

Ameripex Seminars on Thematic Philately
Introduction to Thematic Philately
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Introductory Notes:

Dr. Ing. Giancarlo Morolli, of Munich, West Germany, is President of the Commission for Thematic Philately of the Federation Internationale de Philatelie (FIP) and was an Ameripex '86 judge. His seminar presentation was in three parts and consumed a full afternoon. It included slides as well as commentary but I have only summarized the text here. Although his message was geared to the international level of competition, his advice is applicable to all thematic* collectors and exhibitors. S.L.

Morolli's fundamental points:

1. Stamp collecting is, and should remain, a pleasure.
2. The theme chosen should be of personal interest and give pleasure.
3. Collect whatever and however you please. No one is compelled to exhibit but if the collector decides to do so, he must exhibit by the rules. This is necessary in order to have a uniform set of judging criteria.

What is Thematic Philately?

Thematic philately is the development of a theme through the placement of material so that it tells a story, using information supplied by the purpose of the issue, primary or secondary elements of the design, or other postal characteristics shown or implied on an element of philatelic material. It is not the collection of sets, issues, or complete countries, as in other types of philately - but it demands the same level of philatelic commitment. It is the collection of appropriate philatelic material that can be seen clearly as having a direct relationship to the theme. Each element must fit into the development of the theme. In sum, the key element of a thematic collection is its development; items giving incorrect information or are misplaced lose their impact in understanding the theme.

What types of philatelic material are appropriate for a thematic exhibit?

Philatelic material includes stamps, postal stationery, cancellations (ordinary, first day, meters), maximum cards. Private information, e.g., illustrations, included on a philatelic item should not be exploited. The materials, i.e., building blocks, exhibited must have "carried" the mail or, other postal communication; been issued or intended for issue or produced in preparation for issue, been used or treated as valid for postage; been issued by a government, local, or private postal agency, or been issued by some other duly commissioned or empowered agency. These philatelic elements are described in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

Fitting stamps into a thematic exhibit:

Stamps should be selected for their primary or secondary design elements, and/or the purpose of issue or circumstance of issue, and/or the relation of the design or issue to the theme. Stamps may be divided into commemorative and definitive groups. Commemorative stamps are issued to commemorate events, organizations, or persons and hence have thematic value. Definitive stamps may have thematic interest because of their subjects or because of the circumstances of issue, e.g., a change of government which could be important for a collection about that country's history.

A good knowledge of the theme can lead to discovery of thematic material in a stamp:

A Newfoundland definitive issue illustrates the Cabot Tower at St. Johns. This stamp is thus important for collections about telecommunications or Nobel Prizes since Marconi received here the first signals from Cornwall across the Atlantic, leading to his Nobel Prize in 1909.

The United Nations General Assembly met in France in 1948 and France issued a set of two stamps portraying the Palais Chaillot, site of the meeting. This issue relates to the United Nations but can also be of interest for other themes, such as modern architecture or NATO which used the facility as its early headquarters.

Some do's and don'ts for exhibiting stamps:

Exploit multiple details of a stamp design by learning how to "read" a stamp. For example, the 1979 Belgium CEPT high value stamp for the common theme of "History of Posts and Telecommunications" shows a telecommunications satellite, an antenna, and two optical telegraph stations, thus making it also interesting for a telecommunications collection. Similarly, the 1980 CEPT high value Netherlands stamp for the common theme of "Famous Personalities" depicts Churchill, the British flag, a microphone, and a message about the Congress of Europe. Thus, it offers possibilities for several other collections. Remember that an overprint can change a theme.

Include less common stamp items related to the theme, such as perfins, tabs, etc. Don't ignore advertising on stamps, which was sometimes applied to the backs of stamps or on tabs (labels) attached to stamps, for those may contain thematic information. Don't overlook booklet covers. Souvenir sheets may have thematic information on their margins in addition to the stamps. Remember that stamps come in a variety of formats, all of which can be used. For example, different perforations can show different distribution media for the stamp. Imperforate stamps can give interesting variety but collectors should know when the imperforate is a fault of the production process and when it is a decision of the postal authority. In some cases imperforate stamps are not valid for postage and are only a (very expensive) philatelic souvenir which does not bring any advantages.

