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# Book Reports

Northwest Philatelic Library, Inc.



## BEYOND SCOTT: PHILATELIC LITERATURE CAN MAKE YOU A BETTER COLLECTOR

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The quantity of philatelic literature is a vast. It is arguably the largest body of collectibles literature. Just what is “philatelic literature?” Probably more than you think. Generally, it comprises all written material related to philately, principally information about postage stamps and postal history. FIP defines it as: “All printed communication available to collectors related to postage stamps, postal history, and their collecting, and to any of the specialized fields connected therewith.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, David McNamee lists 22 types of philatelic literature, based on the holdings of the Western Philatelic Library.<sup>2</sup> That list includes four basic classes: Stamp catalogues; books, monographs and handbooks; auction catalogues; and government postal manuals. *Wikipedia*<sup>3</sup> provides an encyclopedic list of 47 categories of philatelic literature. Other plausible lists probably exist. But, regardless of how “philatelic literature” is defined or classified, it is the intent here to make plain how

expanding your philatelic literary horizons can make you a better collector. [“Philately starts where the catalogue ends.”]

Today’s most basic form of philatelic literature is the general stamp catalogue. When collecting is more a process of accumulation and the focus is on stamp identification, a general catalogue might be wholly sufficient. Yet, even a basic collector could benefit from more exposure to the philatelic literature. For example, the literature can introduce these collectors to other, possibly fruitful areas of exploration, including covers, usage, and postal history. Moreover, even some of the “uncomplicated” approaches to collecting might benefit by referencing other types of philatelic literature. For example, the Northwest Philatelic Library has a full shelf of philatelic literature devoted to “topical” collecting. This literature has something for the beginner, e.g., getting started, to the more experienced collector, e.g., preparing to exhibit a collection.

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<sup>1</sup> *Special Regulations for the Evaluation of Philatelic Literature Exhibits at F.I.P. Exhibitions* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> *The Bay Phil*, (May/June, 2005, p.1)

<sup>3</sup> A public, open-source Internet encyclopedia

Originally a simple price list, the general catalogue evolved to keep pace with expanding, but narrower-focused, collector interests. Specialized catalogues still emphasize pricing, but now provide a wide assortment of supplemental support data – both descriptive [e.g., earliest known use] and analytical [e.g., tagging varieties].<sup>4</sup> All in all, no one would seriously dispute the value of a stamp catalogue: It is virtually indispensable to rationally and constructively categorizing and evaluating stamps. But, no matter its preeminence in use and popularity, the stamp catalogue remains of limited, albeit well-defined, utility.

Today's stamp catalogue demands that the user have a certain level of working knowledge about philately. The basics are readily mastered through the use of philatelic dictionaries and handbooks.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, however, collectors begin to bump up against philatelic matters that demand specialized knowledge and understanding. The list can be daunting, but consider these: stamp design and production, printing methods, paper, ink, gum, luminescence, stamp separations, and stamp usage. These factors can be significant to the extent that they lead to stamp varieties and other collectible "oddities." These are not insolvable matters, but matters that cannot be dealt with fully in even specialized stamp catalogues. Rather, specialized knowledge emerges from detailed research findings published in the philatelic literature. The research problems in these studies may be generic or unique; the research designs may be simple or sophisticated; and, the research findings may be descriptive or analytical. Nonetheless, it is these research findings that tell us something about a stamp, a cover, or a usage that satisfies curiosity and adds richness, and depth of understanding to collecting these items.

