

How to Collect Topical Stamps for Fun and Relaxation
(Excerpt from ATA Handbook #69 by John H. Groet, 1963)
Edited by Ray E. Cartier, 2003

I often hear collectors sagely advising a beginner to start out with a general, worldwide collection. To accomplish anything in a worldwide field is most expensive and frustrating. There are tens of thousands of new stamps issued every year. Stamp shops all over the world are filled with albums in this category, partially filled, completely uninteresting, monuments to discouragement. When a beginner starts with one of these, in a few years he usually tires of the insurmountable task of filling the album. He quits collecting in disgust. Topical collectors on the other hand, maintain and increase interest in their collection, so it becomes a satisfying part of life for many years – even a lifetime.

Topical collecting provides all the joys of a general collection (wide varieties of countries and types of stamps, lure of faraway lands, etc.) without the disadvantages of a general collection. To the general collector who has decided to “give up”, topical collecting can be a lifesaver. For the new adult collector, it can be a doorway away from boredom that can lead to new enjoyment and new friends. General collectors have the start of many topical collections. They can select what they like and add to it, while holding on to the rest of their general collection to use as “trades” to secure desirable stamps for their topical collection.

Topical collecting can consume very little or a lot of spare time. Depending on your needs, it can (and often does) take a great deal of time, if the collector aspires to build a gold medal collection. But if the desire is to just enjoy the quest, the collector has control of how much time to invest. It can be as expensive or as inexpensive as the collector desires. You set the rules - your own rules - no one tells you that you must have every stamp, every proof, every error, that you must mount and arrange them in any specified order, or compose literary masterpieces to describe them.

Since you set the rules as to a.) the scope of the collection, and b.) the method of

mounting, arrangement and write-up, you can both tailor your topical collection to the amount of time you have available and the amount of money you can afford to spend. You make topical collecting FUN, not a task. Otherwise, you defeat the very purpose of stamp collecting: rest and relaxation from every day duties. Follow the rules you set down, change them as you wish.

I doubt that it will make you wealthy – very few collections fall in this category. A good topical collection will increase as much, if not more, in value than any other good collections, but collectors should not collect topical stamps, or for that matter, any other form of stamps, with the idea of acquiring riches. Collect for FUN and RELAXATION; let this be your main reward. Sometimes you may stumble across a treasure. That serendipity adds to your enjoyment.

Getting Started

By this time you're probably thinking, "Fine, but how do I get started?" There is no magic about forming a topical collection. You need a topic. You need a checklist of stamps relating to that topic. You need the stamps. You need an album or a three-ring binder and some archival-safe page protectors. More than anything, you need guidance, something the American Topical Association can give you.

Selecting a Topic

As a new topical collector you may find yourself torn between many topics. The temptation is to flit from one to the other, accumulating stamps at random and adhering to no particular plan. Such a procedure can be somewhat costly and unnecessarily time-consuming.

Selecting a topic is the most important decision you will make in forming a topical collection. Obviously your topic must be one that interests you, perhaps one related to your work, some other hobby, or a field that has continually fascinated you.

For example, doctors often collect medical stamps. An athlete may run the gamut of

Sports on Stamps. An active Rotarian may select stamps honoring that organization. A gardener, bird watcher, railroad buff or boat fan, each will find topics related to his interest. Other topics are suggested by a list of checklists from the ATA, available for a self-addressed stamp business-size envelope (SASE) or through the links on this website. Actually, the possibilities are limitless.

The American Topical Association (ATA) can help you make that all important selection of a topic, and save you time and money. Topical Time, the ATA journal has nearly 100 pages per issue, 6 times per year, and is included with membership. It presents 24-30 different topical features every issue. More information about the ATA and its dozen free services appear throughout this website.

In addition, your decision should also take into account two other factors: 1.) how restrictive or 2.) how broad your topic will be. You will soon lose interest in a topic which includes only a few stamps or covers. If you select a major topic that includes thousands of stamps or covers, its very size may drive you off, because completion will be well nigh impossible.

The solution is to select a sub-topic, within the larger topic, for which you have acquired a special liking. For instance, your larger topic may be animals, but you may be particularly attracted to the cat family. You can concentrate on lions, tigers, alley cats and kittens. If you have already accumulated other animals on stamps, retain them. After you have exhausted the cats you may want to try another animal clan, or you may decide to use your excess animal stamps to trade or to donate to children.