Proofs, essays, etc., must be shown in a specific context related to the production process of the stamp. Per se they seldom increase the marks given for rarity. Special souvenirs must be considered individually; the validity of the issue should be clear and the collection should not be inflated by such items.

If canceled stamps are used, the cancel should not interfere with the thematic aspect of the stamp. Careful selection of items is necessary. The use of blocks or other multiples of modern material should be avoided. A single stamp will do. Blocks are important only when they add some philatelic interest, primarily from a rarity standpoint. Do not include margins, selvedge, etc., unless it is on classical material or otherwise contains information in further development of the theme.

The thematic information brought in by each stamp must be put in the right sequence in order to build a correct thematic "sentence."

Some do's and don'ts for exhibiting postal stationery:

The foregoing considerations also apply to all forms of postal stationery which have impressed or imprinted stamps. Use regular post or postal cards, provided they were issued by or authorized by the postal authority. In West Germany, "Private Stationery" cards are produced by the Postal Administration after a special request by a private organization has been approved. On the contrary, Italy permits private over-printing of postal items and therefore these items can be used only if there is a thematic cancellation of interest. A "picture post card" is acceptable only if it was issued or authorized by the government. In such cases try to acquire two copies and exhibit a front and back.

Remember that there are many items which are similar to postal stationery but are actually of a private nature and therefore hold no interest in a thematic collection. Air letter sheets and air mail envelopes often contain thematic information. Some countries issue cards with thematic information, such as the Christmas and New Year's cards from Spain, Portugal, and Japan, or the tourist promotion cards from Switzerland. Military post cards are private items unless they have a postage free right. There is thematic interest in imprinted stamps used for government mail or the postage paid imprint for bulk mailing from such countries as Denmark, Sweden, and Greenland.

Cancellations and meter postmarks:

Ordinary cancellations: Ordinary cancellations often contain relevant thematic information, in particular older cancellations from European countries. Modern postmarks can be researched by tying back relevant items such as modern and historical town names. Look for special cancels from post offices set up for special events, activities, or organizations. such as the League of Nations, CERN (European Nuclear Research Center), exhibitions, or military posts. Some post offices have special message cancels, e.g., for tourism, or for certain times of the year, e.g., Christmas. Administrative marks, such as those applied by military

commanders, are of thematic significance only when they show or imply a postal advantage, e.g.s free or reduced postage rates.

There are some important proscriptions in the use of ordinary cancellations. A cancel should be tied to a piece or cover. Blocks or single stamps with a cancel have very little interest. Avoid cancels on cards or covers franked with lower than the normal rate. Cancellations without stamps have little interest except when used as arrival or transit postmarks. Ancillary postal marks or labels of the post office are acceptable.

First day covers:

First day covers should be used because of the stamp and/or the cancellation. Emphasis should be on postally used covers with correct postage rates. Normal envelopes with a FDC are often preferred by philatelists who try to get the best document used in normal postal service rather than those created just for collectors. Registration labels and backstamps enrich the cover. Privately prepared cachets have no thematic relevance. Contemporary covers/cachets prepared by postal administrations are tantamount to privately prepared cachets and hence lack thematic value. Generic first day cancellations can be used only if they have a thematic link with the place of issue, while general "philatelic" cancellations bring no thematic contribution. Special first day cards are like an unaddressed FDC.

Franking meters:

Meter postmarks can provide additional thematic details, sometimes depicting complementary aspects or filling gaps not covered by stamps or cancellations. Meters often have pictorial aspects which can be thematically developed. Some meters come from organizations or companies which may be relevant, while others contain wording (slogans) which can be used. Meter postmarks should be on cover, or on tape on cover. Avoid "0" denominations on meters unless the meter is extremely rare. On the contrary, always try to get the correct postage rate.

