

So You Want to Win the CofC! by Jim Kotanchik (jimkot@verizon.net)

Here's How!

Build an extremely competitive exhibit of classic material of any country. Over 41 years no non-classic exhibit has ever won the CofC!

Introduction

In the October 2008 issue of *TPE* I described my database of the results of all but a few WSP shows from 1997 through 2007. I have now added the 2008 WSP results bringing the total number of shows to 381 and number of multiframe exhibits in the database to 11384.

As part of the information associated with each exhibit outing is the time period of the exhibit. Four periods were used:

- C – Classic topics, 19th century and earlier
- 1H – First half of the 20th century
- 2H – Second half of the 20th century including the very few post-2000 focused exhibits
- A – Spans all of the above

Most exhibits fit relatively well into one of the first three periods above. Topics such as classic airmail, WW I, WW II are always 1H. The US Liberty series and transportation coils are clearly 2H.

Some topics that span two periods are a bit less obvious, but in general these were assigned a period that represented the bulk of the material.

Many thematic and display topics include material that spans all of the periods and are thus placed in the A group although space-related topics are often in the 2H group.

Two Events

Two events have triggered this article. One of them was an email in response to my October 2008 article that chided me for ignoring a possible area of interest: "Have you looked at the role the time period covered in the exhibit plays in the award level?" I saved the email, thinking it to be an interesting question but it languished in my email folder named "Follow Up".

A second event six months later triggered my memory of that email. I was on the APS web site and came across the list of WSP CofC winners for the entire 41 years of its awarding, beginning in 1968. I was very surprised to find that

NONE of the winners were 20th century exhibits. There are two winning classic revenue exhibits, but all of the other 39 are traditional or postal history exhibits from the 19th century or earlier.

The CofC Results

This rather striking result goes directly to the heart of the first email. There were over those 41 years, about 1,000 grand award winners where roughly 62% were 19th century exhibits. I find it impossible to believe that among the 380 20th century topic grand award winners was there was NOT A SINGLE EXHIBIT worthy of the CofC.

Since I do not have exhibit data for the "early years" (1958 – 1996) of the CofC, I cannot write with assurance about that period. Thus I will restrict my attention in this article to the last 12 years. This restriction in no way lessens the highly improbable fact that in the last 12 CofC competitions no non-classic exhibit was a winner.

Table 1 presents in summary form the exhibiting results for the 12 years beginning in 1997 through 2008.

Reading across the first line of the table, one can see that classic exhibits represent a bit more than 31% of the pool of all exhibits, but won 41% of the golds, 62% of the grands, and 100% of the CofC competitions from 1997 through 2008.

Perhaps naively I had hoped that at least the distribution of CofC candidates would more or less approximate the distribution of golds. This is clearly not the case and I proceeded to probe deeper into the data to better understand the forces and issues at work.

The result that ALL of the CofC winners are from the classic period is completely astounding. For the moment assume that in the 12 most recent competitions (beginning in 1997) there was a near toss-up decision between the best classic and the best non-classic exhibit. For the classic to be selected in all

12 of those cases the probability is $\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2} \times \dots \times \frac{1}{2}$ (12 times) or .004%! The equivalent of tossing a coin 12 times and having it come up the same side for all 12 of the tosses.

There must be some other mechanism at work, which for the moment is unknown. The remainder of this article is an attempt to understand that mechanism.

Going for the Gold

There are undoubtedly topics within all four time periods that offer sufficient challenge to the exhibitor in building a highly competitive exhibit. It has been suggested that there are more of these topics in the classic period than in the modern, but I believe that there are a large number of modern topics that present challenge equal to or greater than those found in the classic area. As will be seen later, part of the problem is that the challenge of those modern topics is either underrated or unappreciated by some judges.

Although I have the data for each individual year since 1997, it is sufficient to treat all of the exhibits as a group for the entire period 1997 through 2008. This is the data in table 1.

To begin it is useful to look at the distribution of exhibit periods. The first grouping in table 1 shows the distribution by period for all multiframe exhibits.

At this lowest level of competition (earning a gold), one not unreasonably expects the gold medals to be distributed roughly in proportion to the population of exhibits in each time period.