Checklists

Having selected a topic, your next task is obtaining a checklist of stamps in that topic by catalogue number. There are two ways to obtain such lists: the hard way or the easy way.

The hard way is the do-it-yourself approach. It means wading through thousands of pages in catalogues, listing each stamp under your topic. Your local library or stamp club will

usually have the multi-volume set of the “Scott’s Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue” which runs over 6000 pages. Unfortunately you may spend 30 to 40 valuable hours only to discover that you have missed many items.

The easy way is to procure a basic checklist for a few cents per page from the ATA. Only members of the ATA can obtain these checklists, which have been assembled by a variety of collectors of topical subjects. The compilers of these lists have spent months, even years, of spare time searching through catalogues, stamp papers, collections, etc. to prepare these lists. You do not pay for the many hours of work, but merely for the cost of printing and distribution.

The ATA also has a number of topical handbooks, each covering a single or a related group of topics. Included in the handbooks you’ll find not only checklists but information that will be helpful in preparing your write-ups or simply adding to your growing knowledge. ATA will gladly send you a free list of all active handbooks for a self-addressed stamped envelope. Many collectors of like topics have formed various study units within the ATA. These groups supply information to one another through specialized newsletters or journals. Members trade with each other, ask and answer questions, keep up with new discoveries, offer much information on the topic and build friendships. The ATA can also supply you a list of the current study units, or check the "Study units" and/or "Chapters" buttons on this website.

Acquiring the First Stamps

Your topic has been chosen. You acquired a checklist the easy way. Now, I want to talk to you about the stamps you need.

A study of your checklist will reveal that your topical stamps fall into four categories: those in which the subject is the principal part of the design; those in which the subject is a minor part of the design (for instance, in the border); those in which your subject is symbolical – the lion in a coat of arms; or those which are ancillary. For example, a collection of topical stamps on aircraft could include Wright Brothers or pilots or founders

of aircraft companies. I strongly advise that you start off by concentrating on those stamps that picture your topic as the major part of the design and then work toward the supporting stamps to your topic. You might even apply an ABC classification to stamps on your checklist. "A" would be your primary wants, "B" your next tier and "C" those that you'll fit in later. This is a major aid when buying from dealers, as you can spend your money on the stamps that are most important to you before buying your lesser needs.

You could begin by purchasing the largest packet you can afford in your topic. These packets are sometimes advertised in such philatelic publications as *Topical Time*. A packet of from 250 to 1000 different stamps will guarantee hours of fun plus a real savings over what it would have cost to buy the stamps singly.

First, sort the stamps into the four categories described above. File for future use those that depict your topic inconspicuously or symbolically. Sort the stamps with your topic as the central theme against your checklist, and mark on your checklist the stamps that you have. Then, file the stamps in small envelopes or in archival safe sheet holders that hold 8-½ x 11 sheets. These are available from office supply stores or large discount stores such as Sam's or Costco.

A large packet will probably not provide enough stamps for an interesting collection. Use your checklist to compile a want list of issues to "round out" your collection, not to complete it, but to give it form and substance.

Set off in search of additional stamps. You can next check the ads in *Topical Time* that often lists sets and singles. Distribute want lists to dealers, taking care not to send the same list to each dealer. If you don't find what you are looking for, you might search e-Bay or one of the other on-line auctions or contact other dealers listed in *Topical Time*. On line auctions or sales can be found on the Internet under "Postage Stamps".

Albums

An album is essential to a well-organized collection and to your enjoyment of the

collection. Stamps in glassine envelopes in drawers or in stock books represent an accumulation, not a collection. Except for a few well-defined topics, topical collectors vary too widely in their choice of stamps to make printed albums for each topic commercially feasible. A majority of ATA members use three-ring binders, usually those with a plastic cover in the front and a space where you can insert a self-made album cover sheet. I suggest that your choice be confined to a standard page size, preferably 8-½ x 11. Odd-sized small and large pages are hard to handle and, if you ultimately exhibit, they are often difficult to fit into exhibition frames which readily accept 8-½ x 11 or European size A4 pages.

