Current Trends in Thematic Philately – The Development and Generations of Thematic Exhibits

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During the philatelic seminar at the 1st Czech-Slovak Philatelic Exhibition in Vysoke Myto, Czech Republic in 2011, I presented a lecture “Current Trends in Thematic Philately (4th Generation Thematic Exhibits)” with the subtitle “Philatelic Knowledge in Thematic Exhibits”. The seminar generated a keen interest and more questions than could be answered during the presentation, so I decided to transpose its content into a series of articles in which I deal with these issues in more details.

The article “Current Trends in Thematic Philately – The Development and Generations of Thematic Exhibits” is the first of them. It is dedicated to the development of thematic philately and thematic exhibits and thus resulting developing changes in the look on the criteria on building and evaluation of thematic exhibits.

Permanent development of the thematic philately

The thematic philately and thematic exhibits on display at competitive philatelic exhibitions have survived stormy almost 100-years lasting evolution, which is far from to be finished - we can still meet up with new ideas and changes that still move the thematic philately ahead. The main driving force behind this development are new and new thematic exhibits which appear on philatelic exhibitions and push forward thematic boundaries and show new possibilities, either in the use of new philatelic materials or in the selection of specific themes or in the unusual way of innovative thematic treatment. Thanks to that the thematic philately is nowadays considered a full-value exhibiting class (already not only formally!) which is able to present not only thematic but also specialized philatelic knowledge and which starts to bring new ideas and inspiration to other classes as well. The reasonable form of knowledge transfer represent common specialised seminars organized in recent years, where their participants are looking for points of contact and mutual inspiration between thematic and postal history as well as thematic and traditional exhibits.

It is not easy for exhibitors to follow the constant evolution of the thematic philately, so it is very important to meet and exchange information with other collectors, exhibitors and jurors, attend philatelic exhibitions, read specialist philatelic literature, watch philatelic auctions and thus keep in good "philatelic fitness". The most ideal places to gather information are philatelic exhibitions as well as seminars and lectures, where one can see "live" exhibits and meet "real" experts. For those who are not for whatever reason able to
reach them, we bring information about current trends in the thematic philately devoted to the presentations about how to build a modern thematic exhibit and what are the latest trends in the thematic exhibit judging. First of all, however, let's define some basic concepts.

**Development stages of thematic exhibits**

**Thematic (philatelic) collection** is an arbitrarily ordered set of (philatelic) materials related to any theme chosen by the collector.

**Thematic (philatelic) exhibit** is a logically organized thematic (philatelic) collection accompanied by textual descriptions prepared into the form suitable for a display on (philatelic) exhibitions.

**Competitive thematic philatelic exhibit** is a thematic philatelic exhibit that meets the criteria of building and evaluation of competitive philatelic exhibits defined by the exhibition rules of the World Philatelic Federation FIP, which are on a national level specified by a National Philatelic Federation to a so-called “Exhibition Order”.

The above definition of the thematic exhibit term does not explicitly say neither what a logically organized collection is nor which textual descriptions and to what extent it should contain nor what exactly is the form suitable for a display. These concepts and views on them have been constantly evolving and therefore the thematic exhibits development can be divided into several development stages, which we call **generations of thematic exhibits**, and which are closely related to the gradual and since 1980s very rapid development of the thematic philately and changing views on its content and capabilities\(^1\).

The main objective of introducing the generations of thematic exhibits in not an attempt to introduce a formal categorization of thematic exhibits to uniform boxes, but to show typical characteristics which distinguish those different stages of development and thus to better understand how and which way the thematic philately still evolves. This would help us to better understand what is currently important in thematic exhibits and on what is put the greatest importance in their judging; in other words, to know how to assess the potential for a successful exhibit thematic evaluation at competitive exhibitions.

**1\(^{st}\) generation of thematic exhibits**

In the 1920s, when the thematic philately has begun to develop, the **1\(^{st}\) generation of thematic exhibits** (rather collections) was created. Their main feature was the presentation

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\(^1\) The term "generation of thematic exhibits" was first used by Jonas Hallström in his lecture “4th Generation of Thematic Exhibits” at the international thematic seminar during the World Philatelic Exhibition LONDON 2010 [1].
of postage stamps in pre-printed albums, which covered general - at that time the most popular - themes such as animals, history, personalities, etc. From our retrospective, the central role in the preparation of a first generation thematic exhibit laid on the author of a pre-printed album, which was mostly (commercial) publisher, not on the collector, who was tasked only to find any missing thematic stamps (= to fill the pre-defined empty boxes). However, then it was perceived differently and the thematic philately may owe its development to a few publishers who have invested into the issue of pre-printed albums and thus "made rule" that people would collect stamps also according themes.