However, reality and expectation are not the same. The second grouping in table 1 shows the actual number of golds awarded by period of the exhibit. It is clear that the classic exhibits earned more than their fair share of golds. The expectation was that classic exhibits would have garnered about 31% of the 4,845 golds or 1,502. But 1,999 were awarded. The losers were the 2H and A groups. The 1H group

| Period | All Exhibits | | Golds | | Grands & CofC Entries | | CofC Winners | |
|--------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-----------------------|-------|--------------|------|
| | Count | % | Count | % | Count | % | Count | % |
| C | 3570 | 31.4% | 1999 | 41.3% | 242 | 61.9% | 12 | 100% |
| 1H | 5385 | 47.3% | 2288 | 47.2% | 122 | 30.2% | 0 | 0% |
| 2H | 1023 | 9.0% | 224 | 4.4% | 11 | 2.8% | 0 | 0% |
| A | 1406 | 12.4% | 344 | 7.1% | 20 | 5.1% | 0 | 0% |
| Totals | 11384 | | 4845 | | 395 | | | |

Table 1: Success Rate by Exhibit Periods, All Exhibits, Golds, Grand Awards, and CofC Winners 1997-2008

received almost exactly the number expected. In total, the classic period exhibits received about 32% more golds than would otherwise be expected based on the assumption of a roughly proportional awarding of golds.

Since grand awards go only to gold medal winners, this result fills the pot from which grands are selected with golds disproportionately awarded to classic period exhibits (and removed from 20th century exhibits) and thus makes the probability of selecting a classic exhibit for the grand much more likely.

Going for the Grand

I approach this area in much the same fashion as for the golds but note that the playing field is now littered with far more classic period gold medal exhibits than would be expected.

The third grouping in table 1 shows the grands actually awarded for exhibits of each period.

Again, perhaps naively, it would not seem unreasonable that the expected number of grands for each exhibit period should be distributed approximately in the same fashion as the gold medals for that year. In simple terms, since the classic period group received 41% of the golds, then I would expect it to win about 41% of the grands or 162 grands.

Instead we find that the classic exhibits won 242 grands or 62% of those available, 80 more than anticipated or 50% more than the assumption of a roughly equal distribution as the golds would suggest.

Going for the CofC

It is seen that at each earlier stage of the judging process, classic exhibits as a group outperform expectations, and when the CofC is reached, the classic exhibits heavily dominate the pool of candidates. Examining table 1, one sees that on the average for the last 12 years, 62% of the CofC candidates are classic exhibits, but of the total population of exhibits, only 38% are classic period.

As noted earlier, the shift in anticipated grands from non-classic to classic exhibits is only 80 examples over 381 WSP shows. This is only one time in just under five shows on average, where a close call results in a perhaps unanticipated grand. This confirms that the large swing in the CofC results can be created by only a very few juries (about 1 in 5) where classic exhibits get a bit more of a break in their evaluation.

Thus a relatively small initial perturbation at the time the golds are selected can produce rather dramatic end effects.

For those of you of a mathematical bent, this is called the “butterfly” effect frequently discussed in chaos theory. The quick definition is some action with apparently little impact (the flapping of a butterfly’s wing) sets off a chain of environmental events that leads to a large scale unanticipated event (a tornado).¹

Applying this concept to the selection of the CofC tells us that a very few judges, at each stage of the competitive process, can (and do) have a significant effect on the end game of a complex process i.e. the impact that leads to 12 consecutive CofC winners from the classic group.

It only takes a single “swing” vote when a close call is decided by a 3-2 decision. This represents only one judge of the 25 in those juries.²

Based on the above I want to make it abundantly clear that I am NOT indicting the judging corps as a whole, but am attempting to show that a lack of consistency at all stages of evaluation leads to wholly improbable results.

The MPJ Manual and its “Rules”

From this point forward I will very frequently reference the *6th Edition of the Manual of Philatelic Judging*³ and will refer to the “rules” of judging found there. More frequently however, the *MPJ* does not contain “rules”, but guidelines on how to interpret the fundamental concepts used for evaluation of exhibits.