Additional Requirements

Buy top quality stamp hinges or, even better, use miniature plastic mounts that act like an envelope to each stamp. Your hinges must be peelable, when completely dry. Never attempt to remove a mis-mounted stamp immediately after applying it to a page. The page or the stamp may tear. Forget it for an hour and come back to it, carefully removing it from the page with stamp tongs. Everyone makes mistakes in mounting. The wise collector lets his mistakes dry before correcting them. Never, never use any kind of glue or tape!

Stamp tongs are essential. Learn to use them, because perspiration, dirt and skin oil are enemies of stamps and album pages. A good pair of tongs is a low investment.

Arrangement, Mounting and Write-up Order

Order is the first essential to arranging a stamp collection. Order will enable you to find any stamp in your collection and permit additions with a minimum of effort. Your first move, then, is to devise an orderly mounting system.

Study an ATA checklist. Its contents are arranged in a definite sequence. If your topic is sports, trains, maps, ships or the like, your checklist offers a model for systematic arrangement of your album. Scientific topics have inherent systems of order developed by scholars over the years. Thus, your arrangement can be one established by others or

even one of your own invention. The most important principle to obey in an album arrangement is to make your system of order simple, easy to use and adaptable to as little repetitive write-up as possible.

For example, if you arrange a topical collection by country, you may find dozens of stamps from dozens of countries depicting an identical subject. By necessity you will be repeating this subject dozens of times in your write-up. If you arrange by subject, a page can be sub-headed "wrestling" and all stamps picturing wrestling mounted on that page or the following pages.

When a topic is large, this rule is not rigid and mounting by continent or by country group may be a necessity. I have seen a very large collection of Railroads on Stamps handled very effectively in this fashion. It has been a regular award winner at stamp shows. The choice of order is yours, just as the choice of a topic is yours. In both cases, they must interest you. Furthermore, the order you choose must assist in telling the story of your collection.

Arrangement

Put your stamps in the order you intended to use them. You are ready now to begin an arrangement.

First remember that only one page of your collection may be seen at a time. Each page is a separate picture, the link between the pages being the topic and uniformity in page size. An attractive display of stamps is achieved through symmetry, balance and clearness.

Symmetry merely means grouping the main elements of your display so that the left side of a page is almost identical to the right side. Balance is a pleasing arrangement to the eye.

For example, four rows of stamps are arranged on a page; all rows containing the same number of stamps; all rows being of the same length. What is achieved? Excellent

symmetry, but poor balance. The page appears bottom heavy. Clearness is the result of correctly using symmetry, balance and a simple write-up.

Stamps of varying sizes are more difficult to arrange than a uniform set. As a starter, I recommend straight line mounting, that is, the bottom of all stamps in a given row on a straight line. In some instances you might decide to set the centers of all stamps in a straight line. Such a technique avoids the jumbled look often associated with odd-sized stamps that are mixed together.

My suggestion is not offered as an inflexible rule. As a matter of fact, many disagree violently with my approach. Why don't you experiment on your 8-½ x 11 page. Arrange the stamps you intend to mount in various ways. When you hit upon an arrangement pleasing to the eye, sketch the outline of the stamps and the write-up space on your worksheet and use your sketch as a guide in finally mounting your album page. Or, if you know how, create squares or rectangles on a computer page in which each is slightly larger than the stamps, thus creating a border around each stamp or cover.

The spacing of stamps on an album page bears considerably on its finished appearance. Strive to maintain uniform spacing between stamps on all pages. If you don't want to use a computer, you can buy quadrilled sheets at an office supply store. These contain faint cross-hatching of lines to aid page arrangement. On quadrilled pages, two spaces between stamps is generally pleasing to the eye; three squares between larger stamps is excellent. To give a collection that roomy appearance, allow three spaces between all stamps regardless of size.

Uniform spacing between rows throughout a collection is desirable, but not always practicable. To fill a page with an extremely long set, you must necessarily decrease space between rows.

If your page carries an outside border, do not mount your stamps too close to that border. You should mount at least one square from the edge of a quadrilled area. If you pages

lack a quadrille, spacing from the border requires diligent use of a ruler.

For new collectors, I recommend a simplified arrangement system, coupled with your system of order, to permit frequent additions to a collection without constantly re-doing pages. While not suitable for competitive exhibits, the simplified mounting system is ideal for organizing a collection. As your collection grows, you may decide to remount it, and you can do so without wiping out a large investment. (Topicalists, like all collectors, are constantly remounting and changing their collections. This is part of the fun of collecting.)

