

Thematic Exhibiting - Few Practical Tips

By Dr. Upender Vennam

Thematic Exhibit demands great planning and execution skills. A thematic exhibit, when it is treated as finest art, it will be rewarded suitably with appropriate medal by an experienced and balanced Jury. The primary object of an exhibitor is to maximize his/her exhibit score after the exhibit is judged. Therefore, a nicely built up thematic exhibit is undoubtedly a finest craft. Preparation for building up thematic exhibit involves following aspects:

Finding a theme that suits our interest:

It is recommended that the exhibitor should have prior knowledge of that domain, on which exhibit is proposed to be built up. In other words, a thematic exhibitor is expected to know the details of the theme proposed to be built-up in advance. The exhibitor needs to do lot of research on those topics, which are familiar to him/her. A person who is familiar with botanical or zoological aspects can build-up a thematic subject close to these topics with less effort and with maximum impact. A Doctor can look for his/her topic of choice which is familiar to him/her. The logic is that if we have great aptitude in those areas then it becomes easy to build-up the exhibit with that theme. The takeaway is that we should choose an area, which is close to our heart. Unlike Topical Philately, a thematic exhibit demands a story. Therefore, the topic chosen should be able to lead to a good story, told through a variety of philatelic material.

Gathering appropriate Philatelic Material:

Once the topic is chosen, then one need to scout for the philatelic material. The exhibitor needs to build up relationship with various exhibitors, dealers apart from registering in Stamps vending sites / WhatsApp groups. There are many online stamps vending sites like Delcampe, eBay, Postbeeld, Hip stamp etc. It is easy to source material from these e-market places as hundreds of dealers across the world offer quality material. Apart from these sites, there are some Indian sites too which offer variety of philatelic material including ancillaries.

One need to divide his/her exhibit into various chapters say 4-5 chapters. The draft navigation / story line is to be written down on paper. Accordingly, the philatelic materials need to be purchased. While gathering variety of philatelic materials, it should be ensured that the stamps proportion may be around 30 to 40%. Rest should be on different philatelic elements like proofs, specimen, major errors, oddities, freaks, franked items, perfins, over prints etc. The material should cover as far as possible, all time periods, i.e., from classic period to modern. The proportion of material from modern period, say for the last 20 years should be kept minimum. More and more postally used covers, having multiple franking in best condition with clear impressions are to be procured. While gathering the material, some difficult – to get material also to be purchased. Such procured material should be securely placed in a good quality stamp album, duly segregated chapter wise.

Collecting thematic details:

Once large proportion of philatelic material is procured, the next activity is to gather literature on the theme. Such gathered information needs to be collated chapter-wise. One need to consult proper text books, reference material, besides online resources. Initially one need to collect huge information. Such information needs to be segregated into story in line with the proposed chapter and sub-chapter-wise, from the draft segregated information. The most relevant aspects to the story need to be re-written, aligning with philatelic material available. The text should not be more than one or two lines under each philatelic item. One need to exercise utmost caution in mentioning thematic text. The principle of 'write what you show – show what you write' to be kept in mind and followed.

Securing a good quality Exhibit Sheets:

The most important item after securing the philatelic material is the exhibit sheet. The exhibit sheet should withstand the weight of philatelic material mounted on it. Therefore, it is advised to procure the best quality exhibit sheet of 220 gsm at least. The color of the exhibit should not be milky white nor colored. It should be half-white with even surface. It should not be toxic and should not cause damage to the items mounted on it. The size of exhibit sheet can be of 3 dimensions. It can be of A4 size sheet or A3 size (including A3+) or square size i.e., 31cm X 29cm. While going for these sizes, it should be ensured that the height of exhibit sheet is 29cm. Therefore, it would be good idea to procure the big sized paper board and cut it into required size. When items are large in size, it is appropriate to use A3 exhibit sheet. The popular size across globe for an advanced exhibitor is square size exhibit sheet. In case of A4, the number of sheets per frame will be 16 and for A3 the number is 8. In case of using square size exhibit sheets, the number per frame is 12 in 4 rows altogether. One should procure high quality exhibit sheet protectors of BOPP (Bi-axially Oriented Poly Propylene) make. These are generally imported from Bangkok and Taiwan. These are supposed to be non-toxic.

Working soft copy of Exhibit:

As per FIP rules, there is no disadvantage when the exhibit sheet is hand written. These are the days of advanced use of technology. Therefore, ideally, computer to be used for preparing the soft copy and printing the contents of exhibit sheet with high quality (laser quality) printer. Normally suggested fonts are: Times New Roman, Arial and Calibri. Arial narrow font uses less space. The font size should be 12 for thematic and 11 for philatelic text. It all depends on the exhibitor skills in designing an exhibit sheet. The title, the sub-title, the page summary, the text (thematic and philatelic) below the philatelic item, the layout of individual items- all need to be arranged with great professional skill. Ultimately, it is the 'presentation' component of thematic judging criteria, decides the medal level. Various techniques of documentation like highlighting the rarity and / or the important aspects of item shown, the use of appropriate guiding symbols- all will help enhance the aesthetics of the exhibit sheet. The bottom line is that text should be telegraphic. The philatelic item should speak for itself and for that the text will aid. Therefore, the exhibitor should make a conscious effort to see that the viewers eye 'catches only the philatelic item' when viewed. Use of different colors across the exhibit is strictly prohibited. The color used should be uniform and consistent, which is aligned with the Plan page on the first exhibit sheet. It is strongly advised to create a box with border in which philatelic item is securely mounted. The thickness of the box line can be 0.25mm and preferably black color. When rare items are to be highlighted, the box line can be in red with thickness of about 0.25mm. The e-matting enhances the beauty of the exhibit. The page summary at the top right-hand corner will help the viewers to understand the story being told on the page. The text below each philatelic item to be aligned with the box border line confining the philatelic item. When exhibit sheets are kept in a row and when viewed from 2ft distance or so, it should leave a favorable impression of exhibit aesthetics. Therefore, the alignment of each philatelic item not only on the exhibit sheet, but across the row should be aesthetically arranged. The heavier items to be positioned in the bottom of the exhibit sheet and the lighter and small size items to be positioned on the top of it. When 'key item' is placed on the exhibit sheet, it should be positioned in such a way that it stands out.

