

How to Judge a Topical Exhibit.

Dr. Edwin J. Andrews

The purpose of this article is to provide guidance to philatelic judges on how to evaluate topical exhibits that were recently added to the new 7th edition of *The APS Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting* (Manual). The article is based on the personal experience of the author and is not to be construed as representing the policy or opinion of any group or body associated with philatelic exhibiting or judging. I have personally built a 10 frame topical exhibit which is the basis for this and other articles. The exhibit has, and will be shown non-competitively at selected APS World Series of Philately (WSP) venues in 2016 and 2017. As an experienced exhibitor with particular interest in thematic and display exhibits among others, I built this exhibit to be an exemplar for exhibitors, and as a training tool for judges. As an aid to understanding difference between topical and similar exhibit types I will provide tables giving differences in various criteria for evaluating Thematic, Topical and Display exhibits.

1. The Importance of Topical Exhibiting

Philatelic shows and exhibiting in general are struggling with declining numbers and by providing flexibility in exhibiting the new edition of the Manual can stimulate the interest and participation of collectors. There are tens of thousands of topical collectors in the United States and elsewhere who have never considered exhibiting, being intimidated by the seemingly oppressive “rules” of thematic exhibiting and the perception of elitism in exhibiting. If collecting is meant to be fun, then exhibiting should also be fun. The new Manual provides guidance for those wanting to create and show topical exhibits, and in providing this opportunity for topical collectors it becomes an imperative that the judging corps understand this exhibit type so they can render unbiased and fair assessments. This is especially important with the advent of mandatory point scores (January 1, 2017) which will mitigate any judging biases and require specific assessments of the “big 4” Uniform Exhibit Evaluation Form (UEEF) evaluation criteria. There is no reason why topical exhibits cannot garner significant points and medal levels just as have picture postcards, Cinderella’s and other exhibit types. By example Bob Hisey’s “*The Christmas Seals of Finland*”, a six frame Cinderella exhibit, has consistently won golds and various other awards. Michael Dixon’s infamous “*Upper Bongoland. A Study of the 15 Bongos Value of the 1865 First Issue*” is a three frame fabrication judged as a “fantasy exhibit”, yet it has consistently earned Silver and Vermeil medals as well as creativity awards at WSP shows.

2. What is a Topical Exhibit?

The new Manual states...

“Topical exhibits are composed of a variety of philatelic items, the design of which illustrates a specific topic or subject. If you choose to present a topical exhibit, it would show as many philatelic items as possible with the image of the particular subject or group of subjects that is the focus of your exhibit. The key success factor with a topical exhibit is to have a well-defined purpose, scope and organization of the subject matter as illustrated by your material. As the

exhibitor, you have the flexibility of using whatever subject you wish, as well as any logical organizational structure.” [APS Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting, 7th Edition, 2016]

Further, in the appendices of the Manual there is guidance in creating topical exhibits stating....

“Topical exhibits are not the same as thematic exhibits, which use a variety of philatelic items exclusively to tell a story. Topical exhibits are comprised of a wide variety of philatelic items, the design of which illustrates a specific topic or subject. For example, if the focus of your exhibit is to discuss birds, a thematic treatment would detail the taxonomy, origin, anatomy, physiology, reproduction, habitat, food sources, predatory nature, life, etc., of the particular bird or group of birds. A topical exhibit would show as many philatelic items as possible that depicts the image of the particular bird or group of birds.

The key to topical exhibits is that they should have a defined title, purpose, scope, and plan of organization, all of which can be adequately assessed using the UEEF. In the case of the aforementioned birds, this organization might be by taxonomic order. As the exhibitor, you have the flexibility of using whatever focus you wish, as well as any logical organizational structure of your choosing.

One of the following structures is generally used for topical types:

- *Scientific, taxonomic, or systematic structure such as different types of minerals, gems or animals.*
- *Institutional or organizational structure such as fraternal, national or humanitarian.*
- *Event-related structure such as repetitive sporting events (World Cup, Olympics, etc.).*
- *Time-related structure such as a chronological sequence of related historical events.*
- *Other logically structured subjects.*

2.1 Additional Considerations

For topical exhibits, and unlike the limitations of thematic exhibits, any philatelic item can be included (Cinderella, illustrated mail, etc.).

