

# THEMATIC COLLECTING

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## *INTRODUCTION*

Thematic collecting is currently one of the most popular forms of collecting stamps. It is an excellent avenue for introducing people to our hobby as a thematic collection can bring together ones other interests and the enjoyment of philately.

What is thematic collecting? The simplest description of thematic collecting is that it involves an arrangement of philatelic material (most commonly, stamps) by their theme or picture. It is particularly important to note however that thematic collecting involves more than an arrangement of stamps. A good and interesting thematic collection will bring together all the elements of collecting including traditional philately, postal history and postal stationery.

## *AN HISTORICAL BACKGROUND*

A brief comment on the development of thematic collecting from an historical viewpoint is a useful way to help us clarify the modern approach to this field.

The very early thematic collections were likely to have comprised an accumulation of stamps of a common theme. For example a collection of birds on stamps might have been arranged by country, or by date of issue, generally with the sets of stamps remaining intact on each page. Another approach might have considered an arrangement by the type of bird shown on the stamps.

Three refinements to this general approach then emerged and these were described as:-

- (i) thematic collections
- (ii) subject collections
- (iii) purpose of issue collections.

Purpose of issue collections were mostly those that covered perhaps an omnibus series such as the Silver Jubilee of King George V or more recently the 25th Anniversary of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

A collection which is restricted to such a field would almost invariably have limited scope for extensive development in terms of our approach to thematic collections today.

Subject collections were seen as those which expanded a particular topic by way of exploring the different types of philatelic material that could be included in them. The pages may have been arranged by country or in chronological order. There was an emphasis placed on including philatelic items associated with traditional philately — for example, proofs, essays, varieties, re-entries, overprints, booklets, different perforations and watermarks, missing colours, and so on. As

well as all of these, covers and postmarks, slogans, meter franks, postcards, lettercards, aerogrammes, and other similar material normally found in a postal history or postal stationery collection were equally sought after. However little emphasis was placed on developing a theme linking the material in a cohesive thematic manner.

Thematic collections on the other hand generally showed the reverse of the above emphasis. Much importance was placed on developing a storyline while less attention was paid to philatelic items other than the basic material.

The general rule for any of these approaches (and it is even more important today) was to let the philatelic material be the dominant feature of your collection. One could include the odd photograph or newspaper clipping in it, however these should never overshadow the philatelic material either throughout the entire collection or on any one page by itself.

#### *THE MODERN APPROACH*

With the ongoing development of the two main streams of thematics a noticeable trend began to emerge. Thematic collections, i.e. those primarily concerned with the development of a theme in the arrangement of their material, began to introduce a wider variety and range of philatelic items including all the specific ones mentioned earlier.

Subject collections, normally showing a good depth of philatelic material but which was linked in a relatively simplistic manner, began developing a theme or storyline from an original idea.

What was happening in effect, was the merging together of these two broader types of collecting. The modern approach therefore, is to consider a collection (or an exhibition entry) against one uniform set of criteria. A modern thematic collection should contain all the elements briefly outlined thus far. We must remember it is a *philatelic* collection and not a book, nor is it a collection of memorabilia. At this point I should stress that, as with any collection whether thematic or otherwise, it is important to collect and arrange it exactly as you want to. However we can also look at methods to enhance our collections or exhibits and if you have this in mind I recommend the most appropriate way to achieve this is to consider the F.I.P. (Federation Internationale de Philatelie) thematic regulations for the purposes of philatelic exhibiting. These set out the basis on how a modern thematic collection will be judged and we will now discuss the criteria in more detail.

#### *THE THEMATIC COLLECTION*

*In accordance with the F.I.P. regulations a thematic collection ... develops a theme according to the plan, demonstrating the best knowledge of the theme through the philatelic items chosen. The thematic collection uses all types of related appropriate philatelic material. Non philatelic material cannot be admitted.*

Of what does a thematic collection comprise? It consists of both thematic and philatelic elements. The thematic elements are those concerning the plan and the development of the theme.

(a) *The plan*

The plan sets out the *structure* of the collection and also its subdivision into smaller parts or chapters. (When you are entering your thematic collection into an Exhibition the plan must be provided at the beginning of the exhibit.)

As well as detailing the contents of the collection and its subdivision the plan should also state their relative size.