Maximum cards and other items:

Maximum cards have a stamp on the view side of the postcard with the best possible concordance with the subject of the stamp. Picture postcards with a mere reproduction of the stamps are not considered maximum cards. The subject and place of the postmark should have a relation to the subject. If the cancellation has no thematic significance, the stamp alone will be the best choice.

Autographs can add interest and enrich the item, such as that of the designer. However, they are non-philatelic and should only be used with an item that qualifies in its own right. Labels should not be used unless they are postally used and in conjunction with an otherwise legitimate item. Avoid postal bulletins on new issues, such as those released by Austria, France, and Italy. Similarly, avoid press releases, publicity documents, or new issue advertising. Black prints, such as those issued by Austria, are acceptable.

Souvenir covers from philatelic exhibitions or similar events which celebrate a theme, are not acceptable. Mixed frankings, cancellations to order, and any other item showing out-of-line postal items should be avoided. Errors and varieties add interest to the exhibit but they should not be confused with "off-line" situations resulting from "favor" by private initiative.

Conclusions on philatelic material for thematic exhibits:

All types of material must be carefully examined. An item thematically appropriate must also be appropriate philatelically and vice versa. Thematic philately is not a simpler, easier, form of philately.

Techniques for building and improving a thematic exhibit:

A thematic collection develops a theme according to a logical plan, using the information supplied by all types of appropriate philatelic material. A collection may describe the history of a certain period, or region, or discipline, the life in a given environment, the history or structure of an organization (e.g., the Red Cross), or a set of events (e.g., Olympic Games). In a thematic collection, the philatelist is dealing with a specific discipline. He must use reference sources about the theme and seek bibliographic support far beyond the information supplied by thematic catalogs and checklists. There are three phases that many collectors go through in building their thematic collections.

Accumulation phase:

In acquiring material, acquire the right material, not just everything available. This requires an extensive knowledge of the theme as well as philatelic background. Learn what material is available. Dedicate yourself to doing the research on both the theme and the philatelic material.

Collection building phase:

This phase provides personal pleasure. Begin to put some structure in your accumulation by developing a plan. The plan describes the structure and its subdivisions into parts, chapters, and paragraphs. The plan should be logical and balanced so that each item is at the right place and in the right sequence, so that there are no gaps and no padding. The chapters should be balanced - not one of 200 pages and another of only 7. Chapter headings such as "Miscellaneous", "Various" or "Cancellations" are not consistent with a thematic plan.

The theme must be worked out in detail, aiming for maximum depth. The text should link the thematic elements to tell the story in a fluent and consistent way. The story should flow from the material and not out of unnecessary text. Originality may be an objective in developing the theme. Originality may be achieved either with the development of a new theme or of a well-known theme treated in a new way. Research could make even a common subject original. The size of the collection will be the result of a complete and well defined plan and a balanced, deep development. The collection should not be overloaded with material, quantity alone is not enough.

The philatelic elements of a collection are the philatelic knowledge and the condition and rarity of the material. Top quality items are the natural target but if there are lesser items in the collection, try to replace them when possible. Covers and cancellations are more difficult to acquire than stamps and collectors should try to get them when they see them. Philatelic knowledge is based on the utilization of every type of philatelic resource and expertise in the general criteria of philately. Items must present their thematic information in the best way; a canceled stamp must still show its thematic content.

Condition must fulfill the general requirements of philately, considering the general standards for a given item. Rarity does not necessarily mean value; some items are very difficult to find although their market value is not very high. And, vice versa, very expensive items are offered regularly in auctions.

Exhibition phase:

The collection is the foundation necessary to build a successful exhibit. Exhibition means competition. Preparing a collection for exhibition can be organized according to the elements considered in judging the exhibit.