- *The exhibit will be assessed on the ability to present a cohesive representation of exclusively philatelic material which adequately fulfills the stated purpose and scope of the exhibit.*
- *The degree of concordance and relationship of the items will also be an important consideration.*
- *Demonstration of philatelic knowledge is shown by the choice of items, their condition and the descriptions of items, where appropriate.*
- *The selection of more difficult and rare items would be desirable and rare material should be identified for the viewer.*
- *The text should be brief yet sufficient to carry the organizational structure of the exhibit forward.*
- *Presentation, as with any exhibit, should be neat and not distracting.”*

Comparison of Exhibit Limit Conventions

Criterion	Thematic	Topical	Display
Size (# frames)*	Any	Any	Any
Philatelic Material	Limited	Any	Any
Para-philatelic Material	Minimal	Any	Any
Non-philatelic Material	None	None	Any

* Up to 10 frames at WSP shows; One Frame Class Exhibits can be difficult for topical subjects.

3. The Role of the UEEF

Since the advent of the UEEF with the 6th edition of the Manual, judging has focused on the “big 4” criteria and less on the perceived ideal or biases of judges “experienced” in a given exhibit type. The new edition of the Manual further emphasizes this direction by eliminating anything perceived as “rules” regarding material in exhibits, and instructing that in United States exhibiting, the “big 4” criteria and their assigned points are the primary means of assessment of any exhibit, regardless of format or type. Following is a discussion of the UEEF criteria as they would ideally be applied to topical exhibits, with some examples and some comparisons to thematic and display exhibits.

4. Treatment and Importance (Treatment 20 points + Importance 10 points)

4.1 Treatment

A. Organizational Structure.

Most topical collectors organize their material in albums in some logical way. It may be country specific or by one of the aforementioned structures used for topical categorization. The essence of topical treatment rests on the choice of categorization, how logical it is and how finely it is detailed. The more detail the better. In all cases the organization should be a cohesive presentation in order to satisfy the stated title, purpose and scope. The organization should ideally impart an ease of understanding of the topical subject. Since the topical exhibit does not follow a logical progression (a story) it needs the categorization as the organizational structure and backbone from which the exhibit will develop. The categorization will also drive the purpose and scope of the exhibit. By example, my exhibit is titled *Hats - Protection, Identity, Fashion*, and uses a hierarchical structure on three uses of hats that I have chosen; protection, identity, and fashion. Those three broad categories are then divided into smaller segments. By example under protection the sub-divisions are:

1. Protection

- 1.1 Weather Elements and Sun
- 1.2 Associated with Occupation
- 1.3 Associated with Combat
- 1.4 Associated with Sporting Activities

Some of these sub-categories are then further divided into smaller sections, by example:

1. Protection

- 1.1 Weather Elements and Sun
- 1.2 Associated with Occupation
 - 1.2.1 Aerospace
 - 1.2.2 Construction
 - 1.2.3 Deep Sea Diving
 - 1.2.4 Firefighting
 - 1.2.5 Food Industry
 - 1.2.6 Heavy Industry
 - 1.2.7 Medicine
 - 1.2.8 Mining
- 1.3 Associated with Combat
 - 1.3.1 Military
 - 1.3.2 Police and Security Services
 - 1.3.3 Professional Combatants
- 1.4 Associated with Sporting Activities
 - 1.4.1 Aerial Sports
 - 1.4.2 Ball Sports
 - 1.4.3 Contact Sports
 - 1.4.4 Equestrian Sports
 - 1.4.5 Land Sports
 - 1.4.6 Motor Sports
 - 1.4.7 Paralympic Sports
 - 1.4.8 Water Sports
 - 1.4.9 Winter Sports

While this level of categorization goes to several decimal places it still allows further sub-division at the section level using page headers. By example:

1. Protection

- 1.4 Associated with Sporting Activities***
- 1.4.3 Contact Sports***

American Football

1. Protection

- 1.4 Associated with Sporting Activities***
- 1.4.3 Contact Sports***

Boxing

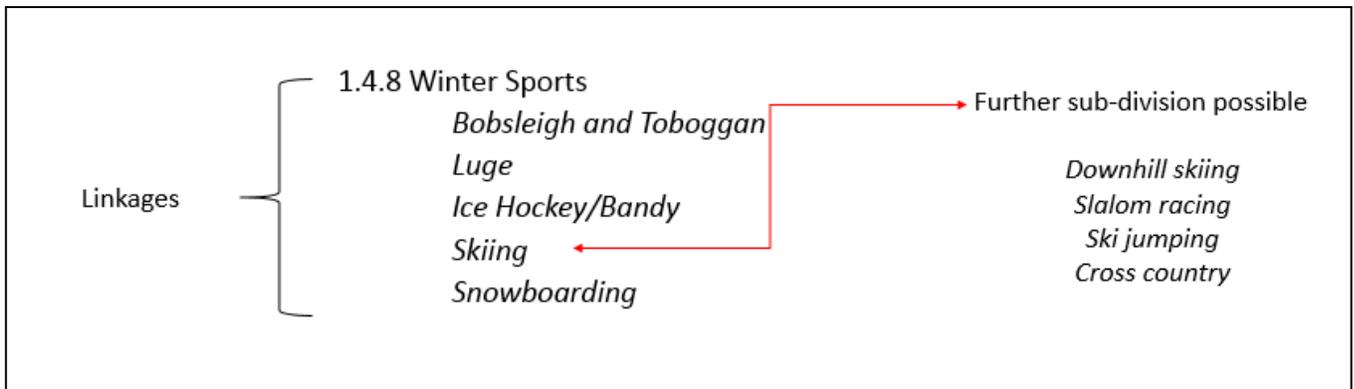
1. Protection

1.4 Associated with Sporting Activities

1.4.3 Contact Sports

Fencing

Even further sub-division is possible creating greater challenge for the exhibitor. Example follows:



So while there is no story being told there is a logical organization that allows the exhibitor to show a diversity of philatelic elements representing the subject of: (1) the overall exhibit; and, (2) the focus of a specific page of the exhibit. The greater the level of organizational detail the greater the challenge for the exhibitor.

Since there is no story to be told “linkages” are important so the exhibit does not appear disjointed, rather having a sense of cohesion. But a good topical categorization can be transposed without affecting the overall exhibit, something you could not do with a story line exhibit. By example instead of my current categorization order of Protection, Identity and Fashion, the order could be Fashion, Protection and Identity. Good organizational treatment can benefit from having an introductory paragraph or even a mini-title pages for each major section of the exhibit, providing “linkages”. This approach also reinforces what the viewer will see as the focus of the subject shifts to the next category. The hats exhibit uses this treatment to introduce each major category of function: Protection, Identity, and Fashion, one example follows:

2. Identity

Through the centuries hats have been used as a means of identification from military rank to the adherence of religious customs. Hats can also become the identifying characteristic of an individual.

The following sections of this chapter will show how hats are used for recognition and identity:

- 2.1 Cultural
- 2.2 Religious
- 2.3 Organizational

The appearance of the full page is shown in Figure 1

2. Identity

Through the centuries hats have been used as a means of identification from military rank to the adherence of religious customs. Hats can also become the identifying characteristic of an individual.



The following sections of this chapter will show how hats are used for recognition and identity:

- 2.1 Cultural
- 2.2 Religious
- 2.3 Organizational

B. Balance and Completeness Balance is also part of treatment and in topical exhibits it should be sufficient to satisfy the stated purpose of the exhibit. The main divisions and major subdivisions should be balanced in relation to the division or sub-division importance, significance or relevance to the exhibit's subject. Overdoing one favored subject can result in obvious imbalance. In thematic exhibits the plan often will have the number of pages devoted to each section in parenthesis. This same treatment can be useful in demonstrating balance in topical exhibits, but is not a requirement.

A determination of completeness is also part of assessing treatment. For topical exhibits a complete showing of everything related to the subject would be impossible, essentially having to show an entire topical collection which, depending on the subject, could be huge. So, to demonstrate completeness the exhibitor needs to show a complete presentation *of the stated organizational structure such that each category and subcategory is represented*, not leaving anything out. In addition a variety of different philatelic elements – as examples of how the topic image is widely represented in philately - helps represent completeness for topical exhibits. Even with traditional exhibits we do not expect to see every plate position or every type of proof. But a strong showing of representative examples demonstrates both good treatment and the importance of the subject in philately.

C. Text

The amount of text used in the exhibit also needs to be considered as part of treatment. In thematic and display exhibits relatively little text is used in favor of letting the elements speak for themselves by carrying the story. Similarly with topical exhibits minimal text is necessary since there is no story. However, each page needs something to explain what the page is about. With the hats exhibit I use a short sentence or two to explain a particular hat style. I do not go into the history of that type of hat, who designed it, how it is made, etc. That would create a story line and thematic approach. An example of text used to set the context of a given page follows:

<p>1. Protection 1.2 Associated with Occupation 1.2.3 Deep Sea Diving</p> <p>Deep sea divers require protection from cold temperatures, water entering the ears and nose, and to provide a fresh supply of air. Many designs of helmets and hat-mask combinations are used.</p>	<p>Underwater Protection</p>
--	-------------------------------------

This is the only text on that page as none of the elements used require further explanation or philatelic notes. . Figure 2 shows the entire page. Also note the overcrowding of elements which will be discussed later.

