

Current Trends in Thematic Philately

Vojtech Jankovič, Slovakia (accredited FIP juror for thematic philately)

Note: This treatise relates to thematic philatelic collecting generally, but also applies to Railway Thematic Collecting. We have taken the liberty to rephrase much of this article in modern idiomatic English, and apologise to the author (to whom we owe our thanks) for any inaccuracies which this might have introduced.

Some Basic Concepts

The collecting of thematic philately and the assembly of thematic philatelic displays has survived an ongoing (and sometimes stormy) evolution over the last 100 years. It is not easy for collectors and exhibitors to follow the constant evolution of the thematic philately so, first of all, let's define some basic concepts.

1. **Thematic (philatelic) collecting** is collecting an arbitrarily ordered set of (philatelic) materials related to any theme chosen by the collector.
2. **A Thematic (philatelic) exhibit/display** is a logically organized thematic (philatelic) collection accompanied by textual descriptions prepared in a form suitable for a display at (philatelic) exhibitions.
3. **A Competitive Thematic (philatelic) exhibit/display** is a thematic philatelic display (as above) which meets the criteria laid down in the rules of the World Philatelic Federation (FIP). At a national level, these rules are interpreted by the National Philatelic Federations of each country.

These definitions do not explicitly say what a logically organized collection is. Nor do they describe the nature of any textual descriptions. These concepts and views about them have constantly evolved over the years. The development of thematic collections and displays can be divided into several development stages (which we shall call 'generations') which are closely related to the gradual - and since the 1980s very rapid - development of thematic philately and the changing views of its content and capabilities.

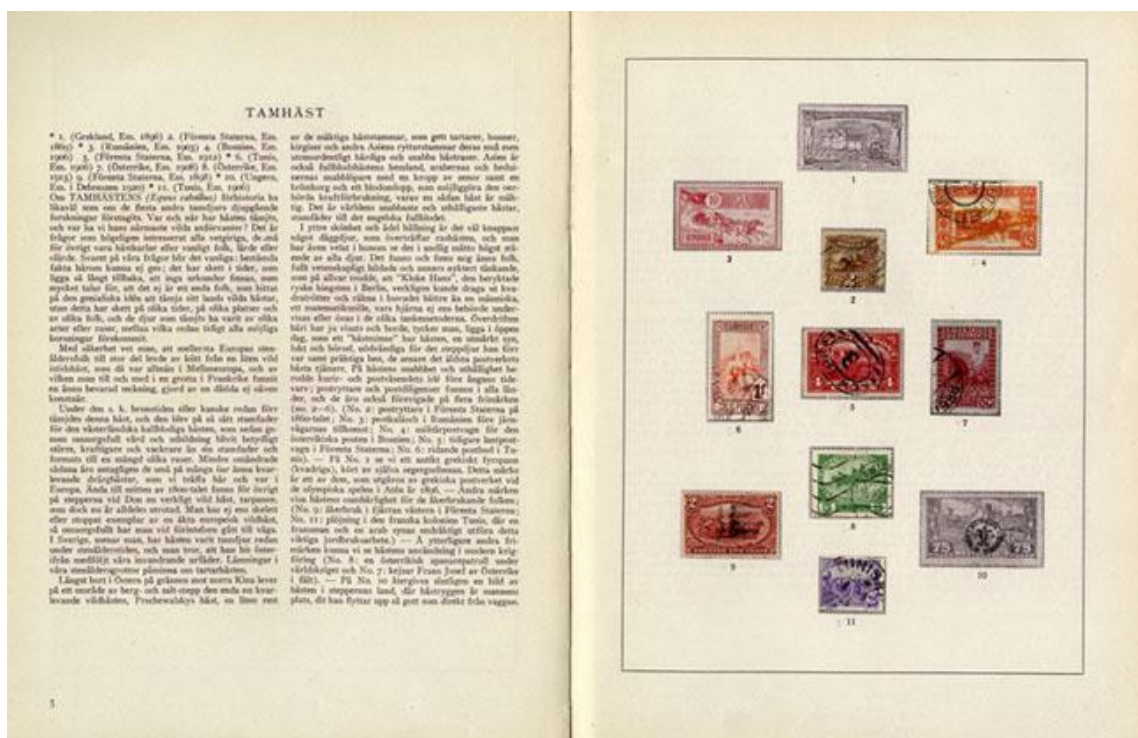
The main objective of introducing these 'generations' of thematic collections and displays is not an attempt to introduce some formal categorization, but rather to show the typical characteristics which distinguish these different stages of development.

