

Security Engravers Group Presentation

Clarence E. Holbert – Designing Eritrea’s Currency

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Introduction

Presented with the idea of a presentation for the Security Engravers Group, I purchased the recommended books about engravers and spent considerable time selecting the subject matter. I always liked the design of Eritrea’s banknotes, and somewhere along the way in my wandering of learning about World banknotes, I discovered Eritrea’s currency was designed by an American working at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, Mr. Clarence E. Holbert. His is a fascinating story that I hope you enjoy as much as I do.

Eritrea

Eritrea is a country unknown to most people. It is located in the Horn of Africa at the southern part of the Red Sea, and bordered by Sudan, Ethiopia, and Djibouti.

During the last century, the area now known as Eritrea was a colony of Italy, captured and administered by the British, and federated with Ethiopia. After a thirty year struggle for independence from Ethiopia, Eritrea declared its independence and gained international recognition in 1993.



Figure 1 - Eritrea and the Horn of Africa

A Dream Come True

This story isn't really about Eritrea, though — Its a story about a African-American man born on January 26, 1944. His name is Clarence E. Holbert. As a child he was constantly drawing and scribbling. He attended what is now The University of the District of Columbia (UDC).

At the UDC, Meredith Rode, one of Holbert's professors at art said, *"I think his work is impressive. It's imaginative and skilled. Clarence is one of the few students I remember out of the thousands I have taught."*¹

Holbert took a job as a security guard at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing during his years in college. He continued to hone his art skill while working as a security guard. *"When I was a guard, anything that had a white surface on it, I would draw on it,"* he said. *"People came by and they would collect them."* Word got around and when a position opened up at the bureau, Holbert was offered a job as an apprentice banknote designer at the Bureau. Holbert jumped at the opportunity and soon was taking part in the rigorous seven year apprenticeship all engravers must undertake.

When the newly independent country of Eritrea came to the U.S. Bureau of Engraving in 1994 to ask for help in designing its currency, the Bureau assigned the task to Holbert. Holbert was surprised to be selected. *"I really didn't know anything about Eritrea,"* he said. *"I couldn't even locate it on a map."* He was also very gratified to take the task. Holbert said the request was a dream come true. *"For years, I had tried to get access to work on U.S. currency because I knew it was history being made — because there are so few times that the American currency has actually been changed. To come up with a new design such as was done in Eritrea, is beyond measure -- just to be able to work on it... I was amazed and I was thrilled to be part of it."*²

Designing Eritrea's Money

Holbert noted, *"With it being a new nation, there was not much material available on the country."* The solution involved recruiting Eritrean artists to take hundreds of photographs of people's everyday lives in different areas of the country. After working on initial designs based on the photographs, Holbert visited Eritrea to get a better understanding of the country.

The University of the District of Columbia

In the 1960's the opportunity for advanced technical training or study for liberal arts degree for the black and poor was an unattainable goal. The Public Education Act (Public Law 89-791) was enacted in 1966, and two schools were established: Federal City College, whose Board of Higher Education was appointed by the Mayor of the District of Columbia, and Washington Technical Institute, whose Board of Vocational Education was appointed by the President of the United States. The mission of both institutions was to serve the needs of the community by directing the resources and knowledge gained through education toward the solution to urban problems. Both schools proudly opened their doors in 1968. The Washington Technical Institute received its accreditation in 1971 and Federal City College in 1974. The schools merged with another school in the mid-1970's to become The University of the District of Columbia.

¹ Quotations and material obtained from "Making money the old-fashioned way" by Justin Jouvenal, Staff Writer, Gazette.Net, Maryland Community Newspapers Online, May 4, 2000

² Quotations and material obtained from "Designing Eritrea's Money was 'Dream Come True' by Charles W. Corey, Washington File Staff Writer, February 12, 2003



Figure 2 – Asmara, Capital of Eritrea

Arriving in the capital of Asmara, Holbert said he immediately realized that Eritrea is an amazing place.

"When I first came there, they were building. I was just amazed that after the war, how they were taking the old war materiel and just making what they needed to meet the everyday needs of the country."

"I was immediately impressed with the informality and friendliness of the Eritrean people," he said. "I was amazed by their building projects underway. Men and women were working alongside each other along with former soldiers."