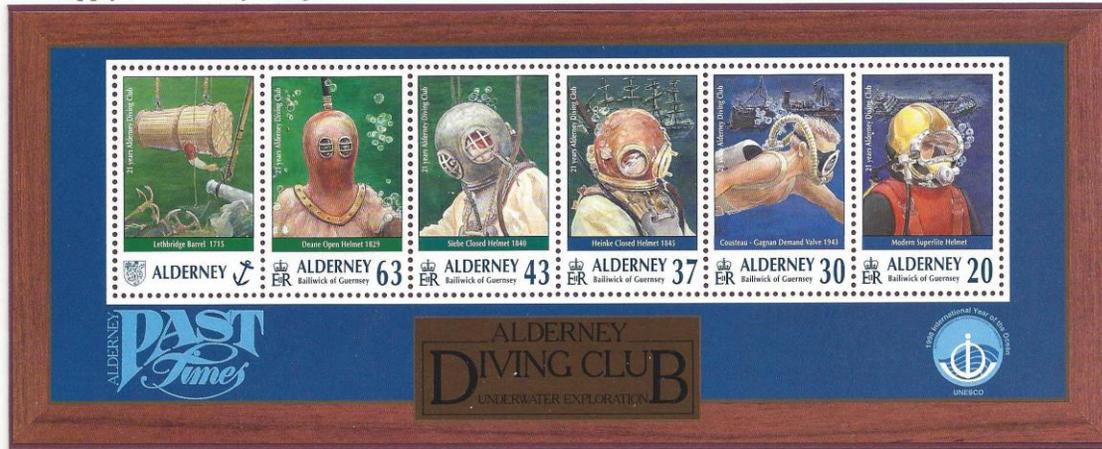
1. Protection

1.2 Associated with Occupation

1.2.3 Deep Sea Diving

Underwater Protection

Deep sea divers require protection from cold temperatures, water entering the ears and nose, and to provide a fresh supply of air. Many designs of helmets and hat-mask combinations are used.



