

Test Notes – General Guide

I only recently discovered how similar of collecting interest Souvenir Card collecting and Test & Promotional Notes / Advertising Sheets collecting is. Both groups collect well engraved vignettes found on bank notes, but found elsewhere! The modern test notes offer intaglio printing and a multitude of security devices on bank note paper (cotton) and polymer substrate, usually two-sided. I now collect cards and test notes.

A new collecting friend at the SCCS suggested a short article on test note information and values to avoid the dreaded “buyer’s remorse”, so here goes!

General Information. Most would-be collectors want to know the extent of material and a range of values one might expect. The latest catalog published in March listed 209 different firms with 1700+ test notes, not counting varieties of nearly twice this number. 7 months later there are 215 firms and over 2000 test notes attributed. Test notes are a very dynamic collecting area. Many notes are available in the \$10 range, topping out at new world record test note that yielded \$42,000 at auction this August. A huge range, for sure. Most modern test notes would fall in the \$25 to \$150 range.

When I produced the first Catalog of Test Notes some 15 years ago, I did not include valuations. This was partially because I had no decent database of sales prices and partially because one of my large ATM collection contributors did not wish to provide values. His reasoning was he would be able to continue acquire new samples at favorable rates. While the main thrust of starting the catalog was to provide a common set of catalog numbers for a new specialty, the other use I could not ignore is providing a baseline of values for the new collector. Both of these reasons together would hopefully cause test note collecting to grow. *Collectors need some confidence of what is available and what it should be worth.* There is so much material that the catalog has morphed into two catalogs, one for printers’ material and one for ATM material.

Catalog System. I knew from the start there would be “holes” to fill of known test note series. Because of this, I started each new type with an advance of 10 numbers. Example: ABNC-101 (first American Bank Note Company note cataloged), ABNC-111 (the 2nd new type). Test notes and promotional sheets very often lack two items taken for granted by bank note and souvenir card collectors – a date and a denomination. Most currency catalogs advance their numbering system based on these two criteria. What is left to group test notes together is a theme. Often this takes the form of a certain vignette, security device or event.

Valuing Notes Assigning values in a catalog is trickier than it would seem. As much as I use the “Pick” catalogs named after the first author Albert Pick, these now 3 Standard Catalog of World Paper Money issues have only loosely provided usable valuations. In days past when the books were well maintained, they seemed to overprice a majority of modern notes. I could buy notes regularly for 60% of catalog value. I call this the vanity price. Collectors would feel great when they bought notes under catalog value & dealers could offer notes below catalog and appear to offer good values. I attempt to provide the average sales price for test notes. When there a sufficient sales, this is mostly possible.

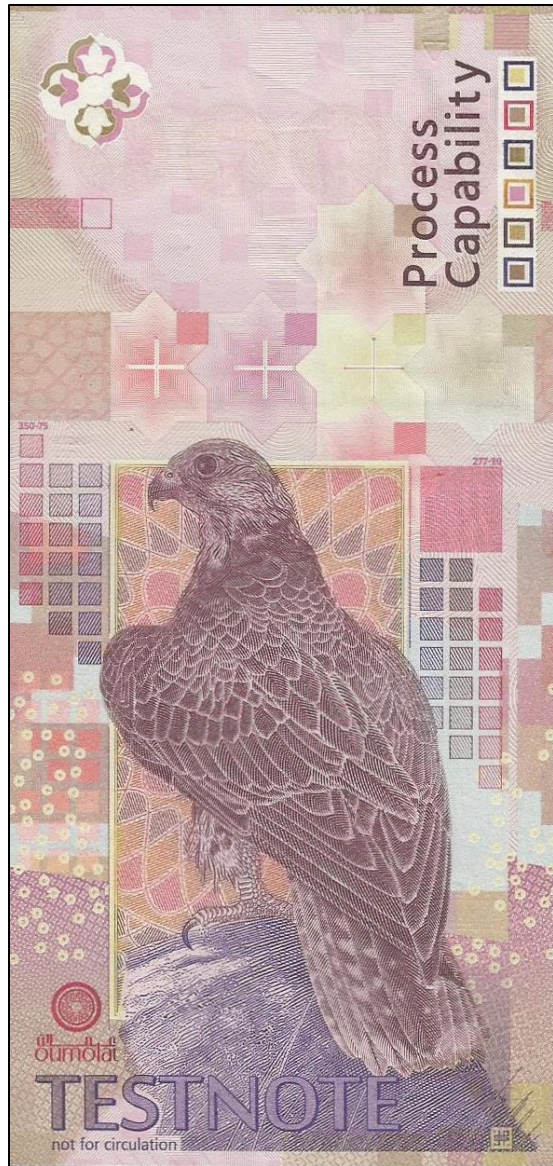
Fixed price lists and “buy now” sales on online auction sites offer stable values. True auction sales are **much more erratic**.