It must also be fully consistent with the title of your collection or entry, be logical, correct and balanced.

The F.I.P. regulations state that:

*The plan may:-*

*\* be freely chosen in order to make the synthesis of a theme or an idea*

*\* derive naturally from the theme, for instance when this describes analytically organisations, institutions, and re-current events.*

The regulations also note that a plan based on a classification by country, in date order or by type of material would not be suitable.

So the first and most important decision to consider after determining the theme you wish to follow is that concerning its scope. If you are intending to put together a collection suitable for exhibiting then it is best to firstly accumulate as much relevant material as you can. At some later stage the material you have acquired will provide a good basis for identifying a specific direction to take. This will allow the choice of a more precise theme together with the outline or plan showing how the collection will be structured.

A typical plan (as it would appear on your plan page) might be:

RACE TO THE MOON

	Pages in Exhibit	Pages in Collection
Title Page	1	1
Plan Page	1	1
1. THE EARLY DAYS	25	35
1-1 The Early Experiments		
1-2 The Space Age Begins		
1-3 The First Satellites		
2. MAN GOES INTO SPACE	30	50
2-1 The Development of Manned Spacecraft		
2-2 Flights of the Cosmonauts		
2-3 Flights of the Astronauts		
3. HEADING FOR THE MOON	23	40
3-1 The Space Probes		
3-2 Early Apollo Flights		
3-3 Man Lands on the Moon		
TOTAL	80	127

It will also be noted that there is provision for a title page. Although this is not part of the actual judging criteria it is a very good idea to include a title page. If we draw an analogy with a book, a title page can give the collection a fine and eye-catching dust jacket.

In terms of the F.I.P. requirements the development of the theme is evaluated on the:

- *presence and adequacy of the plan page*
- *consistency of the plan with the title*
- *correct, logical and balanced subdivision in parts*
- *coverage of all the parts necessary to develop the plan*

*(b) The development of the theme*

As stated earlier the other thematic element in a collection or exhibit is the development of the theme. Here you can show all your originality and the depth of your personal research. The higher the knowledge of the chosen theme the greater is the likelihood of selecting key philatelic items to highlight important aspects in the collection's plan.

This means that the selection of material is very important as is the placement and sequence of the items throughout the collection. The text linking the philatelic material must be correct, accurate, concise and relevant.

I stress the importance of relevancy — all the material on any given page should relate directly to the point being made on that page within the overall context of the development of your theme.

In terms of the F.I.P. requirements the development of the theme is evaluated on the:

- *originality of the research*
- *depth and balance of the elaboration*
- *thematic importance*
- *correct thematic knowledge.*

*(c) The philatelic material*

The third aspect of the thematic collection (or exhibit) is that of the chosen philatelic material itself.

Each item must be selected strictly with regard to the theme. The range of material that can be used was outlined earlier and includes not only the stamps themselves but also covers, postmarks, slogans, meter franks, die proofs, imperforate and other perforation varieties, booklets, missing colours, and so on. In fact, anything acceptable in any other philatelic discipline is almost certainly equally acceptable in a thematic collection.

The F.I.P. regulations also recognise that *philatelic studies may be included in an exhibit as long as they are consistent with the thematic development and the degree of specialisation of the exhibit.*

In other words do not overdo a specialised study of one stamp for example, in one aspect or section of your plan if this *either* produces a grave imbalance in the collection as a whole *or* is not consistent with the theme's development.

With regard to used covers or other cancelled postal documents it is preferable that those showing contemporary postal rates are selected for inclusion and that their usage has been genuine and not philatelic.



