



## **Philatelists: witnesses and agents of the first globalization (1860–1914)**

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Between 1860 and 1914, the world witnessed a degree of unification that would not be seen again until the 1990s. This “first globalization” was characterized by an intertwining of economies and societies ushered in by technological developments such as the advent of a worldwide postal network. Exploring the political, social and cultural views of philatelists of the time appears as a particularly promising way of opening vistas on this phase of world history.

These views were expressed in the philatelic journals published during the period by stamp dealers such as Jean-Baptiste Moens in Belgium, Arthur Maury in France and Frederick William Wurtele in Canada. As these philatelists came from middle-class professional and merchant families, their perspective was unsurprisingly anchored on the twin concepts of progress and civilization that were the cornerstone of the 19th century Western bourgeois worldview. Believing that nothing had contributed more to the civilizational advances of their time than the worldwide low-cost postal service made possible by the invention of the postage stamp, they viewed stamp collecting as an opportunity for the common man to participate in the march toward progress by awakening to a global awareness.

Philatelic editors understood civilization as the emancipation from the material and cultural shackles of pre-industrial times. This enlightenment was seen as originating in Europe, but until the late 1870s, the Western origin of the civilizational process was not yet associated with the idea that Westerners ought to dominate the world, and the philatelic press emphasized openness and discovery rather than conquest in its treatment of stamps from Asia, Africa and the Pacific islands. In the eyes of philatelists, the benefits of Western civilization were so evident that even without colonization, no nation would want to be left behind by progress, as evidenced by the universal adoption of postage stamps that were the harbinger of a world where all people would live in harmony instead of being locked up in egoism and ignorance.

This optimistic outlook was challenged by the Long Depression in which the global economy was mired in the 1870s. The crisis derailed the trend toward internationalism, provoked a rejection of free trade in favour of protectionism, and contributed to the revival of an aggressive colonialism. From the 1880s onward, this shift from universal openness to nationalistic imperialism was reflected in the philatelic press, where Maury openly subscribed to white supremacist theses, while Wurtele struggled to conciliate the humanist and pacifist beliefs inherited from his youth with a deep attachment and keen admiration for the British Empire that was shaping the framework of his adult life.

Wurtele's journal sought to be the school and hub of a virtual global community of philatelic humanists who would play their role as witnesses and agents of globalization, by spearheading the transcending of geographical, linguistic and cultural barriers, albeit under the benevolent aegis of white Anglo-Saxon men who saw themselves at the forefront of civilizational progress as inventors of the postage stamp.