If we think a bit about it we may realize that this generation of thematic exhibits (or rather collections) still remain alive today. Some collectors (and they are not a few) still produce (or request to produce) their own proprietary album pages with printed titles and windows for specific postage stamps of their topics. It's their way of collecting and storing their collections which suit them best, therefore they have no reason to change their habits. Album pages for these collections are created based on available stamp catalogues or even exactly bespoke to enable them to include just those postage stamps they already have in their collections. Basically, it is a kind of customised collection design not for a competitive but for a private presentation.

Once such collections were exhibited and evaluated, however, today they could only be seen as a form of organization of a general or motive collection, in which are laid side by side complete series of stamps and miniature sheets, seldom also entires or other philatelic stuff.
For the evaluation of such exhibits we miss a higher (measurable) level of authors’ creativity (choice of theme, specific approach to the theme, coherent logical structure, etc.). In addition, those 1st generation thematic exhibits lack of any credible presentation of philatelic knowledge (thematic descriptions, philatelic specialities and their descriptions, interesting entires, etc.).

2nd generation of thematic exhibits

In the 1950s, the thematic philately had developed and started to enter international philatelic exhibitions - the 2nd generation of thematic exhibits was formed. It was still characterized by general themes, but exhibitors were already preparing their own proprietary exhibition page layouts and presented postage stamps were accompanied by brief textual descriptions.

The most important feature of this generation, which has moved the thematic philately significantly ahead, was the connection between material and its accompanying text description, which has gradually led to the on-page grouping of postage stamps into smaller units based on their sub-topics. This caused that thematic exhibits were no more presented on standardly produced album pages by traditional publishers but on album pages which were produced by exhibitors according to their needs. Here one can admit a spark of own creative approach - something that could be evaluated at competitive exhibitions. However, texts were still quite “short-spoken”, in fact they were only short titles or slogans. And in the terms of material, the 2nd generation of thematic exhibits, still persisted almost exclusively on placing postage stamps.
KONST

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

Sökonungen själv. Detalj

Furst Wenzel av Liechtenstein

Markis de Vauban. fransk marshalk

Antoine I. furstie av Monaco

Skalden Nicolas Boileau
2.5th and 3th generation of thematic exhibits

The thematic philately has made a huge step forward in the 1970s when thematic exhibitors started to apply diversified philatelic materials in their thematic exhibits – no more postage stamps only. First, only several well-known types (e.g. FDCs, commemorative cancelations), but soon have been gradually introduced various types of postmarks, postal stationeries, and stamp booklets as well as circulated entires to better document all thematic matters (in fact this process has not been finished yet). Exhibits of this type are classified under the intermediate level as the 2.5th generation thematic exhibits. Indeed, only an intermediate step, because only when in the 1980s were added detailed accompanying texts with closer relation to specific philatelic materials (currently this method of presentation is called a "philatelic dialogue"), thematic exhibits has entered the new truly ground breaking 3rd generation of thematic exhibits, which already had all the features of what is now considered a modern philatelic thematic exhibit.
1. The story about a man who had a vision — to change the world through Christianity.

His name is Saul... a)... and he grows up in a Jewish family.

All our images of Saul are based upon a description in the Apocryphal book - Paul and Thecla.

He is described as a man with a kind expression.

"He is a short man, bandy-legged..."

...bald...

...with bushy eyebrows...

...over a prominent nose."
3.5\textsuperscript{th} generation of thematic exhibits

Thematic exhibits reached the 3.5\textsuperscript{th} generation of thematic exhibits, when they started to achieve gold medals thanks to the significant increase of diversity and improved quality of philatelic materials in the thematic class at international level exhibitions. This achievement brought the thematic philately for the first time on the equipollent status in the eyes of the expert philatelic public who has already begun to see the thematic class as a "real philately" equipped with top philatelic items and explanatory texts closely related to presented philatelic materials.

