

# Getting Started in Philatelic Exhibiting

by John M. Hotchner,\* American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors

## Introduction

“I can do this” was my reaction when I first paid attention to philatelic exhibits at a local club’s yearly show. And it turned out that I could. But not without overcoming a dozen reasons that argued against trying when I began to think seriously about making the leap from collecting to exhibiting.

Although the idea of displaying our treasures for other collectors to admire is attractive, it isn’t something we can just do intuitively. Rather, I found that exhibiting is a craft that needs to be learned through trial and error. It is also a public expression of our interests, knowledge, and artistic sense; and that can be a bit daunting. I’d like to have a quarter for every time I’ve heard a collector say, “I don’t have expensive stamps or specialized knowledge. I couldn’t compete with the exhibits I’ve seen.”

I think all successful exhibitors began with some form of that thought. But you CAN compete — just recognize that you won’t get to Gold medals in a month. Learning the craft by doing, and building a prize-winning exhibit takes time, and the secret is having realistic expectations and goals. The purpose of this pamphlet is to help you get beyond the reasons why you may think you can’t or shouldn’t exhibit; and to think positively about your talents and abilities. You will be amazed at what you can do — and you will be amazed at how exhibiting can enrich your philatelic life.

**Competition**...is not the only reason to exhibit. The great majority of exhibitors ultimately enjoy seeing how high a medal their exhibit

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can earn. But it is equally okay to use your display to try to convince others that they should collect what you do. Or to educate other collectors on the breadth of a collecting area by highlighting many different specialty areas that are available.

However, you will find that competition can be fun. America is an accomplishment-based society, and we learn from an early age that winning competitions, be they in sports or speech contests or to keeping up with the Jones’s, drives a good share of our daily thought. We are used to competition, but philatelic exhibiting competition is unusual — except for some limited instances which will be described later — because exhibitors are not competing against each other. Rather our exhibit is competing against the standard of being the best it can be.

## Challenge

Exhibiting is a personal challenge since you will develop skills you didn’t know you had. And in its most enjoyable form, it is also a philatelic challenge since you will create something unlike what anyone else has done in the past. In addition it will require you to pick a subject to exhibit that gives you room to expand your knowledge and your collecting, and to organize and study your material. Furthermore, by expanding your knowledge of what exists that can be part of your exhibit, and building your exhibit to the status of being the best it can be, you are also building a collection that can be worth more than the sum of its parts.

## What Will You Be Trying To Do?

The basic idea of philatelic exhibiting is that you are telling a complete philatelic or thematic story

using philatelic (and sometimes associated material in Display exhibits) to illustrate your points. Like a book, your story will have a beginning, a middle and an end. The material will be described on the exhibit pages briefly, but it is the material that tells the story, not lengthy text.

Once you understand this objective, the best thing that you can do is to make a point of going to exhibitions and taking time to look carefully at how others have done exhibits. Part of the secret of success is in how you organize the material and the story, so that there is a logical flow. The other part of the secret is how you use the title page to outline the story you expect to tell. For some exhibits it is also appropriate to have a plan page which, like a table of contents for a book, provides the outline of the story, and tells the viewer where each part of the story can be found in the exhibit.

In doing your exhibit, it is expected that you will use the best philatelic material, both in terms of quality and condition, that you are able to get. And that you will label it accurately; providing information about it beyond what can be found in the standard catalogues or what is obvious from the stamp or cover itself. Presentation — the pleasing arrangement of material and text, proper grammar and spelling, general neatness — all count as part of the judging criteria. But it is the philatelic material itself, and how it illustrates a complete story, that counts most.

## Getting Started: The Exhibit Subject

The ideal is to pick some part of your collecting areas about which you feel special interest and curiosity. This should be something that is broad enough that you have a good

accumulation of stamps and/or covers to pick from to put on your exhibit pages. If you collect it, you have probably already concluded that you can afford most of the material in the area. If not, think about that aspect, because telling a complete story may mean that expensive material will be needed as you rise in medal levels and at last attempt to win that Gold medal.

