

MY THEMATIC COLLECTIONS

Betty Salter

My two special thematic collections are "Conservation" and "Molluscs in Philately". (A rather grand name for shellfish, snails, squid etc. shown on philatelic material of any type.)

I have collected stamps since the late 1940's — anything that came my way! For the first 20 or so years I had never heard of thematic collecting but always kept, on separate pages, any stamps showing natural subjects. This was a logical development from my keen interest in most aspects of natural history. I have a shell collection and my first working years were at a museum.

As more time became available I decided to do something with all my "pretty" stamps. Exhibiting didn't come into my thinking at that stage. Finally I set out "The Classification and Distribution of Plants and Animals." WHAT A MOUTHFUL! What an undertaking! It soon became apparent that this was far too big an area to cover effectively. After the PANPEX '77 exhibition, I decided to consolidate my interests into the two areas first mentioned. Both are still quite vast and this is something that needs to be considered.

It is easier to collect effectively within a narrower area of interest as long as you are sure the material is available — it almost always is. Thematic scope seems to be unlimited! It would be easier on the pocket to collect only "Water Sport" for instance; rather than every sporting issue put out. This would be a smaller area to be an 'expert' on, many people limit their area even more. The choice is entirely yours.

My collections are constantly evolving in approach and appearance. I have reconstructed each several times. To me, this is an important aspect of thematic collecting. If the collection is a living, growing one you must be prepared to rewrite and rearrange pages as new material and information comes to hand, and your ideas grow about your chosen theme.

When starting out on a new theme a dual approach is probably best. A basic idea of what your collection is to be about and a growing accumulation of stamps and supporting philatelic material on that subject. Don't start writing up too soon. Keep cuttings from magazines and notes from books. Sort these to match your plan later.

When setting out to write up, or reconstruct, a collection I draw up a rough plan of what I want to do; study the material available; sort it to match the plan and then, where necessary, modify the plan to suit the material.

Keeping the plan on the wall ahead of me, I work step by step, writing up in sections. This makes research easier — India today, whales next week! I rough out a page on old stamp paper; pencil it up on good paper, planning positions of stamps and covers; ink in and finally mount the items.

Conservation of the world's wildlife and natural resources is of great concern to me and I enjoy the research necessary to develop my collection. I make good use of the Public Library but have also built up my own reference library.

I collect magazine cuttings and notes from anywhere, filing them in clear plastic bags corresponding to the plan's sections. This grew from original good intentions to keep a loose-leaf scrap book of such notes, but I found it took too much time and left too little for stamps! The other way is just as effective. You don't have to have an elaborate filing system.

With "Conservation" there is ample scope to develop the theme both thematically (story) and philatelically (material). I do not feel obliged to buy every wildlife set that is issued, but choose those which suit my intentions.

Seeking out earlier material is not always easy. Either it is in a dealer's stock but the one stamp you want (preferably mint) does not warrant the high price of the entire set or the stamp you want is highly priced and there are limits to how far one can stretch the finance available. (See, for instance, the United States 1898 4c "Indian hunting Bison".)

Finding other material such as postal stationery, (especially older material), lettercards, commercial letters and interesting cancels is still as much good luck as good management. Quite often the arms of a country provide motifs useful for thematic collectors. Other collectors are often a big help when it comes to unusual material.

Another problem I encounter is that of availability of material. Both of my themes embrace stamps from throughout the world. In New Zealand I find it difficult to track down material from countries that are not from the Pacific or British Commonwealth. Sometimes the lowest priced items in a catalogue can cause the most frustration, yet they are needed to form an important link in the theme.

Reading stamp auction lists and writing to selected dealers overseas seems to be the only answer for this problem but this takes quite a lot of time and determination.

For my "shells" collection I have a standing order with a dealer for all new issues. Very early material is difficult, there is definitely not a great deal to be found.

A section which I find most interesting and enjoy working on is "The Traditional Use of Shells." Here again is scope for good thematic development. Shells and shell products appear in all sorts of stamp issues. People wearing shells, fish hooks made from shell, strings of pearls for example. If unnoticed when first issued, these can be tricky to track down later.

The classification of shells, I have learned, is of more interest to me than to most others who view the collection. I find that in most instances any collection which confines itself to the scientific classification of species — plant or animal — lacks thematic development, becoming a subject collection. The same can usually be said of one about the models of cars. On the other hand, you could create a theme; "The Evolution of Road Transport."

You must know your chosen subject very well to develop properly but writing up (annotation) must be kept to a minimum. You should not be illustrating an encyclopedia with a few stamps, but letting the stamps and other material tell the story with a little help from your text. This means that sometimes hours of reading will be shown by only a brief heading and sentence or two on one page. This information, however, must be absolutely relevant to the material you have on that page.

Another problem I regularly find is that the incorrect naming of a species on a stamp. I check all scientific identifications on stamps. When they appear wrong, I cross-check from two or three sources. There may have been a name change, in which case I use my most reliable source, or if possible Encyclopaedia Britannica, as an ultimate authority.

When you are really interested in your chosen theme, as most thematic people are, gathering information is usually a pleasure, not a chore.

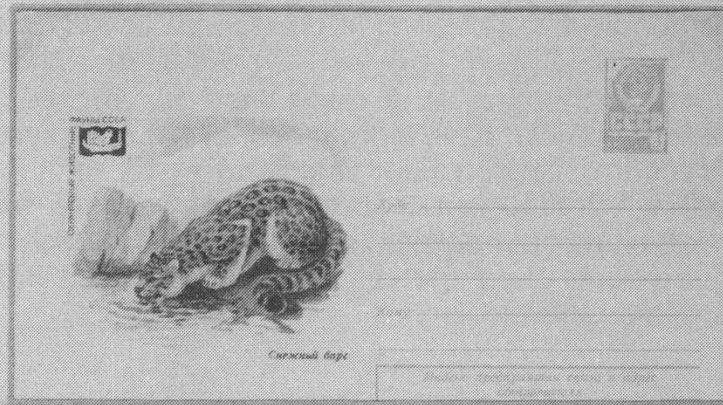
Thematic collecting is a good field for those with plenty of imagination, you can have a great deal of fun and pleasure forming a good thematic collection. Friends and family will enjoy looking at it with you, sharing your interest. If you decide to go on to competitive work and/or exhibiting your collection, you will have to become familiar with the requirements of competing. These will be dealt with in a separate section of the Guide.

Snow Leopard



Beautiful.
Rare. Shy.
Solitary.
Hunted + Endangered

Lives in inhospitable mountain regions of Central Asia between Russia + Mongolia and across the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau. Once more widespread, but hunted for its beautiful pelt. Cancel notes it is in the Russian 'Red Book' (of endangered species)



A sample page from my Conservation collection.