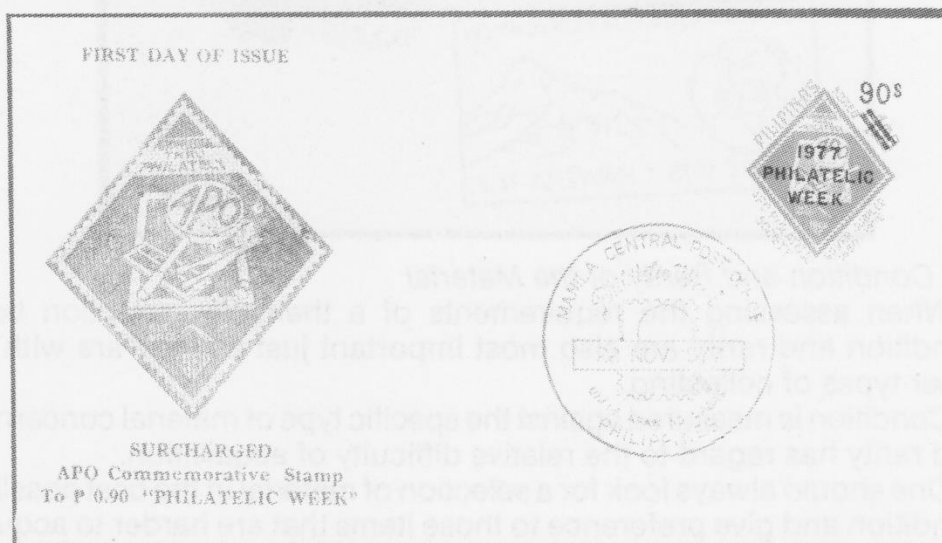
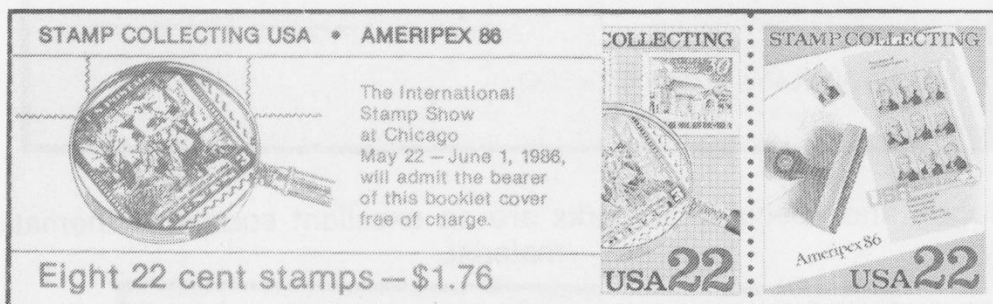
Philatelic items such as First Day Covers are not so desirable and should not be used if the only reason for their inclusion relates to the cachet or picture on the left hand side.

However postal stationery items (lettercards, postcards, aerogrammes, etc) with official postal imprints can be used where the illustration on either side of the card has some relevance.

The evaluation of philatelic material (other than for condition and rarity) comes within the criteria for philatelic knowledge which is measured by the degree of knowledge expressed in the exhibit (or collection).

Philatelic knowledge is measured on the:

- *presence of the different types of philatelic items*
- *correct adherence to the rules of philately*
- *philatelic importance*
- *postal characteristics of the documents*
- *valid philatelic study, when consistent with the plan.*



Often postal stationery items can be useful to show an aspect of the theme which is not available on an issued stamp.



Slogan and special postmarks are an excellent source of thematic material.



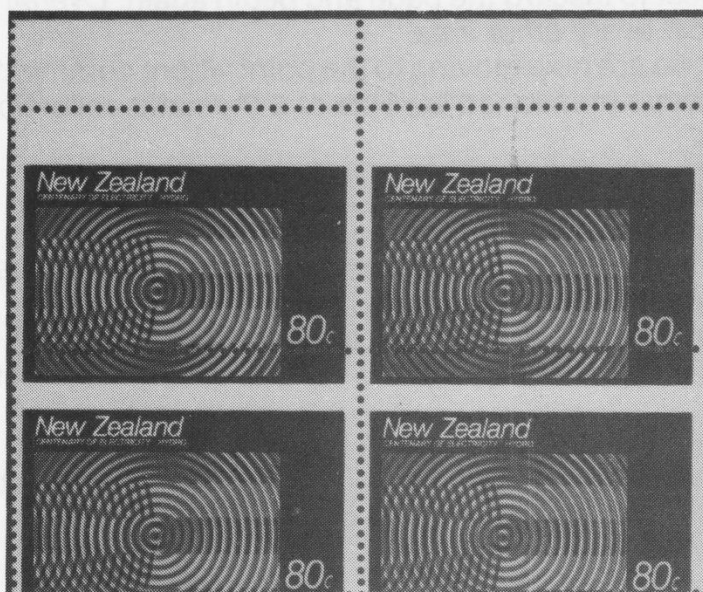
*(d) Condition and Rarity of the Material*

When assessing the requirements of a thematic collection both condition and rarity are also most important just as they are with all other types of collecting.

