

LE SALON DU TIMBRES - A report of the exhibition
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For nine days in late June/early July, La Poste held a stamp exhibition at the Parc Floral on the outskirts of Paris. Like its predecessor in 1994, it was a cross between a national and international show, albeit aimed at a French audience. By the close, around 80,000 visitors out of a predicted 100,000 had attended. These days this sort of attendance is normally reserved for exhibitions held in Asia and La Poste is to be congratulated at managing to attain such a large turnout.

Arriving at the Parc Floral, visitors were greeted by a team of friendly young women in Salon t-shirts who were giving away free show guides, stamp passports and a daily show report. The next feature was a spacious area staffed by the ITVF (the French stamp printing works at Perigeux). Many cylinders, tools and other paraphernalia were on display, with staff answering all manner of technical questions from modern-era French stamp specialists. Gold foil blocking was being undertaken at the show on a special Parc Floral miniature sheet by an adapted Heidelberg press and sales at euro7,60 were brisk. Other ITVF items including Salon 'gravure' sheets at euro15,00 per set of ten also sold well.

Leaving the above three halls behind us, a brief spell outside revealed plant displays, a fire engine, tractor and light aircraft, plus a large area was reserved to display the journey of a letter. These were especially popular attractions with the many children who attended - except when it rained.

Visitors then entered a hall of 22,000 square metres where there was an excellent mix of philatelic and non-philatelic attractions, ensuring that the whole family was kept amused. Five themed areas were devoted to Formula One (with Trulli's Renault), Nature (including virtual reality vision), Auto-Moto (with various motor bikes, including a Triumph Bonneville), Aviation (with a jet engine and models) and Sport. The 100 year Entente-Cordiale was severely tested in this last section, where the France-England UEFA Euro 2004 football match was being played on a giant screen (yes, that's the one where we lost!). All these sections were accompanied by displays of stamps and covers on the respective theme and they attracted a lot of attention, not least because a competition resulted in many stamps being actively sought to answer the questions.

Many collectors from across Europe took part by exhibiting in the philatelic competitions. These comprised one-frame of 16 pages each and this approach was really interesting to me, for there are many exhibits where five or eight frames of similar stamps can become rather boring. With this concept, there is more variety of subjects covered and I am sure that this approach has a greater interest for the non-collecting show visitor.

There were 100 dealers present, offering everything from the latest stamp error (the French Entente-Cordiale stamp missing all text, making a bland,

incomprehensible design even worse - and that takes some doing!), through to early items of postal history. Not surprisingly there was a large emphasis on France and her colonies.

Postal authorities were largely represented by their agents in France, although there were several exceptions. The stand for French Polynesia would not have been the same without the presence of a genuine Polynesian young woman in traditional attire. Collectors of modern issues benefit so much from these type shows because stamps are largely sold at face value and the chance of examining whole sheets is not normally possible outside of this environment. The Crown Agents were there, as was the Royal Mail which had sent an employee from Tallents House to support their agent.

So, what else was there to retain the interest of visitors? Well, singers and sports personalities popped in, you could have your photo printed alongside real stamps (the French equivalent of Smilers TM) and then vote for the next French definitive design from a choice of 100 hopefuls. You could sit and rest or eat, buy from a large range of non-philatelic books in the boutique or examine the latest catalogues on the ASCAT stand. Children could draw and paint stamps, test their skill on various simulators and play on games machines - even learn how to collect stamps!

The French Postal Museum was in attendance with a real mail coach, where frequent enactments of the coach being robbed by brigands proved to be a great attraction for young and old alike. I found myself part of one of the shows when I was spun round by the robbers and promptly shot, although clearly I lived to tell the tale. This piece of theatre was a terrific way of publicising the forthcoming display at the museum.

This was a large, well organised and friendly show and I think that we could learn a lot from the approach taken by the French Post Office.

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