

Topical Stamp Collecting; A Universal Hobby for Seniors
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Topical stamp collectors are very much like the butterfly. They usually start their collecting of stamps early in their life. In time, they give up their collecting, building a cocoon as they marry and settle down, raise families, and compete for jobs. In time, something rekindles their interest and they emerge from their cocoons, often taking a radical change in their collecting habits. Where they were once stamp collectors, they are now philatelists. By the age of 50, most philatelists have a good idea of what really interests them and are looking for creative outlets to educate themselves in their interests and enjoy doing something that has an inherent, personal appeal. This, then, becomes a lifelong hobby for most. A hobby is defined as an activity which is done in order to find a venue for relaxation. Topical collecting fills that requirement for thousands of seniors. It is often one area in their lives over which they have total control.

How do we define “Topical” collecting?

This is a facet of stamp collecting that allows a person to pick a subject, or topic, of special interest to them, and collect stamps which are pertinent to that subject. Most non-collectors have an impression that a stamp collector is a person who sits at a desk, like an accountant, covering rectangles in a stamp album with stamps that fit into each niche. That is not the way it is done in topical collecting. Topicalists create their own albums, usually on a computer. A topical collector first selects a subject of interest to him or herself. This could be a sport, an animal, something related to their careers, religion, or any of hundreds of topics of their own choosing. Collecting is not limited to just stamps. Many collectors collect stamped envelopes, known in the hobby as “covers”. Some collect postmarks while others may collect pictorial meters. Others collect “event covers” that are postmarked for space events, aircraft flights, ship launches, exhibitions and a wide variety of other events.

Topical VS. Thematic

You will no doubt run across the word “thematic” when you collect “topicals”. Thematic is to Topical as Philatelic is to Stamp Collector. To illustrate, a stamp collector gathers up stamps and puts them in envelopes, a drawer, or a shoebox. A philatelist organizes and studies his or her stamps. All philatelists are stamp collectors. Not all stamp collectors are philatelists. When you first start gathering topical stamps you will be a Topicalist. When you organize and mount the stamps, studying the subject matter, and putting them in a sequence that tells a story, you will be a thematic collector. However, you will also still be a stamp collector, a philatelist and a topicalist. Confusing? Don’t worry about it. Just enjoy your collecting!

Who collects these miniature works of art?

Recent surveys by several stamp-collecting newspapers show that the average collector is a male, aged 62 to 63 with a college degree or higher education. Research, enjoyment and relaxation are often given as reasons why these adults collect. That is the difference between a stamp collector and a philatelist. A stamp collector accumulates stamps. A philatelist studies either the stamps and their usage or, in the case of topicalists, the subject matter on the stamp.

According to Mr. Fred Greene, stamp columnist for the Dallas Morning News, “One of the beautiful aspects of this branch of the hobby is that the topicalist can collect and classify philatelic material in any way that provides maximum pleasure.” That well sums up why people collect stamps.

Cover Collecting

Many cover collectors fail to realize that they should use a “rag” content envelope in order to keep their covers from getting brittle and yellow in time. Also, the envelopes frequently come with cardboard stuffers which may have a high sulphuric content that

will eventually attack the cover itself. The glue on the back of the envelope may also bleed through to the front over time. Collectors are well advised to find acid free paper and cut pieces that can be inserted in the envelopes and folded over the back so that the flap (kept outside of the envelope) closes against the paper. I've tested normal typing paper with an acid detector pen and found the varieties I use to be acid free.

The photo corners that are used to hold the covers to the page likewise should not be paper. There are archival safe plastic photo corners available at many craft stores, photo stores and some stamp dealers. Covers and stamps are mounted on sheets of paper that also should be acid free. Those sheets are often kept in plastic page protectors that are found in office supply stores and major discount merchandisers such as Sam's Clubs. These should also say "Archival Safe" on the box.

What Will it Cost Me?

Because the collector gets to decide what to collect, he or she won't have any glaring blank spaces in his or her collection. The collector can then decide how much he or she is willing to spend on the collection. Topicalists can spend hours at a stamp show bourse, going through thousands of stamps at five cents apiece, at a dealer's box with thousands of covers for \$1.00 each or they can spend up to thousands of dollars on particularly elusive items. According to famed Postage Stamp Auctioneer, Jacques C. Schiff, Jr., "There is no end to the possibilities of topical choice: Animals, birds, fauna and sports can be narrowed down to specific types or expanded to include even just an appearance of the topic in the background of a stamp".

The money factor is not all that important when collecting a topic. Each person pursues the hobby according to his or her own means. If a topic, like World War II for instance, is too broad, the topicalist can narrow that down to ships, or aircraft or personalities involved in the war. If the stamp desired is out of the collector's price range, the collector can look for a different stamp or even a used example of the

pricey “mint” copy.

Many topical collectors take their interest to new heights. The President of the American Topical Association collects “Lighthouses on Stamps” and travels to coastal areas to explore the lighthouses there. She follows up by conducting research on the history of these landmarks. Another collector of “Castles on Stamps” has gone to Europe in search of some of the castles she has found depicted on stamps of the world. A collector of fairytales and folktales on postage stamps has traveled to foreign countries around the world, seeking the stories which were popular enough in their country of origin to merit a postage stamp, but whose stories were virtually unknown in the United States. Even though she never previously thought about writing, she has now written the first in a series of books on these little known stories. Bird watchers can build up a collection of the birds they have seen. A lady who retired to a mountain top in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia found that black bears were regular visitors, so she started collecting bears on stamps. Soon, she was exhibiting and, before too much time went by, she too became an author. (See ATA handbook #146 if you are interested in seeing the results of her efforts.) These are examples of some of the side benefits of this form of collecting.

What Topics Can I Collect?