"I was especially impressed with one gentleman in particular," he said. "When I saw the task in front of him, I realized that he had a character in his personality like everyone else in that country. I quickly realized that these people just had not taken time to sit down and think about failure. That attitude," he noted, "had come about through the long war. There was like a steel resiliency in the people and in this young man that said 'Failure is just not part of what we are looking at. It does not matter how long it will take us to accomplish our goal, we will bring it about.' I was just amazed by that."

Holbert said he had been privileged to meet with the person who authored Eritrea's declaration of independence and constitution. *"I was amazed because I began to realize that I was being allowed to become part of another country as it came into being. Just like our country fought and got our freedom.... I was in awe once I sat down and realized what was actually going on."*

"To me," he added, "it showed the determination of a people to establish an identity for themselves in a world and they have included everybody in it." Holbert proudly noted that all the country's ethnic groups are represented in the designs on the money.

"What makes a country are its people; leaders will come and go."

Veronica Rentmeesters, Information Officer for the Eritrean Embassy in the District of Columbia

The currency, Holbert recalled, "features the everyday people of Eritrea because Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki had given specific instructions that:

- The money could not feature cabinet or government officials or their relatives —The new money should reflect the common people.
- The money could not feature images of war.
- They money must all be the same size and color scheme — The people should look at the note to determine the denomination rather than judging the denomination by the size of the note or color scheme³. Holbert indicates the president wanted to increase the literacy rate of the country, which was at 20% at the time.

³ The 2004 Issue deviates from the directive — The color scheme is consistent throughout the issue, by the size of each denomination varies by size.

Holbert spent 3½ years on the task researching, planning, designing and traveling to understand the country and create the currency. He spent long hours in area libraries researching the country and made several trips to Eritrea to explore its bustling markets, traditional ox and plow agriculture and its budding industry. Holbert even rode a camel during one trip, which is one of the country's primary modes of transportation — The camel appears as the watermark for the Eritrean notes.

With his research complete, Holbert settled on a design for the bills and coins that he said featured two of the strongest aspects of the country — Eritrea's women and its rare animals. While all the bills are the same color and size, Holbert said, they do "*tie together*" in their design.

On the front of each Eritrean bill, Holbert depicted a picture of a common Eritrean woman. Women played an essential role in the battle for Eritrea's independence, he said. According to a video put together by the Eritrean government, 30 percent of the freedom fighters in Eritrea's war for independence were female. The video also said women played a large role in keeping families together during the war.

On one of his trips to Asmara, Holbert said "I was there at the airport after a long flight from Washington. I was paged and I raised my hand to answer the page. The Eritreans who met me at the airport came over and hugged me. One of them told me 'You don't know how good it made us feel to see that it was one of us who designed our currency.' The very next morning," he said, "a person very high up in the government came to my hotel, hugged me and said, 'Welcome home.'"

"That melted my heart. Being a black American in the United States — you know — the things you go through... doing such a deed for the people of Eritrea, made me feel good that the country has embraced me."

State of Eritrea's Notes

Holbert chose a triptych portrait for the front of the notes. A "triptych" is a work of art (usually a panel painting) which is divided into three sections, or three carved panels, which are hinged together and folded. In a portrait, a triptych depicts three subjects side by side, the lateral ones being usually subordinate, though connected in subject.

The notes depict Eritrean fighters raising the (Eritrea People's Liberation Front) EPLF flag — Very reminiscent to American soldiers raising the flag on Iwo Jima.

The Bank of Eritrea logo is depicted on the back of each note.



P1 - Bank of Eritrea 1 Nakfa Note, 1997 Issue,

Issue Date: 24 May 1997

Front: Three girls at center, flag raising at left

Back: Children in bush school at center right

Watermark: Camel head

Printer: Giesecke & Devrient, Germany

Size: 140 x 70 mm



P2 - Bank of Eritrea 5 Nakfa Note,

Issue Date: 1997 Issue, 24 May 1997

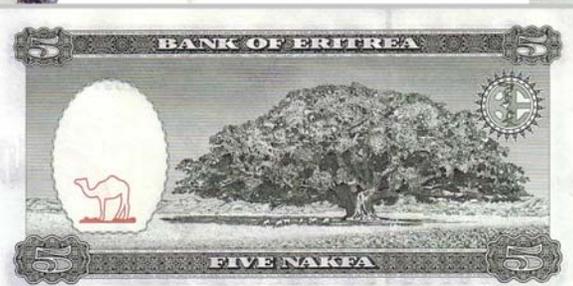
Front: Young boy, young man, and older man at center, flag raising at left, OVD (Optically Variable Device) Kinegram® vertical foil at left

