

Ammonite Sits on Fancy Killer

Ammonites are extinct marine molluscs related to squid and octopus and they look quite similar to the modern nautilus. The name derives from the spiral shape of the shell as it looks like a coiled ram's horn and was originally given the name by the Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (23 AD - 79 AD). He called them *Ammonis coruna* after the Egyptian god Ammon's ram's horns.



Pliny the Elder
Roman Naturalist

One fancy killer design has an image quite similar to an ammonite in the center of an 8 petaled flower. One story I've heard on the design origin is that it was used in cities and towns where ammonite fossils had been found. In the case of at least one city, it's plausible.

Fancy killers (cancels) were used from the 1850s through the 1900s to render U.S. postage stamps invalid for reuse. They were often made by postmasters of third class post offices as they paid for their own supplies. They used locally obtainable materials such as corks or wood blocks and cut designs into them, or bought ready-made devices, commercially produced using vulcanized rubber. These devices incorporated geometric designs of crosses or stars, objects such as shields, more elaborate designs like a skull and crossbones or even images of people and animals.

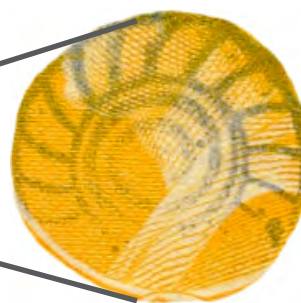


Fossilized Ammonite
Commemorative issue of
Liechtenstein, printed by the
Austrian Government Printing House

Although killers appear on banknotes of the period, the scarcer examples are on U.S. official stamps of the departments of the federal government.



Ammonite
Fancy Hand Cancel



Scan enlargement

Government departments had field offices which used official stamps and sent mail through the local post office. For instance, in the case of the Department of Agriculture, pre-stamped return envelopes were provided to farmers so they might report issues concerning seed orders and other agricultural issues. Although covers bearing the design exist where the city of use can be verified, no cover has been reported on official mail bearing this design.