

EXHIBITING 101: Thematic Exhibiting

Robert R. Henak

Having gone about as far as I can for now with general exhibiting concepts, it is time to dig into the nitty-gritty of putting together a particular type of exhibit. Thematic exhibits are a great place to start. Many people I know who are on the verge of taking the plunge into exhibiting collect based on the subject matter of the philatelic material rather than the issuing country.

What is a Thematic Exhibit?

The American Philatelic Society's *Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting* (7th ed., available for free download at <https://stamps.org/Portals/0/Judging-Manual.pdf>) grants exhibitors much freedom to create their own means of telling the story they wish to share with the world. One may choose one of the more conventional structures, such as Traditional, Postal History or Display, in which case they will be expected to comply with the usual set of guidelines developed over time for such exhibits. Alternatively, the exhibitor may strike off on his or her own, making clear on the title page what they intend to accomplish and why. One's medal level for such alternative formats will often depend on how well one accomplishes the identified goal and how the difficulty level of the showing compares with that of more conventional approaches.

A thematic exhibit, however, is a more conventional type of exhibit. These exhibits have been around awhile and the exhibiting world, accordingly, has developed certain standard conventions that judges will expect from those choosing this format when exhibiting on the national level. One should note that those conventions were developed at a time when exhibiting based on the subject of the philatelic material was deemed less "legitimate" than more traditionally philatelic and postal history exhibits. As a result, the expected standards are quite restrictive to enhance the difficulty of thematic exhibits to counter their perceived – at the time – frivolousness.

Section 3.5.13 of the *Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting* (7th ed) states that:

A thematic exhibit develops a subject by illustrating it with a wide variety of appropriate philatelic material, and supporting it with associated thematic and philatelic text, in accordance with the Title, subtitle (if any), and the Plan. . . . The exhibitor can select any subject or theme as long as it is not about a philatelic element (such as a particular stamp or series of stamps) or characteristics (such as stamp perforations or postal stationery knives).

While exhibits generally tell a story, a thematic exhibit thus focuses on something other than the development of stamps, rates, routes and uses. Examples would be exhibits about clowns, mermaids, owls or a particular person.

Unlike most other types of exhibits, the thematic exhibit focuses primarily on the subject matter of the philatelic material exhibited. Thus, the 3¢ U.S. pictorial issue of 1869 (Scott 114) would be important in a railway thematic exhibit because it shows a steam engine, not because it paid the first-class letter rate at the time for up to ½ ounce, because it was printed by the National Bank Note Company or because it might be on a cover between two discontinued post offices in Indiana.

The same holds true for a cover. The subject matter of a stamp on cover can further a thematic storyline. The cancellation also could fit into a thematic exhibit because the date, post office name or a pictorial cancellation illustrates some aspect of the theme. As I will explain in a future article, this does not mean that other non-thematic aspects of the material are irrelevant. It merely means that the central focus is on how it illustrates and furthers the thematic development of the exhibit.

Thematic versus Topical

Although the terms are often used interchangeably, there is a difference between a thematic exhibit and a topical exhibit. As explained in Section 3.5.14 of the *Manual of Philatelic Judging*, a topical collection or exhibit is limited to philatelic material directly reflecting the chosen subject rather than telling a story about it. Thus, a topical collection of horses generally will be limited to stamps, postal stationery, cancellations, and the like, in some way portraying or depicting different kinds of horses. I hope to more fully address topical exhibits in future articles.

A thematic exhibit, on the other hand, should tell a well-developed story by illustrating relevant points related to the theme or subject of the exhibit. Accordingly, a thematic exhibit about John F. Kennedy likely would touch upon World War II, the Democratic and Republican parties of the 1950s, Richard Nixon, Cuba, the Civil Rights Movement and the like, as well as Kennedy's family and direct personal experiences and influences.

At one time, topical exhibits tended to be frowned upon. While fully legitimized by the *Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting* (7th ed.), they still may be looked down upon among some judges. While most thematic exhibitors will start with a topical collection, judges will expect them to expand into related areas so they can tell a more complete story should they choose the thematic format.

My *Horsing Around* exhibit, for instance, has suffered from the fact that it is necessarily a topical exhibit with thematic aspects. It basically illustrates a number of different non-equine horses divided into general categories, such as plants, animals, people and actions, with many examples shown thematically (because there is no philatelic material picturing the specific concept), but with little or no overall thematic story development. Although I have not shown it for a few years, and not since the Seventh Edition of the judging manual, the exhibit accordingly met mixed results when it came to national-level judging.

For excellent examples of thematic exhibits, see David McNamee's *Canoe*, Phil Stager's *Coconuts* or Van Siegling's *The Magical World of Harry Potter*, to name just a few. Also, be sure to attend the National Topical Stamp Show in Omaha this August and view the many fine thematic exhibits there. *Coconuts*, and many other great exhibits, may be viewed online at: www.aape.org/exhibits.asp.

In future articles, I will address the conventions that exhibitors choosing the thematic format will be expected to hold to, things like the structure of thematic exhibits, the types of material permitted in such exhibits and how the exhibitor is expected to show "philatelic knowledge" for purposes of the Exhibit Evaluation Forms used for judging exhibits on a national level. ☐