Back: Cattle grazing under huge Jacaranda tree at center right

Watermark: Camel head

Printer: Giesecke & Devrient, Germany

Size: 140 x 70 mm





P 3 - Bank of Eritrea 10 Nakfa Note, 1997 Issue

Issue Date: 24 May 1997

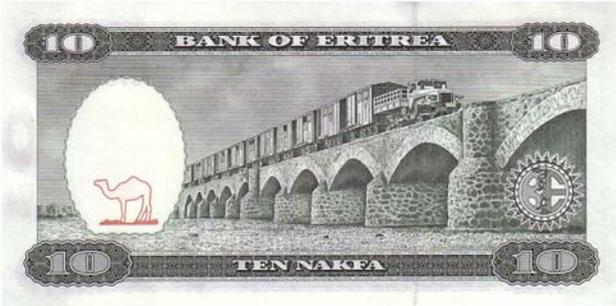
Front: Three girls at center, flag raising at left, OVD (Optically Variable Device) Kinegram® vertical foil at left

Back: Truck on rails hauling box cars across viaduct over the Dogali River at center right

Watermark: Camel head

Printer: Giesecke & Devrient, Germany

Size: 140 x 70 mm



P4 - Bank of Eritrea 20 Nakfa Note, 1997 Issue

Issue Date: 24 May 1997

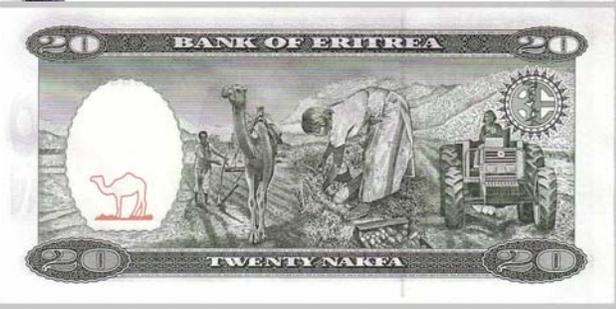
Front: Three girls at center, flag raising at left, OVD (Optically Variable Device) Kinegram® vertical foil at left

Back: Farmer plowing with a camel, woman harvesting, woman on farm tractor at center right

Watermark: Camel head

Printer: Giesecke & Devrient, Germany

Size: 140 x 70 mm





P7 - Bank of Eritrea 50 Nakfa Note, 2004 Issue

Issue Date: 24 May 2004

Front: Three girls at center, flag raising at left, OVD (Optically Variable Device) Kinegram® vertical foil at left

Back: Ships in Port of Masawa at center right

Watermark: Camel head

Printer: Giesecke & Devrient, Germany

Size: 143 x 71 mm



P8 - Bank of Eritrea 100 Nakfa Note, 2004 Issue

Issue Date: 24 May 2004

Obverse: Three girls at center, flag raising at left, OVD (Optically Variable Device) Kinegram® vertical foil at left

Reverse: Farmers plowing with oxen at center right

Watermark: Camel head

Printer: Giesecke & Devrient, Germany

Size: 147 x 72 mm



But, Wait! There's more...

Clarence Holbert also designed the coins for Eritrea's money and he designed several stamps during his time at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.



Scott# 2523A

Issue Date: July 4, 1991

Designer, Typographer, and Modeler: Clarence Holbert



Federal Duck Stamp Program

Issue Date: 1983

Designer and Modeler: Clarence Holbert



Federal Duck Stamp Program

Issue Date: 1996

Modeler: Clarence Holbert



Federal Duck Stamp Program

Issue Date: 1990

Designer and Modeler: Clarence Holbert



Federal Duck Stamp Program

Issue Date: 1986

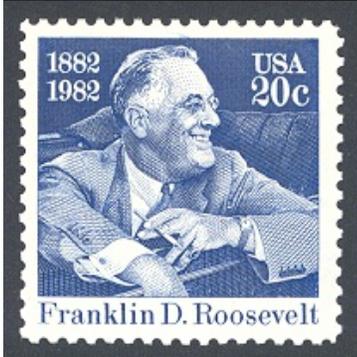
Designer and Modeler: Clarence Holbert



Federal Duck Stamp Program

Issue Date: 1978

Designer and Modeler: Clarence Holbert



Franklin D. Roosevelt Stamp

100th Anniversary of Birth

Issue Date: January 30, 1982

Designer: Clarence Holbert

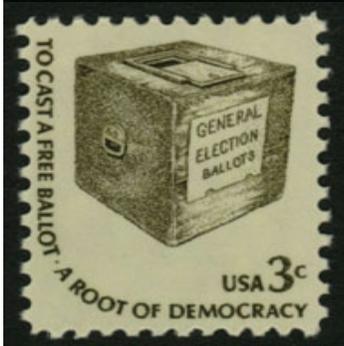


Head, Statue of Liberty

"I Lift My Lamp Beside the Golden Door"