Buyer’s remorse. In 2015, Sterling Currency of Australia bought some Note Printing Australia Test Notes featuring the Rembrandt Picasso polymer substrate notes of 1973. They posted a story on their website of this endeavor. A quote near the end of the article sums up their experience, “I knew full well when I submitted my bids to the auction that there was a chance I’d end up with something that was worth less than I’d paid for it, however little did I know that a bit of time invested in some research, as well as a few dollars in a book that covered the subject, would have saved me hundreds of dollars.” Here’s one of these, NPA-121a. For those that want the whole story, go to the Sterling web page here: <https://www.sterlingcurrency.com.au/blog/news-research/the-humanity-of-it-all/rembrandt-picasso-and-how-not-to-bid-at-auction/>



Another issue worth mentioning is newly released test notes. At auction, some collectors are willing to pay a premium to own the first one available. The price often takes 6 months to fall to a stable number. An example is Oumolat Security Printing in Abu Dhabi, OUM-101. Oumola is a native Arabic word and literally translates into 'currency'. The first few sales were \$160, including a brochure from Jura. Jura software is used to design Oumolat notes. The next few sales increased to \$220 or more. The sales have since slid to \$160 and are still falling slowly to the mid \$120s. Sold one at a time, the only seller from Hungary (home of Jura) has maintained the value fairly well. It does possess nice security features - SICPA security inks, Spark®, intaglio printing, Omron rings, positive & negative microtext, and Security Print Authentication System (SPAS). With SPAS, you can use a cell phone app to verify a note is authentic.





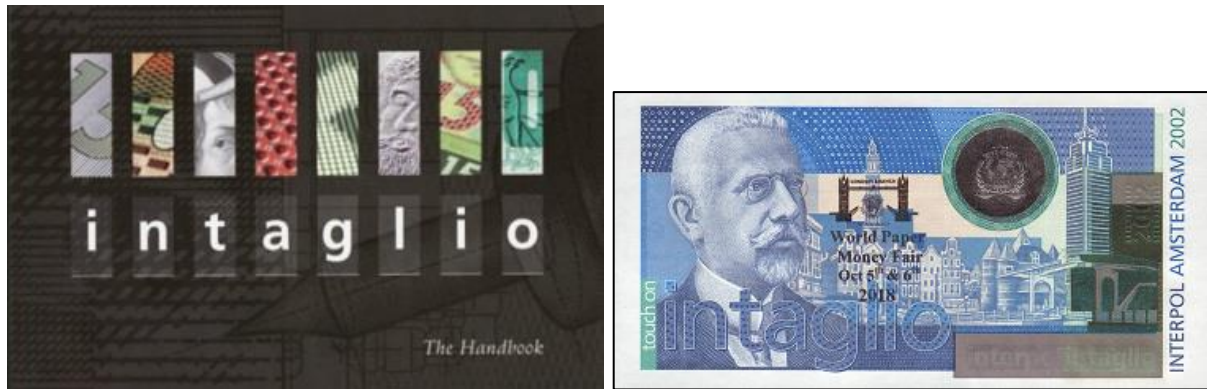
Test note variants and folders/brochures. Test/promotional notes often exist with minor differences, be it color changes, with or w/o serial numbers, different security features, 2 sided or uniface, and others. Do these changes affect the catalog value? Like banknotes, many times they do. Modern test or house notes are often available in a folder or brochure, touting the advances the note exhibits. Is there any effect on the value? Not ask much as you might think. An example is in order for both of these points.

At the 2002 Interpol meeting held in Amsterdam, the currency industry firms Giesecke & Devrient (printer), SICPA (Security Ink supplier), and KBA-Giori (printing machine manufacturer) teamed up to produce a note specifically for this meeting. Johannes Schober – founder of Interpol is depicted on the front. The note has raised letters, a latent image, medal foil, and intaglio printing to thwart counterfeiting. The 6 ½ x 8 inch, 12 page brochure that accompanied the note on the back page describes the intaglio process. The population for the note is not known, but considered low to very

low. Average catalog price? \$100 to \$180. Average price with brochure? The same. Many collectors don't know how to store the brochure with their collection.



In 2018 at the annual IBNS London Money Fair, Giesecke & Devrient provided free samples of the note only for the attendees, with an over stamp of the original note.



Average price? \$50. I just won one for \$33, including shipping. Appears price is trending lower... The population of this note is also not known (they rarely are for test notes), but is considered low, also for a specific event.

Self-fulfilling prophecy. Someone mentioned in a recent forum of the trouble he had in finding an ATM test note of a series. The collector and I know the note appears less often than the rest of the set. Even with several bidders, he was able to purchase the note at the high range of the catalog value for all notes in the set. Could one of more of the bidders have decided what their top bid was based on the catalog value? I am obliged to record actual sales value, not estimate future price trends, so the catalog value for this note will continue to be the same as the more common group of this set. Three groups that DO estimate future trends are collectors, forums, and large auction houses. The auction houses often provide blogs of trends and almost always estimated values of lots on auction. Occasionally, these estimated values act as self-fulfilling prophecies!

I hope to contribute articles on test notes / promotional sheets, with luck some that have the same or similar vignettes as Souvenir Cards. I have my eyes on the semi-official SO-29c from Canada. Stay tuned.