ЧЕМПИОНАТ МИРА ПО ПОДВОДНОМУ ОРИЕНТИРОВАНИЮ Ленинград

Куда _____

Кому _____

Индекс предприятия связи и адрес отправителя _____

Почтите индекс предприятия связи места назначения

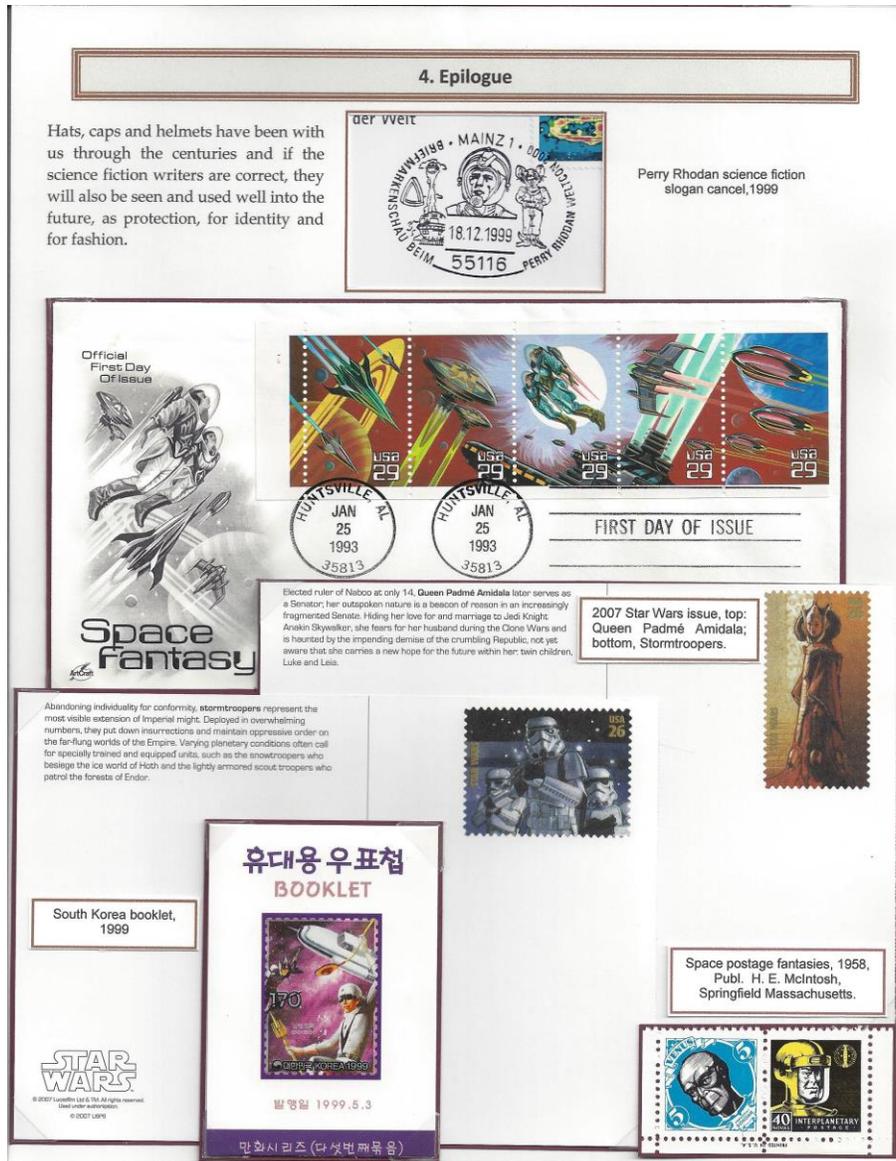
СССР 5 СССР

ЧЕМПИОНАТ МИРА ПО ПОДВОДНОМУ ОРИЕНТИРОВАНИЮ 03-10-08-1987 ЛЕНИНГРАД ПОЧТАМТ



D. Exhibit Ending

Good treatment provides a logical ending to an exhibit so it doesn't just stop. With a traditional exhibit an ending is usually the withdrawal or replacement of the stamp or issue with examples of what then followed. With thematic, display and many other exhibits having a logical progression of a story there is usually an easy way to end the exhibit tied to the stated scope. With topical exhibits this is more of a challenge yet the exhibitor should provide a logical ending. Since my exhibit is categorized based on the function of hats I used philatelic items related to science fiction, to show how hats might be used in the future. See Figure 3 as an example of a topical ending. Again note the overcrowd



Comparison of Treatment criteria in evaluating Thematic, Topical and Display Exhibits.

Criterion	Thematic	Topical	Display
TP	Essential		
Purpose & Scope	Essential		
Organizational Plan	Essential		
Development	Story	Categorization	Story
Headers and Sub-headers	Story	Categorization	Story
Linkages	Story	Categorization	Story
Balance	Chapters	Categories & Elements	Chapters, Overall Philatelic material is dominant
Ending	Essential		
Text	Terse, story + elements	Terse, categories + elements	Terse, story + elements
Concordance	For Maxi's essential; for page elements desirable		

4.2 Importance

The current Manual describes two aspects of importance, one being the philatelic importance of the exhibit, “*the exhibit covers a major aspect of philately in a postal system or geographic area*”. But thematic, display, topical and many other exhibit types are generally non-philatelic subjects. **In these cases it is exhibit importance** that carries the weight of the point score. The manual defines this as “*the exhibit represents a significant challenge in scope or complexity. The exhibit is the best example of this subject, and it cannot be easily duplicated.*” So for the challenge aspect the exhibitor needs to demonstrate that the subject is not something simple. The more complex the subject is, the harder it will be to show it using a topical treatment and therein, a demonstration of the level of challenge. Challenge is also demonstrated by the diversity and difficulty of acquisition of items shown, not just page after page of mint stamps.

How easily the exhibit could be duplicated is very subjective and assumes there are other exhibits on the same topical subject and that the judge knows of those exhibits in order to make a comparison. Since topical exhibits are just now being shown in the United States it is unlikely that other exhibits of a given topical subject will be widely known. So the organizational structure and categorization to detailed levels become a barometer of importance in topical exhibits along with the choice of philatelic elements.

Use care not to “double ding” points when assessing choice and difficulty of element acquisition. These are knowledge criteria.

Comparison of Importance criteria in evaluating Thematic, Topical and Display Exhibits.