In other words, relatively the space around such 'key item' should be 'more' compared to the white space between other items. The 'key item' should be positioned in the 2nd or 3rd row, preferably in the middle portion of the exhibit. There are other ways of highlighting the 'key items' also like with distinct boarder line around the 'key item'. The page titles and sub-titles sizes should be bigger than the thematic and philatelic text size. For the purpose of creating thematic exhibits, MS Publisher will be of great help. With constant practice, one can master the art of creating a good exhibit. The exhibits can be numbered at the bottom right hand corner of exhibit sheet.

Once exhibit is created frame-wise, the sheets can be arranged on a table / ground to see whether the frame has come up aesthetically presentable. Also, it needs to be seen whether the 'key items' can be spotted easily. One need to find out whether there are any distracting items on the exhibit sheet. It is a good idea once thematic text is prepared, it should be copied on to MS-Word page so has to see whether the story has un-interrupted flow.

The thematic text should be free from grammatical errors and in a telegraphic text form. The philatelic items are to be presented as per the FIP norms. On each page, variety of philatelic elements need to be shown. On an average, 8 items and above may be ensured. Overall in a five-frame thematic exhibit, there will be around 500 items. The number of philatelic elements per frame to be ensured above 16 numbers. It would be a good idea to mention page-wise philatelic items in an Excel sheet. A 'pie chart' may be created to know relative proportion of different philatelic elements present in the exhibit. As noted, the stamps percentage may be ensured below 40%. As many as possible, good number of commercially used postal covers, postal stationery in mint form, major errors, multiple franked covers need to be spread across the exhibit. The modern material should be in excellent condition. The stamp and the cancellation are important philatelic items. Especially in India, there are many special covers issued covering various situations. These will come handy in advancing the story. The cancellation part helps the exhibit to elevate its standard. A cancellation should be clearly visible. Where necessary a small arrow may be stuck pointing the portion of cancellation relevant for the exhibit.

It may so happen that there may not be any philatelic item, which directly advances the story. In such situations, the intelligent use of cancellations, franks, slogans, errors etc., can be made use to advance the story. The use of such material is not directly evident. But on close examination, such material can be linked for advancement of the story. Such 'surprise material' will earn additional marks.

The special covers issued in India will come with some design/illustration on the left side of the special cover. This is not to be shown when displayed on the exhibit. It is only the stamp and cancellation that are relevant to for advancing the story. Therefore, a 'window' needs to be created by cutting the exhibit sheet so has to insert the cachet portion behind exhibit sheet. This is true in respect of big sized commercially used covers also. The postal stationery need to be shown in its entirety. When variety of postal stationeries of same design need to be shown, those can be overlapped. Otherwise, overlapping of any philatelic items is not to be done. There should be 'breathing space' around each philatelic item.

The story advances from top left to top right and then from second row onward top left to top right. There should be inter connection between two pages. In other words, the last item on each page should lead to the advancement of story in the next page. Essentially thematic exhibit is about conveying story through philatelic items. Ideally each philatelic item positioned on exhibit sheet need to advance the story. Each item to be independent and at the same time contributes to the advancement of story.

Therefore, the sequence of items to be arranged in such a way that inter change of items will hamper advancement of story. It may so happen that in every thematic exhibition this type of situation will not be there. The page sub-title may alone advance the story with various items presented on the exhibit sheet. For example: When 'dance forms' is the sub-title, there may not be any story between two philatelic items shown on the exhibit showing different types of dance. In other words, each philatelic item may be representing one form of dance. What best can be done in such a situation is grouping of similar nature of items together. For Example: When dance forms are shown, variety of dance forms like classical dances, folk dances etc., can be grouped together based on certain common aspects. The idea is that in some way relationship among the items shown on the exhibit sheet should be established so as to advance the story as arranged on the plan page. The exhibit should have the clear beginning, engaging story as it unfolds and ends with strong conclusion. The Plan page need to be re-visited again and again as exhibit is constructed. By the time last page is completed, the Plan page reaches its culmination.

Therefore, Plan page is the first page in constructing the exhibit and also the last one to be completed after rest of exhibit pages are worked. The Title need to be innovative and convey the story in one go. Accordingly, the Title page, introduction and plan need to be worked out carefully. One 'key' philatelic item may be kept on the Title page which will represent the most important aspect of the exhibit. There should not be any use of non-philatelic items in the exhibit. The border-line items should be kept barest minimum. Picture post cards and revenue items should not be used at all.

May the thematic exhibits grow in quality and win international acclaim!