The Plan:

Every exhibit should have a plan - a statement of the exhibit's intent. The plan should be structured in outline form. Its parts should be consistent with the exhibit title and thematic content. Subdivisions should be thematic and balanced and completely cover the intent of the exhibit. Do not use any word or phrase unless it develops the theme and avoid philatelic terms such as "cancels, rates," etc. The plan should start with a brief introduction to the subject.

The plan should include a reference to the relationship between the size of the collection and the exhibit. This can be done by showing for each subdivision the number of pages in the exhibit and in the total collection. For example, the numbers 5/8 would indicate that 5 pages of a subdivision are being exhibited out of a total of 8 pages in the collection. This data helps the judges to understand the size of the collection and in turn makes it easier to relate to what has been selected for exhibition.

Development:

The theme is developed according to the plan and is expressed by as much original research as possible. Development materializes in the choice items exhibited, the sequence of their appearance, and balance in the thematic text. (Proofs should appear before stamps. stamps before covers, etc.) In preparing the write-ups - write what you want in your own way, then eliminate every word possible without losing the meaning. Put thematic material on top, philatelic material on bottom of the page; read the top part of every page, page by page to insure that it reads like a book developing the theme from beginning to end.

Size of exhibit:

The size of the exhibit is determined by the output of your original research. Do not digress from the theme; stick to solid philately; do not make philatelic excuses. Do not use an item just because it is nice if it is on the fringe, collect it but don't exhibit it.

Presentation:

The main objective of presentation is to highlight the material and the thematic development. Judges will look at the page, frame, and exhibit as a whole for balance in text (titles, thematic and philatelic commentary) and in layout. The pages should be full of material and text but not overcrowded.

Judging a thematic exhibit

At international exhibitions, thematic exhibits are judged according to a point count system as follows, giving effect to changes recently adopted by the FIP:

(NOTE - Check current regulations for point counts)

Within this schematic, the judges will consider a number of elements in each category:

The Plan:

Adequacy of plan page; consistency with title; correct, logical, and balanced subdivisions; presence of all parts needed to develop the plan.

Development, original research; depth and balance of elaboration; correct knowledge of theme; proper sequence of items; thematic texts.

Size does not refer to actual size in number of pages but to a comparison of the actual treatment to the potential achievement of a complete plan and thorough development of the subject - a comparison to a theoretical standard of excellence.

Philatelic knowledge:

The selection of items and the write-ups should be selected to show philatelic knowledge. Such knowledge is demonstrated by use of different types of items by respect for philatelic rules; by philatelic importance by the postal characteristics of documents; by the correct interrelationship of items by the philatelic write-up; and by valid philatelic studies.

Condition and rarity:

Rarity considers effective availability. Condition or quality is used in relative terms.

Presentation:

Presentation factors include general appearance, readability, order, and balance; length and effectiveness of text; and correct use of non-philatelic items.

After reviewing all of these factors, the judges will make a positive judgment on the overall quality of the exhibit coupled with an averaging of the points given in each category by each judge. The total average determines the level of the award.

Conclusion

Participation in an exhibition should proceed with a clear objective: get ever more fun and pleasure from stamp collecting. Exhibitors should understand that the highest awards are obtainable only with a long and deep effort, based on research and dedication, as well as financial resources. Thematic philately does not give any free lunches, it is as challenging as any other branch of philately. Exhibitors should therefore be pleased when the award received matches the effort he has put on building his exhibit, and he should also accept the fact that other collectors, who have put in more effort in a successful way, may receive higher awards.

The award levels for the thematic class at FIP international exhibitions is: below 60 - diploma; 60-64 - bronze; 65-69 - large bronze; 70-74 - silver, 75-79 - large silver; 80-84 -vermeil; 85-89 - large vermeil; 90-94 - gold; 95 and over - large gold.

NOTES:

It is recognized that differences exist in the terms "topical" and "thematic." As used here, the term "thematic" is intended to be all-encompassing.

Here the guidance tends to break down because there really is no one place to go to find out what the rules are. FIP literature on exhibiting and the APS Judges' Manual are helpful but in the long run most "rules" are interpretations coupled with judges' likes and dislikes.