

...MORE ANCIENT THAN THE GOLDEN FLEECE...

by Alexandru Rusanda, Chairman
connecting the threads from April 2015 and April 2025



In the April 2025 issue, MPC President Ken Elston presented a stamp issued in Belgium in 1959 depicting the Order of the Golden Fleece. Ken also referred to an article in the April 2015 issue, in which he had published information about the same Order and possible Masonic connections, as the Order is mentioned in Masonic ritual. In issue 148 of April 2015, a stamp issued in Belgium, also in 1959, was presented depicting one of the Grand Masters of the Order of the Golden Fleece, namely Philip III, Duke of Burgundy and Ruler of Austria.

In fact, the two stamps, presented separately 10 years apart, form part of the same postal issue.

The “Golden Fleece” stamps from Belgium in 1959 are a set of semi-postal stamps depicting portraits of Grand Masters of the Order of the Golden Fleece. The series was issued as part of the Royal Library of Belgium Fund and includes several stamps featuring historical figures associated with the Order.

The Distinguished Order of the Golden Fleece is a Catholic order of chivalry founded in 1430 in Bruges by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, to celebrate his marriage to Isabella of Portugal. Today, two branches of the Order exist: the Spanish Fleece and the Austrian Fleece. The current Grand Masters are King Felipe VI of Spain and Karl von Habsburg, head of the House of Habsburg-Lorraine, respectively. The Grand Chaplain of the Austrian branch is Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna. The separation of the two existing branches took place as a result of the War of the Spanish Succession of 1701–1714. After the death of Charles the Bold in an attempt to conquer the Duchy of Lorraine caused the extinction of the House of Burgundy in 1477, the Order passed to the House of Habsburg.



A few months after his marriage to the heiress Mary of Burgundy, Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg was knighted in Bruges on 30 April 1478 and was subsequently appointed sovereign (Grand Master) of the Order.

From Emperor Charles V or King Philip II of Spain onwards, the sovereign was on the one hand the head of the Spanish line of the Habsburgs and on the other hand also King of Spain. Charles V was appointed head of the Order at the age of nine and identified himself strongly with this community throughout his life.

Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI was able to claim sovereignty of the Netherlands, the Burgundian heartland, during the War of the Spanish Succession, and thus he could celebrate the Order's festival in Vienna in 1713. As with Maximilian I or Charles V, the Order was again closely associated with the Holy Roman Empire. Regardless of this, the Order was divided into two lines. The Habsburg Order owns the archive and the old insignia and adheres more closely to the original statutes.

With the absorption of the Burgundian lands into the Spanish Habsburg empire, the sovereignty of the Order passed to the Habsburg kings of Spain, where it remained until the death of the last of the Spanish Habsburgs, Charles II, in 1700.



The controversial conferral of the Fleece upon Napoleon and his brother Joseph, whilst Spain was occupied by French troops, angered the exiled King of France, Louis XVIII, and caused him to return his collar in protest.

These and other awards by Joseph were revoked by King Ferdinand VII upon the restoration of Bourbon rule in 1813. Napoleon created, by Order of 15 August 1809, the Order of the Three Golden Fleeces, in view of his sovereignty over Austria, Spain,

and Burgundy. This was opposed by Joseph I of Spain, and appointments to the new order were never made.

In 1812, the acting government of Spain conferred the Fleece upon the Duke of Wellington, an act confirmed by Ferdinand upon his resumption of power, with the approval of Pope Pius VII. Wellington therefore became the first Protestant to be honoured with the Golden Fleece. Sovereignty of the Austrian branch remains with the head of the House of Habsburg, which was handed over on 20 November 2000 by Otto von Habsburg to his elder son, Karl von Habsburg.

The Order celebrates its day on 30 November (feast day of St Andrew the Apostle, patron saint of Burgundy), when new members are accepted.



SHARE YOUR DISCOVERIES

If you have come across interesting Masonic philatelic material in your collecting, we would be pleased to hear about it. Unusual commemoratives, rare cancellations, errors, varieties, or postal history items related to Freemasonry may be of interest to other readers. Articles, research notes, and historical insights are equally welcome.



If you have information about Masonic stamps, or other research findings, please do get in touch. Clear photographs and descriptions can be sent to the editor at masonicphilatelicclub@yahoo.co.uk

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“
To collect is to rescue
things, valuable things,
from neglect, from oblivion,
or simply from the ignoble
destiny of being in someone
else’s collection.

—John Robert Fowles,
English novelist

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