Some collectors are indifferent to stamp varieties. Many collectors, on the other hand, delight in the hunt for that elusive rare and valuable variety. For this latter group, research and study are part and parcel of that hunt. Take the following case – stamp color. Color shades do matter! The Scott *U.S. Specialized* lists the 4-cent ultramarine Columbian, Scott 233, at \$200 CV, whereas the "blue" error variety, Scott 233a, lists at \$32,500. So, what color is the variety's "blue?" Most important here is how does one go about forming a reasonable and defensible conclusion about color? A potentially enlightening [and prudent] way is to first gain some knowledge about stamp color. This calls for more specialized philatelic literature. The Library holdings include seminal studies on stamp color.<sup>6</sup> Not only will the reader learn of the underlying causes and inherent difficulties of dealing with color, these richly-illustrated works provide a sound basis for drawing valid conclusions about color varieties.<sup>7</sup>

A more comprehensive case supporting the importance of specialized philatelic literature is the Washington-Franklin issue of 1908-22. Even though there were only two different vignettes and two different frames used for this issue, over 200 collectible stamps emerged from the issue. Serious U.S. collectors know of the issue's complexities. But developing an understanding of those complexities and how to unravel them is best left to the research literature. Over its long term of use, the Washington-Franklins underwent many changes. These included the use of experimental papers to control shrinkage, varying stamp security measures, the use of sub-prime resources

<sup>4</sup> Support data incorporates much of what is currently known about a stamp [or cover, or event]. This information typically emerges over time from the more specialized philatelic literature. To illustrate the effect of this data on a catalogue, consider that the first edition of Scott's *Specialized Catalogue of United States Postage Stamps* [1923], the size of a checkbook, is 67 pages in length. In contrast, the 2004 *Catalogue* devotes 132 pages to the same stamp issues included in the 1923 edition and is printed on 8x10¾ inch pages using the same font size as the first edition - probably a fourfold increase in the amount of information about the same stamps.

<sup>5</sup> The Library has a wide variety, differentiated by breadth and depth, of these "general reference" materials. The classic *Fundamentals of Philately* by L.N. Williams (rev. 1990) is recommended.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: *Encyclopedia of the Colors of United States Postage Stamps*, 4 volumes, by R.H. White (1981).

<sup>7</sup> After having undertaken this kind of study, a more reasonable basis for incurring the cost of expertizing exists.

due to WWI shortages, and the problematic shift to the rotary press for efficiencies in stamp production and printing technologies. All of these, individually or in combination, contributed to creating collectible varieties. Moreover, the issue's complexity became a fertile area for forgeries, usually accomplished by altering a common stamp to resemble a rare stamp. But, how can one tell the difference?

A beginner, for example, may not make a distinction between Scott 332 and 358. After all, both are 2¢, carmine, perforated 12 with a picture of George Washington, i.e., they “look” the same. Yet, these are two different stamps, the latter being printed on experimental “bluish” paper, thus carrying a substantial premium price. On the forgery side, how many collectors are aware of and prepared to critically differentiate a coil pair, Scott 385, from a coil pair created by trimming the perforations off the left and/or right of a pair of sheet stamps, Scott 374? The unused value multiplier for this fake is 7x, i.e., the fake's value is 7 times greater than the value of the sheet stamps used to make it. A tidy profit for the faker!

Fortunately, serious philatelic research studies have been undertaken over time to provide the necessary differentiation and authentication for these types of varieties.<sup>8,9</sup> Scott *Specialized* has attempted to incorporate salient information from these original studies, but that coverage, not surprisingly, is brief and incomplete and pales in comparison to the value of reading the original research whereby the reader can “see” clearly the issues at hand and the step-by-step manner of their resolution. The point here is that the more specialized philatelic literature can help the collector better evaluate current holdings, make more informed decisions about what to acquire, and to identify those philatelic items that require further, more expert, analysis.

Now, let's say a collector wants to prepare a competitive exhibit. Discussions with experienced colleagues are certainly useful, particularly suggestions on getting started and common pitfalls to avoid. But competitive exhibiting demands more than this, and this is where the philatelic literature comes into play.<sup>10</sup> A good starting point is *Manual of Philatelic Judging* [5<sup>th</sup> ed., APS, 2002]. Here, the reader is exposed to two important criteria for exhibiting, both of which bear explicitly on the need to do quality research, including use of and reference to relevant philatelic literature: [1] Philatelic importance poses basic questions: Is this exhibit important? Is the exhibit difficult to build and/or to improve upon? Does it contribute to the existing knowledge infrastructure or further development in its field? Judges will compare your exhibit with what has already been published or is known in the field. [2] Personal study and research pertains to the proper analysis of items chosen for the exhibit, whether available research has been acknowledged and used effectively in the exhibit, and whether new conclusions have been documented about the topic at hand. Clearly, each criterion contains a “research” component and demands a working familiarity with the philatelic literature, and, moreover, a demonstrated ability to synthesize the knowledge gained from that literature.