A significant share of the increased awareness of the high quality philatelic materials in thematic exhibits have deserved so called philatelic studies. Their 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 that thematic exhibitors have started to look for and insert into their exhibits not only common philatelic materials in their cheapest form. Their effort is now focused on different material variants (e.g. due to the change of colour, perforation, paper, and printing method), typical or accidental printing flaws, various semi-products created during the item preparation and printing, an unusual postal use and other interesting (and often much rarer) philatelic material forms. The same breath, however, it must be admitted that the inclusion of philatelic studies in competitive philatelic exhibits – mainly in the initial phase – often met with negative reactions. Hopefully, responsible people succeeded gradually to specify reasonable and non-violent forms of philatelic knowledge presentation, which emphasize high quality and excellence philatelic materials while not suppressing the thematic development on each particular exhibition page (and within the whole exhibit).
Shortly speaking, the 3.5th generation differs from the 3rd one by the balanced use of diversified high quality philatelic materials throughout the whole thematic exhibit: not only a sample of a non-stamp item on each exhibition page but the maximal use of all available...
types of philatelic materials on every page. Such an equalisation of all types of materials, results in practice in the significant loss of postage stamps and their replacement by other types of postal history related items and documents which are deemed – according to the above rules – appropriate philatelic materials.

4th generation of thematic exhibits

The thematic philately has reached the stage of development which we call the 4th generation of thematic exhibits when Damian Läge exhibited his "Australasian Birdlife" thematic exhibit. In his exhibit he has elaborated to perfection both fundamental thematic philately aspects: the highly specialized thematic treatment and the inclusion of diversified and extremely rare philatelic materials. In addition, he was capable to link those two aspects - which is currently considered the most important (and most difficult) - into an interesting narrative or story that would attract not only philatelic experts but also common visitors of philatelic exhibitions. Thanks to this exhibit and its innovative approach, the current generation of today's thematic exhibitors has started to find new inspirations and develop their own way of thematic presentation. And this still brings 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 are able to add even a little bit extra.
Here we have to admit that the assignment of an exhibit to the 4th generation thematic exhibits category is not an exact method since some of the evaluation criteria request for a subjective opinion. In other words, a good 4th generation 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 not everyone perceives the same way. And we know that in the word of art it is the subjective opinion which matters.

Outdated versus modern themed exhibit

From our current view the most important "turning point" is the birth of the 3rd generation thematic exhibits, which is a very important milestone in the development of thematic exhibits (and the whole thematic philately), because strictly separates outdated thematic exhibits that have no chance of success at current competitive exhibitions and modern
thematic exhibits build according to the currently valid exhibition rules. In other words, if any exhibitor wants to think about a kind of success at a philatelic exhibition he/she must necessarily learn all the features of the 3rd generation 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?) and persist on several decades outdated views and theses. I know, sometimes it is very difficult to accept that what was enough 30 years ago for a gold medal, is now considered outdated and pretty obsolete, but times have changed and thematic philately do not remain still, but still evolves. And even so, the exhibit, which won a gold medal 10 years ago, today, defends only with difficulties a vermeil medal.

A prime example of changing criteria provide once famous gold thematic exhibits by 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”. In each particular time period each of them belonged to really top – for the time period ground breaking – thematic exhibits, which reached the world level and gain several gold medals at the European and international philatelic exhibitions. Each of them in its time belonged to the best and certainly has pushed the development of the thematic philately worthy piece forward. For that they deserve a firm place in the pantheon of the Slovak – and I'm not afraid to say – also of the world thematic philately. By this, unfortunately, their role in the contemporary modern thematic philately practically ends. One can still find a lot of interesting materials, perhaps some inspirational ideas inside them, however their thematic treatment and the concept has already become obsolete and therefore has no chance of success anymore. But not to be critical only to others, even my exhibit Vojtech Jankovic – “My life as a bicycle”, which is currently gaining gold medals at world exhibitions, slowly but surely starting to age and within some years I may also feel the loss of breath and if I do not adjust to the actual thematic philately evolution, it might also end up on the “rubbish heap of philatelic history”...

Developmental level and the potential success of a thematic exhibit

The above characterization of the thematic exhibit development levels is not a self-standing theoretical mind-game but allows – among other things – to detect the success potential of a particular exhibit. (Of course, meeting these criteria is not the only condition for a successful evaluation!). Currently, the following unwritten rules are valid (under the successful evaluation we mean the gain of at least a large silver medal): At a regional exhibition only exhibits rated at least to the 3rd generation category have any potential to be successfully evaluated. At a national exhibition could succeed only exhibits rated at least to the 3rd generation category which are close to the 3.5th generation category. At any international or world exhibition an exhibit should have at least the main features of the 3.5th generation exhibit if the exhibitor wants to think at least about a vermeil medal; while for a gold medal
could aspire only exhibits tending in their nature to be classified as the 4th generation thematic exhibits.