The Development and Generations of Thematic Exhibits

We can loosely define four main stages or 'Generations' in the development of Thematic Philately (which we refer to as Generations 1, 2, 3 and 4). There are also a couple of intermediate or 'half stages' (which we refer to as Generations 2.5 and 3.5).

Thematic Collecting & Displays - Generation 1: Stamps only (fill in the gaps)

Generation 1 of thematic collecting started in the 1920s, when the thematic philately first became popular. Its main feature was the **assembling of postage stamps in pre-printed albums** which covered general themes (and at that time the most popular themes) such as animals, history, personalities, etc.



Page from a typical Generation 1 Thematic Collection (items in date order, no text on page at all)

Looking back, the central driving role in Generation 1 thematic collecting lay with the **author of a pre-printed album**, who was usually a commercial publisher rather than a collector. This pre-printed album was designed by the publisher and invited collectors to find any missing thematic stamps to fill the pre-defined empty boxes. It was therefore the publishers who chose what themes might be collected.

Generation 1 of thematic collecting is still with us today. Some collectors still produce (or get produced) their own proprietary album pages with printed titles and windows for specific postage stamps of their chosen topics. This is their preferred way of collecting and storing their collections, so they have no reason to change their collecting procedures - and why should they? Basically, it is a kind of customised collection for personal enjoyment, but not for general public display.

In the early days such collections *were* sometimes displayed and evaluated. However, today they can only be seen as a form of collection in which complete series of stamps and miniature sheets (but seldom entire envelopes or other philatelic material) are laid together side by side.

These collections lack any creative input from the collector ... such as the choice of theme, the specific approach to the theme, a coherent logical structure, etc. In addition, those Generation 1 thematic collections lack of any philatelic knowledge such as thematic descriptions, philatelic specialities etc.

Thematic Collecting & Displays - Generation 2: Stamps only (fill in the gaps, plus basic text labels)

By the 1950s, thematic philately had started to appear at international philatelic exhibitions ... Generation 2 of thematic exhibits was now with us. It was still characterized by general themes, but exhibitors were already preparing their own proprietary exhibition page layouts, and the postage stamps were accompanied by brief textual descriptions.

The most important feature of this generation, which moved thematic philately significantly ahead, was the connection between material and its accompanying text description. This has gradually led to the on-page grouping of postage stamps into smaller units based on their sub-topics. As a result, thematic exhibits were no longer presented on standard pre-printed album pages; instead, they were presented on album pages produced by exhibitors according to their needs. This is the first spark of a creative approach from the author - something that could be evaluated at competitive exhibitions. However, texts were still quite brief, and really no more than short titles or slogans. Furthermore, Generation 2 of thematic exhibits were still almost exclusively limited to postage stamps.

