
EXHIBITING 101: Thematic Exhibiting

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In my last article, I explained what a thematic exhibit is and how thematic exhibits differ from topical exhibits. To summarize, a thematic exhibit tells its story by focusing on the subject matter of the philatelic material, rather than on the country that issued it or the rate paid.

This article begins the focus on philatelic material that can and should be used in a thematic exhibit to illustrate the thematic story line. Future articles will address additional permissible material, the storyline and write up of the exhibit, the technical requirements and, finally, what judges look for in a thematic exhibit.

While the American Philatelic Society's *Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting* (7th edition) grants exhibitors much freedom to create their own means of telling the story, if you choose to label your exhibit "thematic," the judges will expect you to follow certain conventions. One of the conventions central to competitive thematic exhibits concerns the type of material used to illustrate the story. The manual is available for free download at <https://stamps.org/Portals/0/Judging-Manual.pdf>)

Specifically, in APS shows, such material is limited to items that would be appropriate for postal or revenue exhibits, plus maximum cards. While the type of material deemed appropriate for international shows is more limited, I focus here on the conventions applicable under the APS manual.

A quality thematic exhibit uses a wide variety of philatelic "elements" to illustrate the story. An element is a particular type of philatelic material, whether it is a mint commemorative stamp, a stamped cover, a cancellation or a piece of postal stationery. The exhibitor should strive to provide variety in terms of elements, not merely across the thematic exhibit as a whole, but on each page of that exhibit.

While I cannot describe here every type of philatelic material falling within these categories, and thus permissible for thematic exhibits, I will try to address the most common. An extensive list of permissible thematic elements is available at www.americantopicalassn.org/exhibiting.shtml.

The first category of materials appropriate for thematic exhibits is that appropriate for postal exhibits.

The most obvious type of philatelic material appropriate for thematic exhibits, therefore, is postage stamps. Mint stamps are better than used because the subject of the stamp is more easily seen when not covered by a cancel. If possible, CTOs (canceled-to-order stamps) should not be used at all. (The one exception here might be if you are using the cancellation on a block of CTO stamps to illustrate your story, rather than the underlying stamps).

Keep in mind that different types of stamps comprise different "elements" in the thematic exhibiting. Thus, a commemorative stamp is one element, a definitive another and an airmail stamp is yet another. Semi-postal stamps (where part of the purchase price goes to charity), special stamps (such as Christmas stamps), official stamps or even postage due stamps can provide additional elements, as can EFOs (errors, freaks

and oddities). Overprinted or precanceled stamps likewise can constitute different elements, although they generally should be used based on the overprint or cancellation, rather than the subject matter of the underlying stamp. Again, the wide variety of different stamp-based elements is illustrated on the ATA website's exhibiting page noted earlier.

Of course, an exhibit illustrated solely with stamps would be quite boring and, by failing to reflect broad philatelic knowledge, would not merit a high award. Accordingly, thematic exhibits should include other philatelic items as well.

First, any thematic point that can be illustrated by a stamp likewise can be illustrated by the same stamp properly used on cover (a mailed envelope or card). It is best if the stamp in question is the only one on the cover (colorful philatelically inspired covers with multiple stamps and overpaying the applicable rate are discouraged), or at least where it pays a separate part of the rate (as by paying the first-class portion of the total rate on a registered letter).

Second, markings provided by the post office or mail carriers also can provide thematic elements to illustrate the storyline. The cancellation, for instance, can do so through the post office name, the date or even the killer. Fancy cancels, often carved from wood or cork by small-town postmasters with too much time on their hands in the late 1800s and the 1920s and 1930s, can provide an impressive contribution to a thematic exhibit.

More recently, pictorial cancellations have been popular, commemorating any number of anniversaries, institutions, people and events. Although philatelically inspired cachets on first-day covers or event covers are not appropriate for thematic exhibits, many first day cancellations over the past 70 years have thematic elements and also would fit in such an exhibit.

Auxiliary labels or markings, whether the ubiquitous pointing finger or others, also can further the thematic storyline.

Third, postage meters have long contained thematic elements, such as the eagle in U.S. meters or the horse in those of Venezuela. Postage meters also have long permitted advertising slugs to be added to the indicia of postage. These also are per-



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mitted in thematic exhibits and provide interest and variety.

A fourth type of non-stamp postal item to help illustrate a thematic exhibit is postal stationery. The imprinted stamp reflecting payment can have thematic aspects. Likewise, such stationery (whether aerograms, envelopes or postal cards) may be illustrated in a way that can further a thematic storyline.

However, with a few exceptions, it is only the illustrations on the mint stationery as sold by the post office that may be used. Postal cards (those with preprinted postage) are in; the picture side of privately printed postcards is not. Illustrated postal stationery is in; post-production advertisement or philatelically inspired cachets, whether on FDCs or event covers, are out – even if sold by the post office. Of course, while a cachet on an FDC or the picture side of a private postcard is not appropriate to illustrate a thematic exhibit, other aspects of those items can be, such as the postmark, the stamp or auxiliary markings.

Finally, although less common, production materials for stamps and postal stationery also are permissible and are, indeed, encouraged in thematic exhibits. Thus, genuine proofs, essays, artist's drawings and the like can add both to the philatelic interest in a thematic exhibit and contribute substantially to a higher award level by demonstrating increased difficulty and greater philatelic knowledge.

Beware, however, that some countries mass-produce “proofs,” “special printings” and the like for sale to collectors. The judicious use of a few such items, when properly explained, can add to a thematic exhibit. However, excessive use or the failure to recognize and explain them could negatively impact your score for philatelic knowledge.

Next issue, I will address revenue materials and maximum cards in thematic exhibits. □



Showing multiple elements, a page from *The Olive: Olea Europaea*, Vincent De Luca's Award-Winning Exhibit.