<sup>8</sup> A sample: *The Expert's Book* by Paul Schmid (1990); *Manual and Identification Guide to the United States Regular Issues, 1847 Through 1934*, by Charles Micarelli (1981); and, “Telling the Washington-Franklin Offset Issues Apart,” *The American Philatelist* by Wayne Youngblood (May 2005). Each of these, and others, are available in the Northwest Philatelic Library.

<sup>9</sup> Excellent resources on forgeries are available. An excellent working resource for detecting fakes is *How to Detect Damaged, Altered and Repaired Stamps* by Paul Schmid (1978).

<sup>10</sup> An excellent general reference is *The Philatelic Exhibitors Handbook*, rev. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., by Randy Neill (1995).

No matter the nature and scope of your collecting interest, the philatelic literature should be an essential part of your collecting and collection. Some collectors consider the acquisition of philatelic literature as equally important as the acquisition of stamps. Reading is part of our cultural heritage, and it is the prime and most efficient means by which we become better educated. Knowledge is power. The philatelic literature can take us beyond our own limited experiences of collecting to show us the richness of collecting as discovered by others. Reading can be intellectually stimulating – the literature allows us to think in a logically connected way, particularly in complex areas, but also allows for sustained reflection.

There is, yet, a more pragmatic reason for engaging the philatelic literature – you can be a more discerning collector. That is, the knowledge you gain from the literature can lead to better decisions about your collection – for example, what to keep, what to purchase, what price is fair. Moreover, you will be less susceptible to inferior material, including fakes, forgeries, and repaired stamps. You will know when it “makes good sense” to seek outside expertizing. You will be a more informed resource to less experienced collectors, relying not on all-too-common off-the-cuff second- and third-hand conversations, but on the knowledge and understanding you acquire directly from the literature.

“Running the gauntlet” of the Northwest Philatelic Library may at first seem daunting, and may hide the true wealth of material on hand. There is much on hand, and more in the works, to enrich you as a collector. The Library has one shelf devoted to catalogues; yet, has 34 shelves devoted to other literature resources. If you haven’t done “research” before or your research skills are rusty, let the Library help you. The Library is persistently breaking down barriers to its use. Some of the results can be seen today, other efforts will take time. But, no matter how you cut it, the Library contains resources than can add understanding and value to your collecting interests.

#### NEW ACQUISITIONS

1. *Durland Standard Plate Number Catalog* (2005)
2. *American Air Mail Catalogue*, Vol. 2 (6<sup>th</sup> ed., 2005)
3. *American Air Mail Catalogue*, Vol. 3 (6<sup>th</sup> ed., 2005)
4. *Catalog of United States Bureau Precancels* (5<sup>th</sup> ed., 2005) donated by Bob Dressler
5. *Austria Revenues* (J. Barefoot, 2002)
6. *Great Britain Concise Catalogue* (Stanley Gibbons, 2005)
7. *Canadian Revenue Stamp Catalogue* (Van Dam, 2000)
8. *Channel Islands-German Prisoners of War* (Beekman, 2000)
9. *Russian Postmarks* (Kiryushkin & Robinson, 1989)
10. *Postal History of British Post Offices Abroad* (Proud, 1991)
11. *Stamps of Italy Abroad* (Tchilingham & Bernardelli, 1974)
12. *The Chalon Issues of New Zealand* (Lynch, 2005)
13. *Channel Islands Specialized Catalogue* (Stanley Gibbons, 1979)