All “rules” or guidelines of any sort are subject to individual interpretation. Given the very diverse interests, background, and experience of the judging corps, it is not at all surprising that there might be a spectrum of interpretation of the “rules”. The task is to ensure that the spectrum is narrowly constrained so that exhibitors have a reasonable expectation that the same interpretation of the rules will be used at all WSP shows.

I believe that every judge acts in good faith during the evaluation process. Assuming that good faith, then the awards seen must be the result of improper application of the criteria set forth in the *Manual of Philatelic Judging*.

In the following text I use the collective noun “judges”. This does NOT mean ALL judges, but perhaps some or

few. There is NO indictment of the full judging community in what follows.

The Rest of the Story

There are four areas in judging practice and process that lead to the dominance of classic exhibits. These are:

1. The evaluation of “Subject and Philatelic Importance”
2. Use of “scarcity” rather than “rarity” in exhibit evaluation
3. Evaluation of the “Difficulty of acquisition” or “Challenge Factor”
4. “Personal Study and Research.”

It is in these areas that there is a divergence between the intent of the *MPJ* and the interpretation of the judges:

I will examine each of these concepts to identify how the classic exhibits come to dominate the higher competitive levels.

Subject and Philatelic Importance

In a disappointingly large number of cases, judges appear to interpret “importance” as a metric of the financial investment in the exhibit. In these cases the thought process may be similar to: “costly exhibits must be significant exhibits or why would all that money be spent on them?”

The concepts of “Subject and Philatelic Importance” are defined on page 13 of the 6th Edition of the *MPJ*:

“A long running definitive issue which developed over a period of printing advancements, service improvements and rate changes will have more importance than a short lived issue during a time of simplicity of rates and services, *regardless of its time period*. [author’s emphasis] Development of the railway system in the transportation and distribution of mail had a greater impact, and is more important than, the Pony Express, even though the acquisition costs of the latter are greater.”

Modern or obscure subjects do not necessarily equate to unimportant subjects.

Conversely, scarce (not necessarily rare) and classic material does not necessarily equate to important subjects.”

Based on this definition that does not mention the cost of the material, I would without fear of error make the following observation:

The US Prexies, which franked more mail than any other issue from any country in history (save perhaps the British Machins,

¹ Similar to the familiar children’s poem regarding the loss of a nail from a horse’s shoe.

² Remember there are only 115 accredited judges of which perhaps only 70-80 are “active”.

³ The most recent version is now available on the APS web site.

another modern topic), are far more “significant” than say the US 1869 issue, a short-lived issue, which carried only a tiny portion of the US mail at the time and was replaced after just a year of use.

On a “significance” scale (based on the definition from the *MPJ*) of from 1 (least) to 10 (most), I would give the 1869 exhibit a 2 or 3, and the Prexies a 7 or 8.⁴

It is unlikely that there are very many judges that would agree with my position.

Most importantly for this discussion, is that some judges do not properly apply the “importance” or “significance” criteria in the *MPJ*. The evidence is ample in the disproportionate number of high awards to 19th century material.

Rarity vs. Scarcity

This is the most frequently misunderstood concept in the judging process and is the primary reason for the dominance of classic exhibits in the CofC. Thus I will spend a bit time in examining its aspects.

The rules in the *MPJ* attempt to remove the cost of acquisition from the judging equation and focus on the rarity of the philatelic material rather than the scarcity.

I recently purchased in the Cunliffe Sale for \$5,250 the unique sheet of OXF1 printed on both sides with the back impression inverted. Two weeks earlier someone had purchased the 1869 issue “Ice House Cover” for \$375,000. Both items are EQUALLY rare: one of each known (at least for the last 100+ years).

Apparently, although equally rare, the Ice House Cover is 72 times scarcer (more costly) than my pane. There were front-page stories in the philatelic press about its sale, and no notice at all of my purchase.⁵

Based on the standards in the *MPJ*, my pane and the Ice House Cover should have EQUAL merit when the exhibits with them are side by side at a WSP show.

Assembling a majority of judges who would concur with this position would be difficult.

An insight to why assembling that majority would be difficult is found in the January 2003 issue of *TPE* on page 15. It was written by a most illustrious figure in philately, Robert Odenweller. To help us understand his view of my position, Mr. Odenweller offers the following:

“[...] if only one person or a very small group happens to be interested in a given area, it might still be of limited interest philatelically.”