Issue Date: March 31, 1978

Designer and Modeler: Clarence Holbert



Early Ballot Box

"To Cast a Free Ballot - A Root of Democracy"

Designer and Modeler: C. Holbert

Introducing Clarence E. Holbert

Mr. Holbert retired from the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in 1998. Holbert held one of only five slots the bureau has for engravers and was the second of three African Americans to hold the position in the history of the government agency. Truly, he should be an inspiration for all.

"I feel like God blessed me with my career"

- Clarence E. Holbert

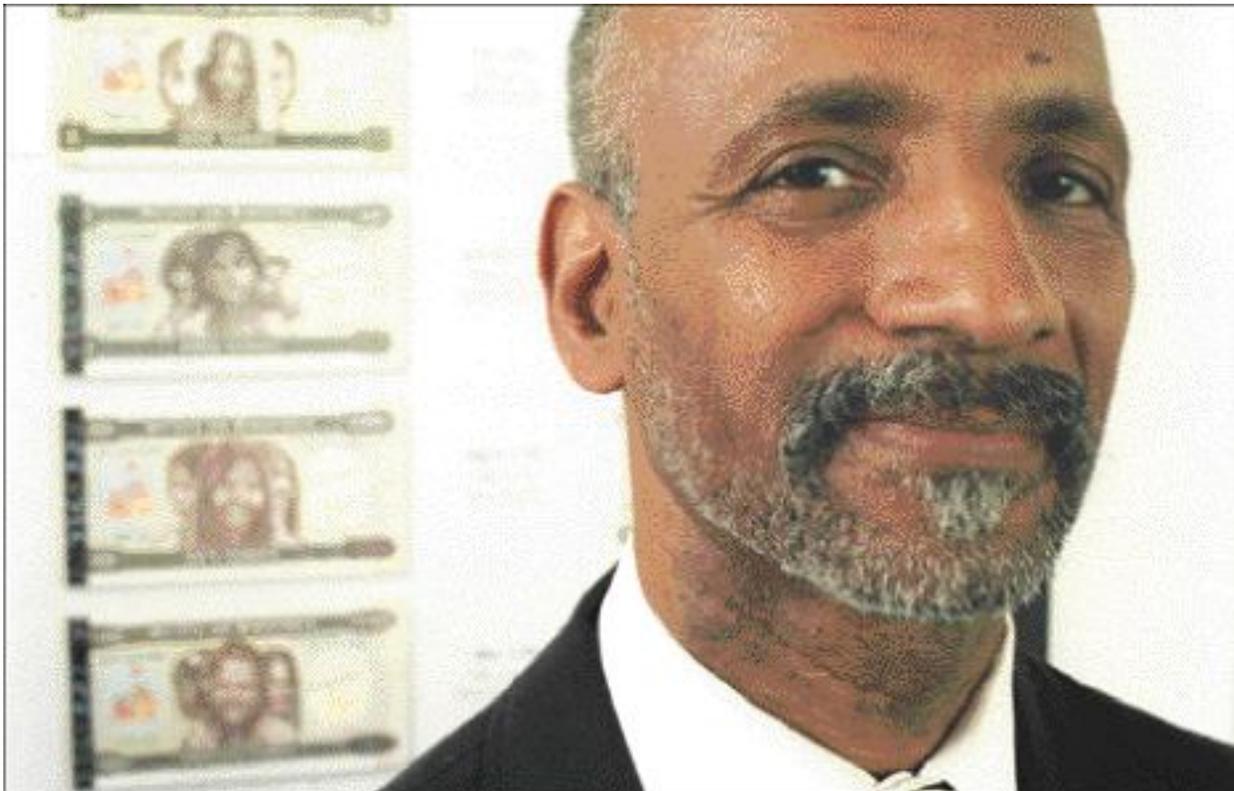


Figure 3 - Photograph of Clarence E. Holbert standing in front of Eritrea's Money exhibit at UDC Art Gallery