Write-up and Illustrations

Before mounting a single stamp on an album page, you must compose your write-up and insert it adjacent to or below the stamps. The page that prompts a viewer to say “How attractive” is generally not crowded.

The stamps must tell the story. Decoration or write-up merely supplements the stamps’ message. It must not steal the show.

The temptation to over-decorate or over-elaborate in write-up is inherent in topical collecting. It must be resisted. A treatise belongs in an encyclopedia - not on an album page.

As an example: your page is part of a collection of flowers on stamps. The subheading on the page is Water Lilies. Obviously you need not say, “This flower stamp shows the water lily, XYZ,” beneath each of a group of stamps on the page. Your write-up should merely identify briefly each species of water lily.

Lengthy write-ups will not be read. They are boring and detract from an otherwise pleasingly appearing page. Facts difficult to acquire and that aid in understanding should be used in moderation.

To condense your write-up to the bare minimum, work out your descriptions beforehand

on a work pad or your computer screen.

Topical collections permit attractive arrangements. Do not destroy the effect with gaudy illustrations in a myriad of colors, or by paragraph after paragraph of scholarly write-up. Make sure that the stamps themselves tell the story. With experience, you will acquire proficiency in write-up and arrangement. Your own good taste must guide you in the final analysis. There are no inflexible rules. Once composed, write-ups are best done on a computer. Check with the ATA to find when there will be a stamp show in your area, and see how other collectors present their collections.

Work slowly and carefully to create a collection your friends will admire. Part of the joy of collecting is sharing your interest with others. Sharing a sloppy page necessarily lacks the personal satisfaction you will feel if you show a smooth job.

Adding to your Topical Collection

Earlier, we discussed the initial acquisition of stamps for your topical collection. Here are more ways to expand your initial collection.

Combing dealers' general stock often uncovers many elusive items. Also, use the Internet. Several websites can be found by pulling up "postage stamps". Topical stamp auctions are another way to enhance your collection. No set percentage of catalogue value can be established as the basis for a bid. Scarcity, supply and demand and your desires will dictate. Study the "prices realized" as published by various auction houses, and the advertisement in publications such as Topical Time to determine the state of the market, and tailor your bids accordingly. Auctions appear in the pages of Linn's Stamp News, Scott's Stamp Monthly Stamp Collector and Mekeel's, among other publications. A listing of stamp newspapers and magazines in the US can be obtained from the ATA Central Office.

Swapping is a favorite method of expanding a collection. If you are an ATA member, its membership directory will give you access to topicalists of similar interests. Write them

and generate an exchange, or meet them by joining one of the inexpensive study units.

Another means of establishing exchange contacts is through a Topical Time adlet, outlining your needs or detailing what you have for exchange. Perhaps most importantly, in the process of exchanging, you establish many inspiring worldwide friendships. I know one active ATA member whose wife insists (mischievously) that her husband is a stamp collector just so he can receive mail from the four corners of the globe.

Covers (cancelled envelopes, often with cachets – or designs – on the left hand side of the envelope), maximum cards and “local” stamps will add interest to your collection when used with discretion. Many dealers advertising in such periodicals as Topical Time offer excellent values in this material. Eventually you may even add essays, proofs, errors, reprints or other items to your collection.

Do not ignore special cancellations. Quite often, you will find topical cancellations that will tie into your collection. Others will turn up in dealers’ stocks of covers. Corner cards (that portion of an envelope bearing a firm’s business address and sometimes a picture of the firm’s product) also make interesting additions to your albums.

While none of the material just described is plentiful, a search for it is rewarding. With the exception of old 19th century covers, such material is not usually in the rarity class, but is still often very elusive.

As you progress in topical collecting you will devise other sources of stamps and covers for your collection. My suggestions are by no means exclusive. For instance, topically related pictorial and slogan cancellations are hiding in hoards of dealers’ cover boxes.

Exhibiting a topical collection is a topic within itself. There are other handbooks that will cover this in greater detail. Because topical collections are colorful, interesting and educational, many non-philatelic businesses, educational institutions and shows (libraries, sport, garden, outdoor) welcome the display of a good collection. The reward is the

pleasure you will have in attracting others to your hobby.

Search for opportunities to participate in such displays. It is good practice in developing presentations you may later enter in stamp shows.