Criterion	Thematic	Topical	Display
Philatelic	Minimal	Minimal	Minimal
Exhibit	Challenge/difficulty	Challenge/difficulty	Challenge/difficulty

5. Knowledge and Research (Philatelic and Subject Knowledge, 25 points + Personal Study and Research, 10 points.

5.1 Philatelic and Subject Knowledge

The Manual states: *“Non-philatelic Subject Exhibits — An Exception. If the exhibit subject has a non-philatelic focus as its theme and the exhibitor uses philatelic and (optional) non-philatelic items, judges will equally weigh philatelic and subject knowledge in the exhibit. In topical exhibits the subject (topic) may well be stamps on stamps but it will not be treated philatelically, that is as a traditional or postal history or other philatelic treatment. Rather it will be treated topically.”* [APS Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting, 7th Edition, 2016]

In thematic exhibiting judges look for the degree of thematic knowledge as well as philatelic knowledge equally split between the 35 points allotted. What is thematic knowledge? It is an understanding of the exhibit’s subject and how to best represent that subject with philatelic material. Additionally it is an understanding of the conventions used in United States exhibiting for thematic exhibits including the type of philatelic elements considered acceptable and the choice of best elements to represent each aspect of the story line. Multiple items related to the specific part of the story (duplication or redundancy) are frowned upon in favor of using a single well-chosen element. For topical exhibits both the topical subject knowledge and philatelic knowledge should be demonstrated. Philatelic knowledge is a given, so items that are not obvious to the judge need to be explained under the item (rates, errors, types, etc.). The choice of items is also a demonstration of knowledge. However in topical exhibits redundancy is expected. That is, multiple examples on a given page are expected since the exhibitor is purposely trying to show how the topical subject image is repeatedly depicted in philatelic elements. But, to up the level of challenge a variety of philatelic elements should be shown, in this case not constricted by any of the general conventions of thematic element choices. Meaning, in topical exhibits there might be Cinderella’s, labels, poster stamps, para-philatelic material, illustrated mail where the cachet or illustration represents the image for the page’s topical subject. Examples of diversity are illustrated in Figure 4