KONST

Hyacinthe Rigaud (1659-1743), den
förnäma världens målare



Solkonungen själv.
Detalj



Furst Wenzel av
Liechtenstein



Markis de Vauban,
fransk marskalk



Antoine I, furste av
Monaco



Skalden Nicolas Boileau

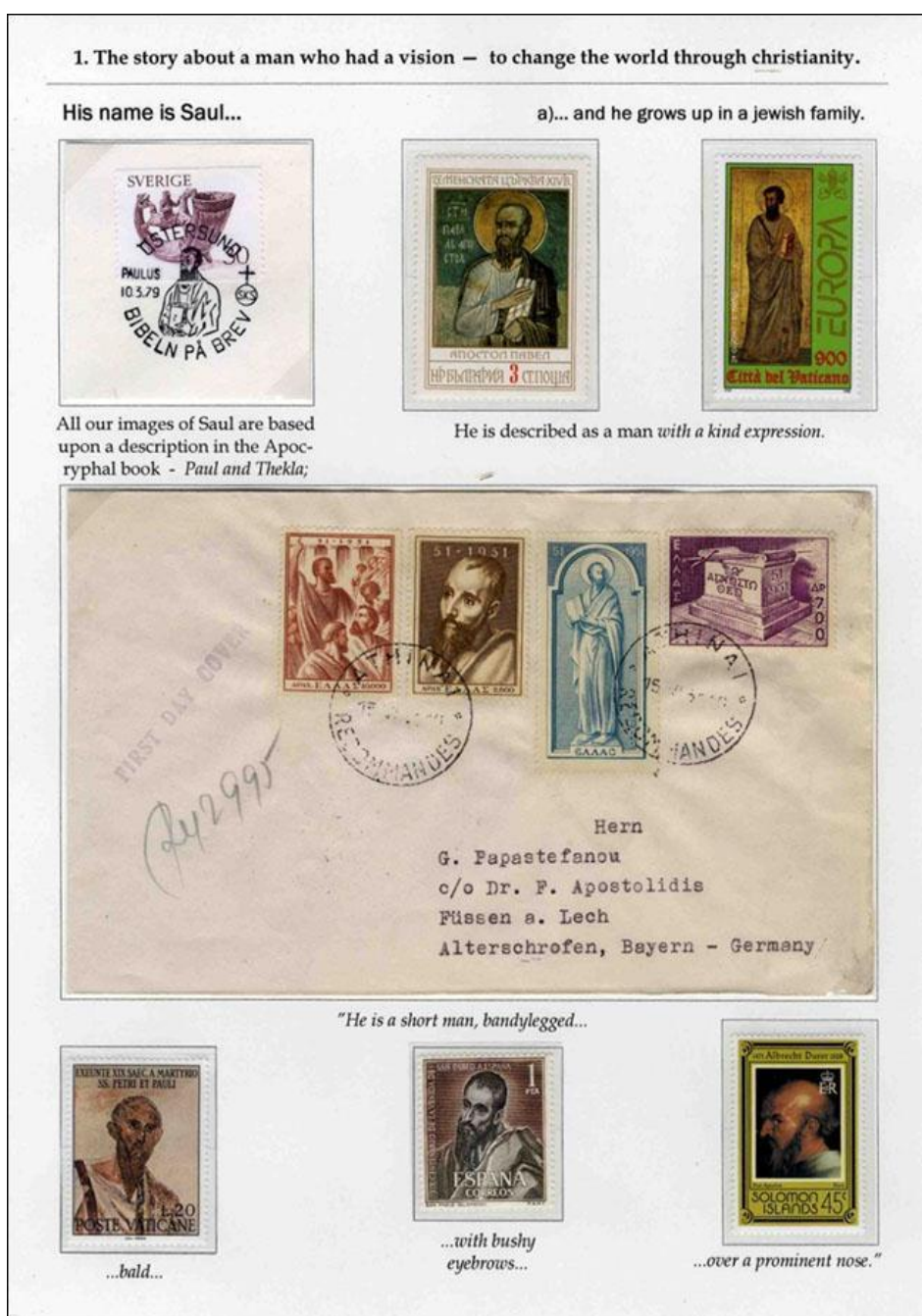
Thematic Collecting & Displays - Generation 2.5: Stamps & other items (still minimal text)

Thematic philately made a huge step forward in the 1970s when thematic exhibitors started to include more diverse philatelic materials in their thematic exhibits. At first, things like First Day Covers (FDCs) and commemorative cancelations were included, but soon other things were added such as various types of postmarks, postal stationery, stamp booklets and entire envelopes etc.

This resulted in a better documentation of thematic material. Exhibits of this type are classified as an intermediate Generation 2.5 of thematic exhibits.

Thematic Collecting & Displays - Generation 3: Stamps & other items (some explanatory text)

We describe the above step only as an intermediate step because it wasn't until the 1980s that any significant detailed accompanying text was added. Collectors began to include text which had a closer relation to specific philatelic materials. This method of presentation is often called a "philatelic dialogue". Thematic exhibits had entered the new truly ground breaking Generation 3, which now had all the features of what is now considered a modern philatelic thematic exhibit.




Page from a typical Generation 3 Thematic Collection (more than just stamps, more descriptive text)

Thematic Collecting & Displays - Generation 3.5: Quality Displays (parity with other fields)

Thematic exhibits reached another intermediate step (Generation 3.5) when they started to win gold medals, thanks to a significant increase in diversity and an improvement in the quality of philatelic materials presented in thematic classes at international level exhibitions.


For the first time this put thematic philately on a par with other fields of "real philately". There followed a development in 'Philatelic Studies', whose main purpose was to present philatelic materials not only in the terms of their *thematic* suitability but also in the terms of their *philatelic* quality. This caused thematic exhibitors to look for and include variants such as colour differences, perforation, paper, and printing method, typical or accidental printing flaws, various intermediate products created during the printing process, items of unusual postal use, and other interesting (and often much rarer) philatelic material.