Critically important is the title you pick for your exhibit. "The Air Mail Issues of the United States; The First 50 Years" sounds simple enough, but that would lead the judges to expect that the pricey Zeppelin set will be included, not to mention the 24c 1918 inverted Jenny. So in selecting a subject and title, you need to strike a balance between setting a challenge that you can afford to meet, and a challenge that is worthy of a Gold if you meet it. Happily there are large areas of the hobby in which money is much less a factor than the effort of studying philatelic material and finding the elusive material to illustrate your knowledge about it.

### And Then?

Next you need to get together all the material that fits within your proposed exhibit title, and start to organize it so that you know what you have. Then you should begin to get some ideas as to how it can be shown in an effective sequence. Putting your material in stock cards in the order your story seems likely to take is the first step. This will also help you to begin to determine what you still need to tell the story.

**This Sounds Like Work** — And indeed it is. Exhibiting is not easy. But what worthy challenge is? Instead it is exciting; even fun, once you get hooked on the challenge. It gives you a goal to work toward — whether it's the exhibit itself, or the medal levels it can earn.

### Preparing The Exhibit

Gone are the days when we had to spend hours preparing an exhibit page using a typewriter or by hand

lettering. The computer has worked a revolution. It takes only moderate computer knowledge and a printer to do basic pages. And making corrections or revising a page takes five minutes instead of having to start from square one. You will need heavier-than-normal paper because the pages, in page protectors, will have to stand up in exhibit frames. Other than that, you don't need special materials to get started. You may, as you get deeper into the craft, want to experiment with capabilities of your computer to do fancier pages, but leave that for later, when you are more comfortable. To begin, keep it simple.

### Exhibit Judging

At the local and regional levels, exhibits are often judged by experienced collectors, and sometimes there are only 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place certificates or medals. More often American Philatelic Society-accredited judges also form part or all of the jury team, and each exhibit receives the level of medal it earns. The APS, the national philatelic organization in the U.S., accredits national level philatelic exhibitions and those who judge them. Judges, who are themselves successful exhibitors, must successfully complete a training program, which includes developing the skill of providing feedback to exhibitors. This assures that exhibiting criteria will be uniform, and consistently applied at all of the 30+ national "World Series of Philately" (WSP) shows held across the United States each year. The Grand Award winner — the best exhibit — at each WSP show ultimately meets all the other Grands head-to-head in the annual Champion of Champions competition.

In evaluating exhibits the judges use specific criteria which is laid out in the *APS Manual of Philatelic Judging*, and you should obtain and read this carefully even if you are not interested in medals. Why? It also explains the different classes and divisions in which exhibits can be entered. You

will need to know what is expected of, for instance, a one frame postal history exhibit, as compared to a multi-frame traditional exhibit. It also explains Display Division (in which you can use non-philatelic material), Illustrated Mail, the Cinderella Division, Revenue and several other types of exhibits.

### Other Resources

Exhibiting is a learning experience, and at its best, it is also an interactive experience with other exhibitors. In fact one of the best parts of exhibiting is that it is a path to meeting other people who share your interests, and collectors who (having seen your exhibit) will search you out to offer material and information to improve your exhibit. Judges will offer specific suggestions for improvements if you make the effort to attend the critique session that they are required to provide. Also, they will review your exhibit with you at your frames if you ask.

Earlier I suggested that one of the best learning tools is to go to shows and look carefully at what exhibitors have done. Take a notebook, and write down the techniques you think are most effective, and which you might be able to use in your own exhibit. Make the effort to get to know some of the exhibitors, and tell them that you are just getting started. Most will be truly happy to help you over the path they have already taken.

Written resources can also be helpful. First join the American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors, an organization of nearly a thousand exhibitors and aspiring exhibitors, judges and show administrators, which puts out a quarterly magazine called *The Philatelic Exhibitor*, which many beginners have found to be an essential resource. The address for AAPE and the APS will be found at the end of this pamphlet. Among AAPE's services is a free critique service through which you can get a judge's review of a developing exhibit before you ever put it up in

frames.

You might also consider purchasing a new book released at Washington 2006, titled "The Philatelic Exhibitors Handbook, Third Edition," expanded and revised by Ada Prill, with assistance from many others in the exhibiting community. It is actually an updating of Randy Neil's landmark work by the same name, first published 20 years ago. This book provides a wealth of information on how to choose a subject, the mechanics of developing the exhibit, what a title page should contain, and much, much more.

