

Preparing a Thematic Exhibit for International Competition

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Next month will see the opening of the eight day LONDON 2010 international stamp exhibition and one of the highlights for me will be the opportunity to see 2,400 frames of competitive exhibits from collectors around the world. I was fortunate in being chosen as one of those collectors and this article tells the story of how I went about preparing my exhibit.

It is necessary to start by going back many years when I first started to diversify my collecting interests. I had been a general collector, then narrowed my area of interest to a few commonwealth countries and finally 'discovered' thematics. My chosen topic was to be letter boxes, as I had always had a fascination with them right from the days when my Mum would have to lift me to reach the slot when posting a letter! Deciding on a theme is half the battle, as you must have a real passion for your chosen subject if you are to sustain interest down the years.

I have now been collecting letter box philatelic material for more than 30 years and initially concluded that it would be a small subject, as I had struggled to complete eight pages for my local club competition, so I filled the pages with lots of writing-up. Big mistake! The judge reminded me that I was not writing a book on the subject (that would come later), but I was supposed to be giving a philatelic display.

I redoubled my efforts to find material and went through every single page of Gibbons' *Stamps of the World* recording manually anything that was remotely connected with my subject. These days, I use the American Scott catalogues as they are in a digital PDF format, where keyword searches turns-up all manner of interesting items at the click of a mouse button. Do not under-estimate the need for research into your subject, both philatelic and thematic, for it is only by a deep understanding about what you are interested in that you have any chance of revealing that depth of knowledge that is so essential for your display pages. Indeed, this aspect accounts for 30 points in the judges scoring.

I eventually produced a listing of the stamps that I had found for publication by the Letter Box Study Group and it comprised two sides of A4. The handbook that I am currently compiling will be over 600 pages of A5, with all types of philatelic material included, such has been the expansion in my knowledge of stamps, stationery and postal history items. Over the years, my exhibit has gradually expanded from 8 to 9, 16, 32, 64 and is currently 80 exhibit pages. I now have the luxury of owning far too much material to show within the space, so I can choose the most appropriate items.

Thematic exhibits require an introduction and plan, which some exhibitors see as a chore, but for me it focuses the mind on the order that the material will best be displayed in and the 'chapters' that I will use to tell the story – much like the 'beginning, middle and end' principle used when writing a book, although a Plan must be much more than merely a contents page. The judges will allocate points for thematic exhibits based on the adjacent table, with the number of points given determining the level of award, which range from a certificate of participation through to a large gold medal with special prizes at their disposal for deserving exhibitors.

1. Treatment and Development	35 points
Title and Plan, Development of the Theme, Creativity and Innovation	
2. Knowledge, Personal Study and Research	30 points
Philatelic Knowledge and Research, Thematic Knowledge and Research	
3. Condition and Rarity	30 points
4. Presentation	5 points

To be faced with 80 blank sheets of paper is quite daunting and it takes a lot of dedication – and time – to complete an exhibit. I have found that however long I think it will take to complete, double it. I recall all too well the day when I was completing an earlier version of the exhibit for Stampex on the day that it was due to be handed in, while making my final purchases in Stanley Gibbons in the Strand. I vowed on that day that never again would I put myself under that sort of unnecessary pressure.

Using the Plan page as my guide, I started to write-up my story line – not like in a book, but as concise sentences, for generally I do not want to have two philatelic items telling the same part of the story. An example might be: “The first mainland box was in 1853 at Botchergate. The design remains unknown, but a 1989 reproduction Penfold now marks the site.” With these sentences written-out, I then allocate appropriate material to illustrate the point being made in the sentence.

The material and individual text sentences are then laid out on pages and re-arranged until what I consider to be a pleasing appearance has been attained. I then use my publishing program (Serif’s *Page Plus*) to arrange the words and to produce thin box rules 5mm larger than the size of each philatelic item. These draft pages are eventually printed-off, invariably onto the back of scrap paper with the items placed in their boxes to check that the layout works when seen as part of a sixteen page frame. I usually stand on a chair and look down on the display to see if the layout works, while many exhibitors construct a lightweight display frame to achieve the same result.

There will be many changes before ‘perfection’ is reached, at which time I then print all 80 pages onto acid-free 210gsm off-white card (pure white pages can appear too stark, in my opinion, while coloured pages are discouraged or banned in the regulations). I do not use proprietary album pages as I find that the quadrille or pre-printed rules or ornamentation distracts from the overall appearance. The material is then mounted with archival photo corners and Hawid-type mounts and inserted into polyester exhibition protectors, which get sequentially numbered to help those mounting the pages into the display frames at the show.

That’s it, simple isn’t it! OK, clearly it is not rocket science, but it is quite a challenge to produce an exhibit that you are personally proud of. There is a great feeling of satisfaction on completion of an exhibit and often a sense of relief that it has been finished in time. It is early February as I type these lines and my exhibit just needs the material to be mounted onto the pages, giving me a lot of time to make further amends or incorporate newly acquired material if appropriate, for an exhibit is never really finished, but is a constant ‘work in progress’.

Some exhibitors are known as ‘pot hunters’, i.e. they are solely interested in the level of award that they might get, while others aim to put on a good show for the public to enjoy. I guess that I probably fall half-way between the two, for after all that effort I would certainly like to be suitably rewarded with what I consider to be the appropriate medal level, while at the same time I want the public to go away as enthusiastic about the subject as I am. I have been disappointed at some of the results given, but then again if a large gold had been given at the exhibit’s first outing, I would have had nothing to progress towards. It took me many years before I attained my first ever national level gold at Harrogate 2008 and the sense of pleasure and pride cannot be quantified.

I state on my title page: “Since their introduction, letter boxes have played a key role in spreading the written word among literate peoples. They guard the mails in all weathers and environments, but are rarely noticed by the millions worldwide using them daily”. I cannot guarantee that all the visitors viewing my exhibit will look at letter boxes differently in the future, but that is certainly what I hope I will have achieved. Wish me luck!

(1390 words)