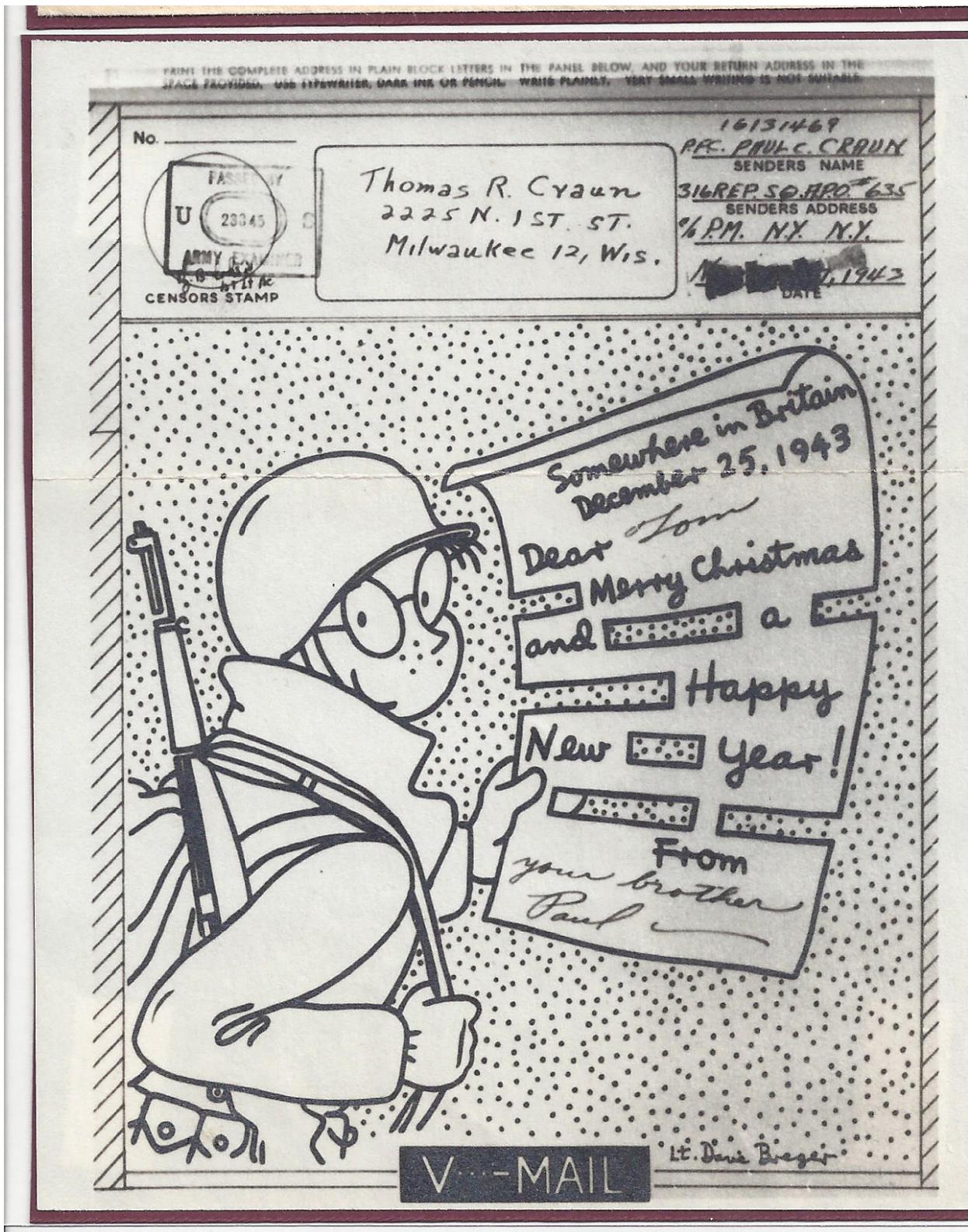


"Pu
[

U.S. Internal Revenue tax-paid beer label, circa 1940.



Jewish National Fund,
charity stamp booklet cover.



Additionally the exhibitor should strive to minimize the use of material that is clearly philatelic in nature by its design or use (sand dune material and philatelically inspired covers, etc.). If

cachets are shown the exhibitor can use them as a way of showing philatelic knowledge by discussing the cachet. Similarly with First Day Covers a description of the city (official or not) is another way for the exhibitor to demonstrate knowledge.

All items used in the exhibit should be philatelic and non-philatelic items such as artifacts and ephemera that might be used in display and other types of exhibits should be avoided. This includes picture post cards unless they are Maximum cards or prepaid cards that were issued by a postal authority; these are best described as such or by showing an image of the indicia. One might ask what the difference is between para-philatelic material and non-philatelic material. Both might be ephemera but if one is directly related to the postal authority it is para-philatelic. For example a news article in Linn’s about a new stamp release is ephemera, But an official postal authority announcement of the stamp release is para-philatelic. The greater the diversity and complexity (rarity or scarcity) of items, the greater is the demonstration of philatelic and topical subject knowledge.

A. Philatelic Studies

Philatelic studies (mini-studies) are often seen in thematic exhibits and are a good way for the exhibitor to show additional philatelic knowledge. These studies should be rewarded if they are seen in topical exhibits where the redundancy natural to a philatelic study fits nicely. The Manual describes philatelic studies for thematic exhibits as follows: *“The exhibit may incorporate brief philatelic studies showing in-depth philatelic analysis and knowledge. Such studies are logically incorporated into the thematic storyline; they are not an excuse for accumulation of more pieces without serious philatelic merit.”* Note the last sentence which applies to thematic exhibits but not topical exhibits.

B. Concordance

The Manual describes concordance for topical exhibits as follows: *“The degree of concordance and relationship of the items will also be an important consideration.”* If Maximum cards are used it is expected that three point concordance be demonstrated. Again, the Manual describes this as follows: *“By definition, the three components — illustration (PPC), stamp and cancel that ties the stamp to the card, should result in tight “concordance” in which all are related to the same subject.”*

Comparison of Knowledge criteria in evaluating Thematic, Topical and Display Exhibits.

Criterion	Thematic	Topical	Display
Implicit philatelic knowledge	Element choice		
Explicit philatelic knowledge	Descriptions + analysis		
Subject knowledge	Story	Topical subject	Story
TTD knowledge -limits	Limited types of elements	Categorization + element choice	Balance of philatelic and non-philatelic

TTD knowledge - redundancy	Only in Mini-studies	Expected	Only in Mini-studies
TTD knowledge – no scans or copies	NA	NA	Essential
TTD knowledge – exhibit type conventions	Thematic	Topical	Display
Deltiology knowledge	NA	NA	Best if used
Artifact/Ephemera knowledge	NA	NA	Best if used

5.2 Personal Study and Research

Knowledge is also demonstrated by finding elements not previously reported or known, such as unusual material, errors, stamps with plate flaws, interesting uses (postal history), etc. If these have not been previously recorded the exhibitor should take credit for discovering them or explaining something not previously recognized (*i.e.*, a new rate, date of use, unreported error, etc.). Example in Figure 5.