### When Your Exhibit Is Ready For Prime Time

Or as it is beginning to take shape, write to several shows to get their exhibit prospectus. Read the prospectuses carefully, for they will tell you a lot about how the host committee will conduct the show, and what is expected of the exhibitors. Pick one of more shows you would like to enter, preferably close enough to home that you can attend. And then enjoy the show experience from a completely new perspective.

### A Final Word

The exhibiting world is one of challenge, personal achievement, new friends, and sometimes a little frustration. You may not always receive the award you think your exhibit should earn. It may take longer than you hoped to build to that Gold medal. But persistence pays. Disappointments along the road just make the ultimate victory that much sweeter.

### 21 Suggestions For Getting Started With Your First Exhibit

1. Have reasonable expectations. A Gold is the end of the rainbow. You will get there, but be content to start with any medal at all.

2. Take care in picking your

exhibit subject and title.

3. Join AAPE, and read about others' experiences to see how they might apply to you.

4. For ideas about titles/subjects and to see how others have done exhibits, visit nearby shows and study the exhibits. Adapt good ideas and effective techniques.

5. Put all your relevant material together, and begin to organize it into a story.

6. Get and read the *APS Manual of Philatelic Judging*.

7. Study your material to make certain that you know as much about it as possible.

8. Dummy up your exhibit pages using stock cards to place your stamps and covers in the way they might be arranged on an exhibit page.

9. Describe your material briefly, without stating what is obvious from stamps or covers. Then put your descriptions on small pieces of paper, and add those to your stock cards.

10. As you survey what you have, pay attention to what you still need to tell the complete story.

11. As you begin to make pages, keep them simple to start; plain white paper — no borders.

12. Make certain that the story line of your exhibit is clear.

13. Pay attention to neatness, spelling, and other elements that will make your pages attractive to look at and easy to read.

14. State facts in your exhibit, not opinions or generalities; e.g. "One of six reported examples", not "rare".

15. Have friends or family look at your pages to proof read them for you and to make sure that the story and text makes sense.

16. Enter your first exhibit at a local or regional show to get your feet wet.

17. Take your exhibit to its first several showings, attend the critique, and ask judges for at-the-frames observations.

18. If you don't get the award you

expect, get the judges' suggestions, and keep improving the exhibit. Realize that any worthy challenge has moments of frustration.

19. Use the AAPE Critique Service to get a more in-depth critique.

20. Think of your exhibit as a work in progress. Even after you get to Gold, you can improve it.

21. You may not agree with all judges' comments, but disagreement is not license to be disagreeable. Listen carefully, ask for clarifications, correct misimpressions politely.

## Help In Getting Started

This pamphlet is brought to you by the American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors. Visit our web-

site at [www.aaape.org](http://www.aaape.org), or write to Tim Bartshe, 13955 30th Ave., Golden, CO 80401 ([timbartshe@aol.com](mailto:timbartshe@aol.com)) if you have questions not answered here. AAPE wants to help you get started. We hope you will join with us. A membership application form is provided as part of the pamphlet.



The American Philatelic Society is the national umbrella

organization for the United States, with 45,000 members, 600 local stamp club chapters, and 200 national specialty societies. APS also regulates the national stamp show and exhibition system. *The APS Manual of Philatelic Judging* is available from the APS, 100 Match Factory Place, Bellefonte, PA 16823, for \$9.60 (members) or \$12.00 (non-members). For membership information write to the above address or visit [www.stamps.org](http://www.stamps.org).



"*The Philatelic Exhibitors Handbook, Third Edition*" will be available from Subway Stamp Shop, and from many philatelic literature dealers. Google "Subway Stamp Shop" for further information.

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**MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION TO: Timothy Bartshe**

American Assn. of Philatelic Exhibitors  
13955 W. 30th Ave., Golden, CO 80401

Enclosed are my dues of \*\$20.00 in application for my membership in the AAPE, (U.S. and Canada) \$25.00 elsewhere; which includes annual subscription to **The Philatelic Exhibitor**, or \$400 for a Life Membership. (Life Membership for those with a foreign mailing address: \$500)

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\* Youth Membership (Age 18 and under) \$10.00 includes a subscription to *TPE*. Spouse membership is \$10.00 — *TPE* not included.  
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