What are the most collected topics on stamps? Space is one of the highest rated subjects, as most of today’s collectors have lived through the entire space age from Sputnik to the International Space Station. Biology, trains, cats, scouts and ships all have strong followings as well. As stated earlier, some collectors may specialize in just certain species, or segments of a particular topic. A space collector, for example, may specialize in just the early manned flights, interplanetary missions or some other facet of that topic. Those who collect plants on stamps might specialize in just roses or orchids. That is the absolute best attribute of collecting topicals. There is no one to tell a topicalist what he or she should (or should not) collect. The creativity is all up to

the collector. If a grandparent wants to collect postage stamps from around the world that depict Walt Disney characters, no one will snicker. That collector may eventually know factoids about the creation of the characters and the movies that are not known outside of the corporation that Disney created.

Topicalists find that their collecting gives them hundreds of hours of stress free relief. Also, if a topical stamp collector suffers an ailment or accident that leaves him or her laid up, this is a hobby that can still be pursued. With websites, like the American Philatelic Society's, www.zillionsofstamps.com or other dealer sites as shown in the American Topical Association's publication, *Topical Time*, postage stamp purchases can be handled on line and the buyer can see the items being purchased before committing to buy the items and without ever leaving their home or apartment. E-Bay, the on-line auction house, has a great following among philatelists who collect stamps and covers.

Many people have no interest in organized philately. However, every successful group of professionals belongs to some type of organization to enhance their knowledge and skills. Collectors enjoy their hobby much more when involved in an association. There are two major organizations in the United States for philatelists. If you are a stamp collector but not interested in topicals, The American Philatelic Society is the most prestigious stamp collecting organization in the United States, and possibly the world. The APS is a 50,000-member organization with tremendous resources for collectors. A request to the ATA office can get you the particulars on this worthwhile organization.

But, if you are looking for a creative outlet, topical collecting can fill that bill for you. Seniors have to keep their minds active. Philately is a hobby that assists in that manner as well. Stamp collectors are very active and very inquisitive. It is no wonder that seniors are the most active members of the stamp collecting community.

Recently, the editor of Scott's Stamp Monthly reported that 40% of the readership were topical collectors. That shows how far Topical Collecting has moved into the world of Philately. Newspapers are one of the resources that topical collectors have, but the pre-eminent resource for those who collect stamps by subject matter, is the American Topical Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping collectors enjoy their hobby more thoroughly. The ATA, as it is called, has a number of ways in which it assists collectors in their pursuits.

Currently the ATA has a lending library of over 50 slide shows. These are currently being updated and copied on to CD's to make them available for use on personal computers. The ATA has stamp checklists of over 400 topics ranging from Abacus to Zodiac on stamps. These are updated regularly. Here is a small sampling of some of the topics that are covered:

African Americans, Airplanes, Anti-Malaria, Archaeology, Art, Astronomy, Balloons
Basketball, Beethoven, Boxing, Cats, Chemistry, Chocolate, Civil War, Computers,
Dentistry, Dinosaurs, Donkeys, Albert Einstein, Fairytales, Fords, Fossils,
Hummingbirds, Ice Hockey, Jazz Musicians, Ladybugs, Masks, Medicine, Nobel
Prizes, Nurses, Olympics, Penguins, Red Cross, Rotary, Shakespeare, Submarines,
Tennis, Universities, Waterfalls, Windmills, World Wildlife Fund, X-Rays, and
Zeppelins.

Those are just 10% of the 400-plus topics for which checklists exist. Since its founding in 1949 by a nineteen year old boy named Jerry Husak, who is still an active collector today, the ATA has published a bi-monthly magazine for its members - Topical Time. All of the articles ever published in the past fifty plus years of this magazine have been sorted by topic and are available to collectors to enhance their research, and an index to the table of contents for the last several issues is also available. Almost 150 handbooks have been published by the ATA, of which 70 titles

are still active. The latest several handbooks have dealt with Caves, The Roosevelts (Teddy, Eleanor and Franklin), Railways (approximately 1000 pages!), Masonic, Bears, Fairy Tales and Sherlock Holmes. These handbooks help collectors get an in-depth source for information on a myriad of popular topics.

For the more popular topics, the ATA sponsors Study Units. These are comprised of groups of people who have similar philatelic pursuits. Currently, fifty-seven of these Units exist covering such diverse collecting interests as Wine, Chess, Columbus, Masks, Petroleum, Biology and the Fine Arts. Also, the ATA has approximately fifty Chapters around the world. These Chapters are actually local topical stamp clubs, whereas the Units are each made up of collectors from around the globe. Fully 25% of topical collectors in the ATA are from overseas.

Another of the benefits of the ATA is their annual National Topical Stamp Show (NTSS). Held in a different city each year, the NTSS attracts excellent topical exhibits from around the country and frequently from overseas. A good number of topical dealers have their tables set up in the bourse, or sales area. Various study units have meetings and seminars. Social gatherings and side trips to see the local area attractions are set up as well.

Since postage stamp shows are important to collectors, the ATA also offers collectors current listings of postage stamp shows and exhibitions being held across the country. Additionally, this organization now helps collectors by advising them of stamp clubs in their communities.

The ATA has a translation service to aid in communications between members, both here and abroad. It also has a panel of experts to help collectors who have questions about their particular interests. The American Topical Association has been a paramount organization in the advancement of helping people learn and share their

interests through philately.

Stamp collecting is one of the most popular hobbies in the United States today. It is truly a hobby that can be enjoyed by anyone who still has a sense of curiosity and an urge to learn more about a subject of their choosing. It is fun; it is educational; it is creative; and it is a perfect outlet for seniors who are ready to step out of the cocoons of their lives and enter an entrancing world of fun education, creativity, relaxation and satisfaction.