dream on.



Fig.17 - Inverted Quetzal

Both the Scott classic and general catalogues are extremely good on most Central and South American stamps and Guatemala is no exception. As I have already indicated, the Free Catalogue tends to aver to Scott as well. I have found both extremely useful. In addition, there are specialised books and catalogues with the International Society of Guatemala Collectors. Their journal is even called *El Quetzal*. A link to their website is provided here:-

<http://www.guatemalastamps.com/>

But there are others to seek as well as the classic type. I did say there are a lot of these stamps. And what adds to their fascination, certainly with the earlier ones, is that they were well designed and printed (in the UK as well as the US) and the large number of surcharges and overprints, some with typographical errors, makes for a gold mine for those collecting complexity.

The Resplendent Quetzal might be a threatened, scarce, shy and retiring bird, but they sure crop up in large numbers in the Guatemalan philatelic world. Wait for part two to see even more.