For a higher clarity, we summarize the essential thematic generation characteristics in the following table. Using the table together with answers to the below questions one would roughly estimate to which thematic development category his/her exhibit probably belongs and thus what expectation he or she may have prior to a philatelic exhibition (regional, national or international).

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

For a better orientation and easier classification of your thematic exhibits we introduced the following control questions. If your answer on the most of them is affirmative, the exhibit is on the right track.

- Are you using a suitable size of your exhibition pages, which allow you to present all important philatelic materials without ugly overlapping OR you constantly fight with lack of space and some interesting materials simply do not find their place on that exhibition page to which they best relate?
- Is your presentation on any exhibition page simple and clear with clear distinction what is the title, which is the main and which is the secondary thematic description and which is the philatelic description OR all text descriptions are written in one font and size and you do not distinguish those descriptions that bear thematic from those which bear philatelic information?
- Does the title and the chosen theme of your exhibit represent a new eyview, something innovative, previously unknown and unpublished OR they follow an approach which can be found in a general encyclopaedia?
• Is the plan of your exhibit your own work OR it is more or less a copy of the contents of any known scientific or popular publication?

• Is each thematic description on your exhibition page adequately documented by an appropriate material(s) and vice versa each material (or each group of materials) has got a corresponding thematic description OR you are writing about something that you cannot document by any philatelic material and include philatelic materials with subjects whom you do not mention in your thematic descriptions at all?

• Does your exhibit include diverse philatelic materials on each exhibition page (always at least two or three non-stamp items) OR the most of your exhibition pages are dominated by postage stamps?

• Do each particular exhibition frame (16 or 12 exhibition pages) and the exhibit as whole contain the sufficient number of different types of philatelic materials (see below) OR you are using only a few most common types of philatelic materials?

• Are your diversified and valuable materials distributed evenly on all frames of your exhibit OR valuable materials are concentrated only for example on the first frame or only in a few small sections of your exhibit?

• Does your exhibit contain only pure philatelic materials OR you need to help yourself by non-philatelic materials which have no place in a quality competitive exhibit (e.g. general postcards, photographs, stationeries with unofficial imprints, postage stamps of illegal or unfavourable issues (e.g. Arab sheikhtags), pseudo-stamps of non-existent countries, private - unofficial stamp issues, etc.)?

If an exhibit has the ambition is to get ahead on a national or international exhibition, it may be helpful to verify the criterion of philatelic material diversity. A simple way to check to which development (and therefore quality) generation a particular exhibit may belong is to count all different types of philatelic materials presented on each exhibition frame (the numbers are valid for 16 exhibition page frames). If the number of different types of material on a frame is less than 10, we cannot speak about sufficient material diversity (= no more than the 2.5th generation). If the number ranges from 10 to 15 it is a quite good exhibit however still rates no higher the 3th generation. And if the number found exceeds 16 different types of materials on each single exhibition frame, it is - in this criterion - indeed an exhibit worth considering the highest 3.5th or 4th thematic generation.

A few words at the end

As we can see, the development is always moving forward – the thematic philately is constantly evolving. So why there are still collectors who prepare their collections corresponding to each of the described generation approaches - filling into pre-printed postage stamps albums, creating their own album pages to their individual needs or creating more or less sophisticated competitive exhibits. This is natural, we all have our own idea of
what is fun and not all of us have ambitions to display our collections in public or even to participate at competition exhibitions (and subordinate to prescribed exhibition rules). Stamp collecting and philately is primarily a hobby, therefore let us devote our attention to it in an extent that causes pleasure and satisfaction in the first place to us.

Try, therefore, to estimate your real abilities and determine the way you want to go, to let your hobby brings you the proper fun and rewarding. Chose for yourself – whether you want to have your collection at home just for your pleasure or you want to present it in the form of a promotional exhibit or if you have a more ambitious plan to participate at competitive philatelic exhibitions of regional, national or even international level. If you choose the latter option, you deserve our recognition because to rebuild a collection and to create an exhibit of a higher level of quality or even more present it to the public is not an easy way, occasionally accompanied by minor setbacks or disappointments. But if you do not give up it is usually crowned with the feeling of great satisfaction and with positive recognition by expert public. And if you get aware of that there exist some rules being built years for the competition exhibits which have to respected, you can expect that your exhibit will be fairly evaluated and you get a well-deserved point or medal, or even prize reward.

References


In the case of any remarks or questions, please, do not hesitate to contact me via email: vojtech.jankovic@gmail.com