2. THE DREAM LEADING TO CREATION.
2.1. PROUD AND FLOWERS OF OUR EXPERIMENTS. 2.1.1. STEPHENSON'S ROCKET.

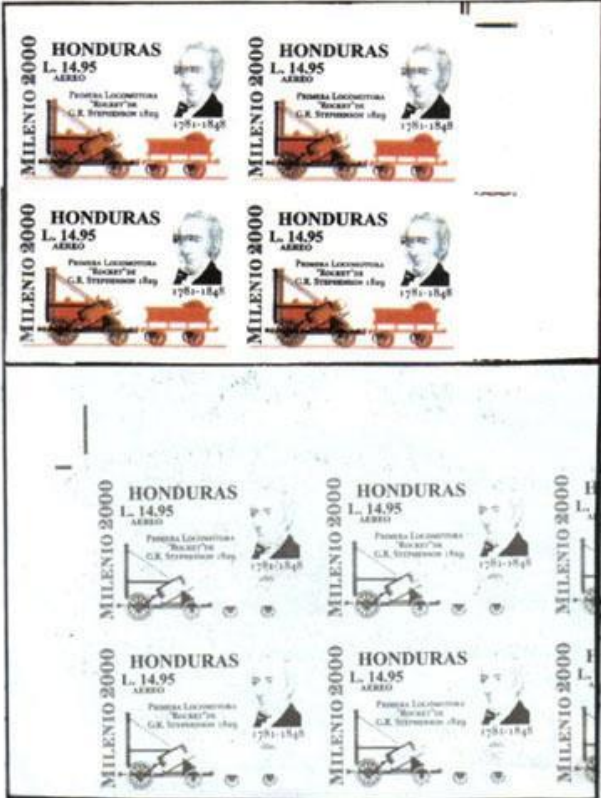


Imperf at bottom and shifted image up. Locomotive has no connection with the tracks. The tender is lower than the locomotive.

Brown colour shift to the right.
Although very far from having been the first to be built, was the first to incorporate a multitubular boiler combined with a blast pipe.



The 'Rocket' is perhaps the most famous of all the early locomotives.



Error: black colour also printed on the gum side.

Imperf at left part of the whole sheet.

Build by Robert Stephenson, the winner of the Rainhill trials was used, in a somewhat altered condition, in regular passenger service for a number of years thereafter. It may be claimed with some justification to have been the first locomotive to be reasonably successful and reliable in service. We can see the cylinders steeply inclined, later modified to be more nearly horizontal.

It must be admitted that, at least at first, the inclusion of philatelic studies in competitive philatelic exhibits often met with negative reactions. However, such material eventually became accepted, with the emphasis being on high quality and excellent philatelic materials which allowed the thematic development on each particular exhibition page and within the whole exhibit.

In short, the Generation 3.5 differs from the Generation 3 in the balanced use of much diversified high quality philatelic materials throughout the whole thematic exhibit. Of course, the inclusion of other types of postal history related items and documents meant a reduction in the number of postage stamps.



Another page from a typical Generation 3.5 Thematic Collection

Thematic Collecting & Displays - Generation 4: Thematic & Philatelic Treatment (also tell a story)

Thematic philately reached a stage of development which we now call the Generation 4 when Damian Läge exhibited his *Australasian Birdlife* thematic display. In this exhibit he elaborated to perfection both fundamental aspects of thematic philately: a highly specialized thematic treatment, and the inclusion of diversified and extremely rare philatelic materials.

In addition, he linked those two aspects (perhaps the most important and difficult task) to an interesting narrative or story that would attract not only philatelic experts but also casual visitors to philatelic exhibitions. Thanks to this exhibit and its innovative approach, today's thematic exhibitors have started to find new inspirations and develop thematic presentations in their *own* ways. This gives us new and new exciting thematic exhibits with specific non-traditional themes, in which exhibitors can present both their deep thematic expertise and philatelic knowledge ... and often add that little bit extra.

2. The long history of settlement: birds conquer the Australasian region

2.1 Land birds from Asia invade Australia via the Sunda Islands

The Sunda archipelago, however, is not only a borderline; it serves at the same time as a bridge: Two chains of islands helped to prevent Australasia from remaining long isolated by allowing Asian land birds to advance step by step. This principle of island-hopping is demonstrated here with reference to Oriental species that have "got stuck" on the different islands.

the northern route via Sulawesi and Moluccas

The Yellow-backed Sunbird has reached Sulawesi (the eastern-most species of its genus).