Mr. Odenweller suggests that less popular areas are of “limited interest philatelically” and by implication less worthy of a grand or CofC. Again quoting from the same article:

“One must always remember that a unique item in an area that is pursued by few (or one) may be of ‘ho-hum’ status. The item that exists in a number of examples, but is sought by a large contingent with fairly significant means, is more worth notice in an exhibit.”

This statement argues that a C3a (at least five are available on an annual basis and can be easily owned by those “with fairly significant means” by merely writing a sufficiently large check) will contribute more to a high award than a known unique item in a less “philatelically interesting” area. In general terms, Mr. Odenweller suggests that costly items are more important in an exhibit than are less costly but equally rare items, i.e. that scarcity is more important than rarity. And by implication the most costly exhibits are more likely to win the highest awards.⁶

Another vision is found in an article by Henrik Mouritsen⁷ in the October 2002 issue of *TPE*. Mr. Mouritsen writes in his article titled “Determining the Grand Award Winner”:

“[...] if I was presented with two exhibits, both of which were the best and most comprehensive in their area, and neither showed major deficiencies, I would always vote for the classical exhibit rather than a turn-of-the-century or modern exhibit...”

Or more concisely, given a close call between modern and classic, classic would always get his vote (simply because it is classic material). Mr. Mouritsen summarizes his position near the end of the article:

“[...] so I do think the classical exhibit should always have the edge, everything being equal.”

In fairness, I should note that Mr. Mouritsen is not a judge, so his opinions, no matter how outrageous, have had no

direct impact on the selection of grand and CofC winners.

In Mr. Odenweller’s January 2003 *TPE* article he includes a commentary on the article by Mr. Mouritsen in the prior *TPE* issue. Mr. Odenweller writes:

“I was impressed with Henrik Mouritsen’s analysis of how a jury should approach the determination of a grand award winner. It is very close to the thought process that I use when on a jury and certainly is worth careful consideration by all judges.”

One might think that I am being excessively harsh in my discussion of Mr. Odenweller’s views. However, he *is* one of the most important figures in both US and International philately. As such, his views carry substantial weight, which are held privately and publicly by many judges.

Several judges have commented to me that for many of the “modern” exhibits, not enough time has elapsed to determine the true rarity of the material. But for US issues such as the 1902, 1922, and 1938, which have been researched and collected for a minimum of about 70 years and some for over 100 years, it would seem that they have indeed, stood the test of time.

Similar arguments can be made for most US and foreign exhibits of early to mid 20th topics. For this reason I relegate such comments to the category: “spurious reasons for voting classic.”

Difficulty of Acquisition or Challenge

Again, like the concepts of “rarity” and “scarcity” this term is interpreted by some in the judging community as how “expensive” would it be to build an exhibit of the same topic with equivalent rarity? Not necessarily with exactly the same content, but with equally rare content. If very expensive (“difficult to acquire”) from the point of view of the judge, then all of the evidence suggests that the exhibit is likely to score better.

On page 19, the *MPJ* writes: “Difficulty of acquisition may indicate either the challenge of item discovery or an indication of the time necessary to find and acquire [and] is not necessarily equated with or proportional to monetary value.”

“Expensive” is a concept that relates only to the exhibitor, not the viewer. What may appear to be very expensive to the viewer of an exhibit; may be merely a blip in the checking balance of the owner. Thus for a judge to say “Wow, that’s a difficult (when frequently in his mind is ‘expensive’) item” is a measure of the health of the judge’s bank account, not that of the exhibitor where in reality, acquiring

⁴ The only issue to rate 10 on my personal importance scale is the Penny Black. I would rate at a 1 (or less if possible) my exhibit of “Doane Cancels of Franklin County, Massachusetts.”

⁵ No surprise here!

⁶ Certainly the CofC results for the past 12 years support this hypothesis.

⁷ Mr. Mouritsen exhibits classic Danish material. In his two *WSP* outings, both in 2000, he won two golds and one grand.

the item may have been more a matter of patience, waiting for its next appearance at auction.