1966 Israel road safety issue
and with color missing.
Unlisted variety.

Comparison of Personal Study and Research criteria in evaluating Thematic, Topical and Display Exhibits.

Criterion	Thematic	Topical	Display
Original Research		Minimal	
New discoveries		Desirable	
New analysis		Desirable	

6. Rarity and Condition (Rarity, 20 points + Condition, 10 points)

6.1 Rarity

Rarity refers to how many exist (*i.e.*, quantified) and may or may not equate to value. Scarcity is related to demand for material (value), essentially how hard it is to find. As in any exhibit type when rare material is shown it should be identified as such and quantified (one of two known, etc.). Good topical exhibits would be expected to have some rare material. The title page should also have information on how rare material is to be identified throughout the exhibit. See Figure 6 as an example.



Comparison of Rarity criteria in evaluating Thematic, Topical and Display Exhibits.

Criterion	Thematic	Topical	Display
Appropriate to scope		Yes	
Clearly identified		Yes	
Quantified		Yes	

6.2 Condition

Condition of material is assessed equally in all exhibit types including topical exhibits. If used material is shown the obliteration should not cover or detract from the image which is the topical subject. Some material is only available used and may have punch holes such as certain specimen stamps, revenue or telegraph stamps; an explanation may be appropriate under the item. Older material may show the effects of age but with most topical exhibits fine or better condition is expected.

Comparison of Condition criteria in evaluating Thematic, Topical and Display Exhibits.

Criterion	Thematic	Topical	Display
Context of source/use/period		Best available	
Damaged or altered items noted		Yes	
Centering of stamps, legibility of cancels		Yes	

7. Presentation (5 points)

Presentation does not count for very much but it has a large impact on the viewer’s impression and can affect how a judge looks at treatment and other aspects of the exhibit. The presentation should be attractive, free of distractions and readily legible using large enough fonts for easy reading of text. Overcrowding is a tendency in topical exhibits as previously shown in Figures 2,3 and Figure 7 following.



Comparison of Presentation criteria in evaluating Thematic, Topical and Display Exhibits.

Criterion	Thematic	Topical	Display
Aesthetic appeal		Important	
Neatness		Important	
Clarity		Important	
Distractions/overcrowding		Undesirable	

8. Conclusion

If we consider what philatelic exhibiting is all about we should be able to understand and respect individuals who embrace a given exhibit type, be it postal history, traditional, topical or any of the many other types. Those individuals have a passion for their material and a desire to express its importance to philately and its relevance to the exhibit type they have chosen. We as judges

cannot be biased in our approach to assessment regardless of our background expertise or personal collecting or exhibiting interests. Rather, we are obligated to continue the promotion of good exhibiting by demonstrating, through our assessments, the highest standards of fairness, impartiality and understanding of the expertise and relevance that the exhibitor is presenting to us. Using the UEEF there is no reason why a fair and impartial assessment of a topical exhibit cannot be made. I am hopeful that topical exhibiting, over time, can become a vibrant part of our hobby.

Acknowledgements

The author appreciates the comments, edits and suggestions provided through reviews of various drafts of this article by Chris Dahle, Tom Fortunato, Liz Hisey, David McNamee, Phil Stager and Pat Walker.

See Appendix Below...

Appendix: A Judge's Checklist for Topical Exhibit Assessment

Treatment

- Unambiguous title
- Clearly stated purpose and scope
- Detailed plan of organization
- Balanced to reflect the stated purpose, scope and plan
- Minimum text
- "Fit" for One Frame Class exhibits

Importance

- Challenge and difficulty in creating the exhibit
- Exhibit importance to similar subject exhibits

Knowledge

- Demonstration of topical subject knowledge (diversity and choice of philatelic elements)
- Demonstration of philatelic knowledge (descriptions, analysis, etc.)
 - Minimum use of philatelic uses and stamps from "topical" countries (dunes, CTOs, etc.)
 - Cachet makers identified if not obvious
 - First day covers described as to city

Research and Personal Study

- Evidence of significant personal study, or
- Evidence of original research (new discoveries/information)

Rarity

- Rare items appropriate to scope
- Rare items are identified and quantified

Condition

- Clear cancels
- Cancels do not obliterate topical image
- Fine condition in context of source or use
- Damaged or altered items noted

Presentation

- No distractions to interfere with treatment
- Visually interesting/attractive
- No overcrowding