The Black-naped Oriole has pressed ahead as far as the Moluccas.

unissued essay with olive-green leaves

plate proof

the southern route via Bali, Lombok, Sumbawa, Flores, Alor and Timor

The Asian Blue-tailed Pitta has not managed to bridge the gap from Bali to Lombok.

plate proofs with blue light green colour omitted

Via Sumbawa and Flores, the Asiatic Paradise Flycatcher has reached Alor.

The Great Tit has advanced as far as Timor.

blue ink omitted

The Blue-backed Fairy Bluebird "got stuck" on Java.

plate proof of red colour

red colour partly omitted (pale fruits on the upper stamp)

The availability of tropical fruits helped vegetarian birds going eastward.

Using the southern route, the Grey Heron has reached the island of Sumbawa.

sepia printer's inspection die proof
ABOUT FOUR COPIES WERE PRODUCED

Page from a typical Generation 4 Thematic Collection
(take a broad subject and develop it using a wide range of material)

However, we have to admit that the assignment of an exhibit to Generation 4 is not an exact science, since some of the evaluation criteria call for a subjective opinion. In other words, a good Generation 4 philatelic exhibit has to be a kind of self-functioning 'living' organism, perhaps an artistic or literary work that always brings something new, has its own narrative value, and uses its own means of presentation ... in a word, it's an original work which not everyone perceives the same way. And we know that, in works of art, it is the subjective opinion which matters.

Outdated Thematic Exhibits v. Modern Thematic Exhibits

Let us now look at displays entered into Competitions.

- *What has changed?*
- *What must your display be like if you hope to win medals in Competitions?*

The most important turning point in the development of thematic collecting was the birth of the Generation 3 thematic exhibits, because this separates the outdated thematic exhibits (which have no chance of success at current competitive exhibitions) and modern thematic exhibits built according to the currently exhibition rules. In other words, if any exhibitor wants to think of success at a philatelic exhibition he/she must necessarily learn all the features of Generation 3 thematic exhibits ... and successfully apply them into his/her exhibit.

Unfortunately, some exhibitors and even jurors have not understood this important fact yet (or do not want to understand it, perhaps?), and persist with views and ideas which are several decades outdated. It may be very difficult to accept that what was good enough for a gold medal 30 years ago is now considered outdated and pretty obsolete, but times have changed, and thematic philately does not remain still - it evolves.

And even so, the exhibit which won a gold medal 10 years ago will at best challenge for a lesser medal today. As examples of the changing criteria now applied, let us look the once famous gold medal thematic exhibits by several Slovak exhibitors: *Severin Zrubec* ('Today rotary press machines revolve'), *Otto Gata* ('Mail in the European history'), and the series of Olympic exhibits by *Peter Osusky* ('For the glory of sport'). Each, in their own era, were really top and ground breaking thematic exhibits. They reached world level and gained several gold medals at European and international philatelic exhibitions. Each of them in its time belonged to the best and certainly pushed the development of the thematic philately significantly forward. For that they deserve a firm place in the pantheon of Slovak thematic philately and even in world thematic philately.

By there, unfortunately, their role in the contemporary thematic philately virtually ends. One can still find a lot of interesting material and perhaps some inspirational ideas inside those exhibits, but their thematic treatment has already become obsolete and therefore has no chance of success anymore.

Just in case you think I (*Vojtech Jankovic*) am only being critical of the work of others, even my own exhibit ('My life as a bicycle') which is currently still winning gold medals at world exhibitions, is slowly but surely starting to age ... and in a few years it might also end up on the 'rubbish heap of philatelic history'.

Developmental Levels, and the Potential Success of Thematic Exhibits

The above levels of thematic exhibit development help us, among other things, to evaluate the chances of success of a particular exhibit (and by 'success' we mean winning at least a large silver medal!).

At a regional exhibition, only exhibits ranked in at least the Generation 3 category have chance of success. At a national exhibition only exhibits which are close to the Generation 3.5 category stand much chance of success. At international or world exhibitions an exhibit would at least need the main features of a Generation 4 exhibit to win any medal at all, while gold medals would be awarded only to displays which approach the quality of Generation 4 thematic exhibits.

We summarize the essential characteristics of each thematic generation needed in an exhibit in the following table. Using this table in conjunction with the answers to the questions below will enable us to estimate roughly to which thematic development category an exhibit probably belongs, and thus what expectation the author may have prior to a philatelic exhibition (regional, national or international).