Particularly in the classic area it may be relatively easy to assemble an extremely high quality exhibit over a fairly short period of time.

I receive mountains of auction catalogs. Among them are numerous catalogs devoted to a single classic US issue. I managed to find single-owner collections of the 1847, 1851, 1861, 1869, and the Banknotes in my library. All auctions were held within the last 6 years. A dedicated effort (ignoring cost) at building an exhibit from any one of those auctions would have produced a gold and likely grand winner. The Matthew Bennett auction in 2003 of the "Lafayette Collection" of the US 1869 Issue is a typical example.

Great exhibits cannot be built overnight, but it is much easier to find expensive material at auction than inexpensive.

Personal Study and Research

Page 17 of the 6th edition of the *MPJ* identifies three areas under this topic:

1. Personal study is evidenced by the correct analysis of the exhibit items and their role in the story
2. Research is the presentation of new facts related to the items displayed. Research can be either primary research reaching new conclusions [...] or secondary research that condenses, clarifies, or corrects previously presented information.
3. Evidence of definitive original philatelic or non-philatelic research about the subject or material presented *is of substantial importance* [author's emphasis]. The manual goes on to issue a disclaimer: "Original research is not expected for subjects that have been extensively researched previously."

These three topics account for 10%, and based on the wording in bullet 3,

addressing definitive original research "... is of *substantial importance*" I tend to reserve 5% in my judging for that area and about 2½% each for the other two areas

If neither the exhibit nor synopsis confirms "definitive original research" the 5% is not awarded in my evaluation. For many classic exhibits, earlier writers and students have researched the material to death, thus only infrequently is the 5% or a portion of it given in my evaluation.

Most judges today agree that there is little opportunity for personal original research in many classic exhibits and do not ding the exhibit feeling that if no research is possible, "how can I penalize the exhibitor for not performing that not-doable research?" The *MPJ* notes this case in its disclaimer in bullet 3.

If an exhibitor selects a topic and builds the best ever exhibit of its type, but the exhibit has no opportunity for original research, then the best potential score is 95% since 5% was lost due to the lack of that original research. Otherwise how could a judge reward the competing exhibit that DOES present significant original research? One cannot have it both ways, and the exhibitor, in his or her choice of topics, freely gave up the opportunity for that %5.

Original research should be rewarded or exhibits without it dinged. If neither alternative is acceptable, original research should be removed from the *MPJ*. But to simply give credit, when no credit is due, merely ignores the standards set in the *MPJ* and in effect penalizes (rather than rewards) the exhibitor who has performed the research.

Exhibits of the highest caliber are often closely matched. The 5% might be enough to shift the grand, reserve grand, or even reorder the candidates for the CofC.

Summary and Conclusions

All of the discussion above is an attempt to understand the disproportionate number of high awards by classic exhibits. I believe that the results over the years are

the product of infrequent improper application of the standards set forth in the *Manual of Philatelic Judging* in at least one of the four areas identified above. The *MPJ* is very clear in stating that cost and/or value play NO role in the evaluation of an exhibit.

I believe that there still remain a small but sufficient number of judges who subscribe to the views of Mr. Mouritsen and Mr. Odenweller, and when given a close call between a classic and non-classic exhibit, will consistently choose winning exhibits based at least in part on the cost of the exhibit rather than its philatelic merit.

Until the judging community embraces the concepts in the *MPJ*, the disparity in rewards for classic and non-classic material will continue.

Epilogue

I believe that the long-term viability of the exhibiting process is, at this moment in time, very much at stake. Statistics confirm the dwindling number of exhibitors. The disproportionate number of high rewards for exhibits that can only be built by the most affluent of exhibitors is a very obvious factor in the loss of new exhibitors. Many (certainly not all) of those inappropriate awards are based on old, or misunderstood, or incorrectly applied judging criteria as defined in the *MPJ*.

I would very much appreciate your views on the topics presented. Letters to the Editor, or direct emails will all earn a thoughtful response.

Responses by CANEJ members are much anticipated as you are the group responsible for consistent and correct judging practice.

Hopefully this article will encourage discussion and begin a proactive focus on the areas that require attention or modification.