

## Topical and Thematic Collecting

By Richard Pederson

Not only is topical and thematic collecting one of the most popular collecting areas in the hobby, but it is also a very important part of the hobby's future. Topical and thematic collecting is an area that has defied recent trends by being one of the few areas that have continued to grow despite a significant decline in membership for most organized philatelic groups and a continuing drop in paid subscriptions for philatelic publications.

For those not familiar with topical and thematic collecting, I will provide a brief introduction to this popular collecting area, discuss why it is popular, and provide some examples of popular topical and thematic collections. Topical collecting involves collecting stamps, covers, and collateral material that is related to a given topic portrayed on a stamp, such as trains, sports, or music. You can make a topic as specific or as general as you wish. For example, music could encompass anything having to do with music, such as composers, musicians, band leaders, singers, and musical instruments. You could also limit your topic to a specific composer (e.g., Ludwig von Beethoven), instrument (e.g., piano), or music genre (e.g., jazz). The wonderful thing about topical collecting is that there is no right or wrong way about approaching your collecting area. You decide your area, determine what you want to include, and proceed accordingly. For those who like some structure, the American Topical Association (ATA) provides checklists that can be used as a guide or starting point for many popular topical collecting areas. You can also use your imagination when creating a topical collection. For instance, a collection of topical material relating to Beethoven could include stamps with him on them, covers celebrating events in his life, stamps depicting places he lived, or stamps and covers pertaining to people with whom he associated. Topical collecting also has the advantage that it allows you to choose a topic (or topics) that has particular meaning or interest to you. Many people select topics related to their job or some other important aspect of their lives. An artist might select art on stamps or a doctor may select stamps and covers pertaining to the medical profession such as doctors, medicines, medical instruments, and/or hospitals.

In the American Topical Association handbook titled *Adventures In Topical Stamp Collecting*, written by George Griffenhagen and Jerome Husak, topical stamp collecting is further divided into topics arranged by either subject or by theme. Topical collections arranged by subject are group chronologically by country and thematic collections are grouped as needed to tell the desired story. For example, a subject collection on trains would contain all stamps depicting trains issued by one or more countries, grouped within each country by date of issue. A thematic topical collection might be arranged so as to show the development of the train from the earliest steam locomotives to the most modern trains in use today. Following are stamps showing three early steam engines, as depicted on San Marino stamps (Scott Numbers 594-6).

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A thematic collection might also show trains grouped by purpose (e.g., transportation, freight, mail) or by type (e.g., steam, diesel, electric). In addition, a thematic collection can integrate stamps, covers, and other related material that collectively help tell the intended story. For instance, a thematic collection on George Washington could begin with a stamp or cover depicting Washington's birthplace and end with a stamp or cover showing where he is buried. Such a collection would also include stamps, covers, and collateral material depicting events in Washington's life, places he was at, and people with whom he was associated. The stamp at the right shows United States Scott number 1032 depicting Washington's final home and burial place, Mount Vernon.



One might ask why topical collecting has increased in popularity while many other philatelic collecting areas have either remained stagnant or suffered a decline in interest. Perhaps there are several reasons driving this phenomenon. First, traditional collecting areas (e.g., worldwide collections, country collections, first day covers, plate blocks) tend to be both confining and intimidating. Collectors, by their very nature, tend to strive for completeness and, because so many stamps have been issued in recent decades, completeness (or even near completeness) is virtually impossible for worldwide collectors and even many country collections pose a daunting task. Traditional collections also tend to be very structured using stamp albums containing a space for each emission listed in a catalog.

Topical collections are more in tune with the way people currently think and do things. They are less structured, allow more creativity, and are very suited to performing the research needed to build a collection via the internet rather than using more traditional catalogs or stamp albums as a guide. With topical collecting, you can literally

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invent/create your own collecting area and decide exactly how to approach the area you have chosen. Topical collecting also has the advantage that you can take on a challenging topic that can still be pursued without spending excessive amounts of money. Like more traditional collecting areas, topical collections can be exhibited and judged on their merits when compared to other topical exhibits. Therefore, whether you are a serious philatelist assembling collections for exhibition at the national and international levels or are just collecting to have fun, there is a place for you in topical collecting.

Some examples of popular topical collecting areas are: Airplanes; Animals; Art; Authors; Automobiles; Bicycles; Birds; Cats; Disney; Dogs; Famous People; Fish; Flowers; Insects; Inventors; Law, Lighthouses; Medicine; Minerals; Music; National Parks; Olympics; Paintings; Polar Exploring; Railroads/Trains; Religion; Reptiles; Scientists; Scouts; Ships; Space; Sports; Stamps On Stamps; Trees; and United States Presidents. The following figure shows a selection of stamps and covers related to the Ships topical collecting area.



If you are interested in finding more out about topical and thematic collecting, a good place to start is the ATA website ([americantopicalassn.org](http://americantopicalassn.org)). For a modest fee of \$25, you can join the ATA and receive all the benefits of membership including a digital version of the wonderful society journal, *Topical Time*. Membership information is included on the website or by contacting the ATA at P.O. Box 8, Carterville, Illinois 62918.

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