	Page format	Themes	Treatment	Text descriptions	Materials
Generation 1	Pre-printed pages	Very general themes	Motive treatment	No texts (on material pages)	Postage stamps
Generation 2	Proprietary pages, standard format	General themes	- ditto -	Minimal texts, titles and slogans	- ditto -
Generation 2.5	- ditto -	Narrow themes	Simple thematic treatment	Short texts without closer relation to materials	Several types of materials
Generation 3	- ditto -	Quite narrow themes	Quality thematic treatment	Detailed texts, close relation to materials (dialogue)	Diversified material types
Generation 3.5	Proprietary pages, non-standard formats	Very narrow themes	- ditto -	- ditto -	Diversified evenly distributed material types, philatelic specialisation
Generation 4	- ditto -	Specific themes	Treatment in form of a comprehensive story	Detailed texts, quite close relation to materials (dialogue)	- ditto -

To help you to evaluate your own exhibits, we pose the following control questions. If your answer to most of them is 'yes', then your exhibit is on the right track.

- Are you using a suitable page size for your display (i.e. does the page size allow you to present all important philatelic materials without ugly overlapping; does it avoid constantly having to fight with lack of space, and does it allow you to place information on the most appropriate page).
- On each page, (a) is your presentation simple and clear, and (b) is there a clear distinction between the title, the main thematic description, the secondary thematic description, and the philatelic description ... and are thematic text entries written in different fonts and/or sizes to the philatelic information, so one can easily be distinguished from the other?
- Does the title and the chosen theme of your exhibit represent a new concept (something innovative), previously unknown and unpublished?
- Is the plan of your exhibit your own work (and not more or less a copy of the contents of any known scientific or popular publication)?
- Does each thematic description on your exhibition page refer to something illustrated on that page, and do all illustrations on that page have corresponding thematic descriptions on the same page?
- Does your exhibit include diverse philatelic materials on each exhibition page (always at least two or three non-stamp items)?
- Does each frame (of, say, 12 or 16 exhibition pages per frame) contain a sufficient number of different types of philatelic materials ... and does the exhibit as a whole contain the sufficient number of different types of philatelic materials (see below)?

[If you want your display to be successful at a national or international exhibition, it is worth checking the diversity of philatelic material within that display. To do this, count all different types of philatelic materials presented on each frame. If the average number of different types of material on a frame is less than 10, your display does not have sufficient diversity of material (it more or less equates to a Generation 2.5 exhibit). If the average number of different types of material on a frame ranges from 10 to 15 it is a quite good exhibit, but still rates no higher Generation 3. If the average number of different types of material on a frame exceeds 16, it approaches the highest Generation 3.5 exhibit or even a Generation 4 exhibit. (The above numbers are valid for 16 frame exhibits.)]

- Are your diverse and valuable materials distributed evenly on all frames of your exhibit (and not all concentrated only on, say, the first frame or only in a few small sections of your exhibit)?
- Does your exhibit contain only pure philatelic materials - have you ensured that there are no non-philatelic materials (such as general postcards, photographs, stationery with unofficial imprints, postage stamps of illegal or dubious issues, pseudo-stamps from non-existent countries, private or unofficial stamp issues, etc.) which have no place in a quality competitive exhibit?

A few words at the end

As we can see, the development of thematic philately is always moving forward and is constantly evolving. So why are there still some collectors who prepare their collections based on each of the generations described above - even the early generations?

Really, it is quite natural. We all have our own idea of what is fun, and not all of us have ambitions to participate in competitions, or even to display our collections in public. Stamp collecting and philately is primarily a hobby, so let us do it in a way that gives us pleasure and satisfaction!

Try to estimate what your real abilities are, and choose the way you want to go. Let your hobby be full of fun and rewarding to you. Choose for yourself whether you want to have your collection at home just for your pleasure, whether you want to present it non-competitively to friends or in public, or whether you want to participate in competitive philatelic exhibitions at regional, national or even international level.

If you choose the latter, you deserve our admiration because to build a collection and to create an exhibit of competitive quality, or even to simply present it to others, takes a lot of effort ... occasionally accompanied by minor setbacks or disappointments.

But don't give up. Your efforts will be rewarded with a feeling of great satisfaction and with positive recognition and appreciation from your audiences.

Vojtech Jankovic