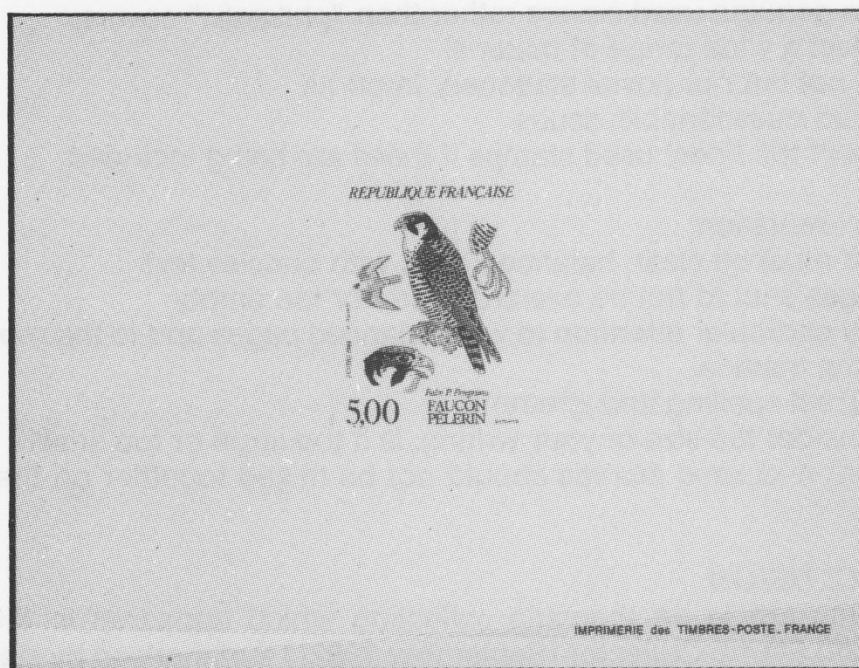
Condition is measured against the specific type of material concerned and rarity has regard to the relative difficulty of acquisition.

One should always look for a selection of material in the best possible condition and give preference to those items that are harder to acquire over their more common counterparts, as this shows effort.

Other varieties should also be included where possible.



*A perforation variety*



*A proof sheet*

*(e) Presentation*

The final consideration is that of presentation. The text should be as brief as possible and the material on your pages well balanced with a varied layout. A good title page is also important as is the overall

impression of your collection. Always be neat and tidy and if a mistake is made it is best to discard the page and begin again. *Overall impression affects almost every other area.*

However we are now moving to the point where comments and hints on all the above mentioned aspects of a thematic collection might be appropriate.

#### COMMENTS AND HINTS

##### (i) the thematic elements

- keep the plan and the development of the collection consistent, with the plan being of moderate size.
- ensure that the development is clear and not confused
- maintain a balance between the various chapters or sections of the collection
- avoid sections inconsistent with the theme
- the development must be logical, balanced and complete
- show evidence of research and originality

##### (ii) the philatelic elements

- avoid showing stamps only
- avoid too much philatelic study (nor too little)
- avoid forgeries, or irrelevant blocks, or non-philatelic material
- use genuine used covers rather than “philatelic” covers.
- select a wide range of material
- do not cut out postal stationery imprints
- avoid questionable issues
- select the finest used stamps if these are being included

##### (iii) presentation

- this must be clear, balanced, tidy, with concise text
- pages should not be overcrowded nor too empty
- pay particular attention to well balanced pages and to the mounting of the material.
- correct spelling and grammar
- consider the size of your writing, is it too large or too small?
- mint and used stamps should not be mixed together on the same page

#### CONCLUSION

In my article on thematic collecting which appeared in the New Zealand Stamp Collector (September 1982) I summarised by stating “it is a matter of putting your material in a form to its best advantage”. I believe this is still relevant. In shaping your collection it will be necessary to consider its size and scope and how you *plan* to structure all the facets of the chosen theme. It is also important to pay particular attention to the *development* of the theme and to the *philatelic* elements. Most of all it is important to show your own *research* and *originality* through the presentation of your collection.