

## The Land of the Free and Happy Philatelists

Philately, or the study of stamps, is a huge field of study that has captured the attention of many Americans over the years. This fascination with stamps and the history that surrounds them has led to a hobby related to philately, which is collecting stamps.

Usually, stamp collection begins with the acquisition of a first couple of stamps and the choice of a particular classification of stamps where the collector will concentrate his or her efforts on. The continued acquisition of the stamps for the collection is done either through personal letters, the postal office, trading with fellow collectors, or collectible stamp dealers, rare and high quality stamps under the chosen classification.

However, while it may seem that a philatelic hobby is far too difficult or obscure, it actually is not. The collection and study of stamps is not a completely novel idea; over 110 countries worldwide have a sort of society for philatelists (or stamp collectors and enthusiasts).

In the United States of America, philatelists banded together in the year 1886 under the umbrella of the American Philatelic Society (APS). For more than a century now, the APS provides its members not only an avenue to meet fellow enthusiasts, but also various services and informational programs to assist in the pursuit and enhancement of the collecting experience. Over this huge span of time, the APS has been kept alive by donations, sale of its various publications, receipt of payment for its services, and receipt of its members' dues. The community of APS is not a small one that may be overlooked. In the country, there are more than 44, 000 philatelists formally part of the APS. There are many others who are new to the trade, or are yet to find their way to APS. This huge number is proven by the fact that various states hold annual philatelic conventions for enthusiasts in the area to meet and convene. Another philatelic association in the United States known equally for its expertise is the Philatelic Foundation.

Various classifications and concentrations of collection are available. Some of them include postage stamps from other countries (particularly those of age), postage stationery (including air letter sheets, government-issued post cards) that preceded the printing of the first stamp in the form we know today, revenue stamps, or first day cover stamps.

However, one particular stamp category is more or less unique to the United States of America (and its adjacent territories, including Canada). These are Federal Duck stamps, which are used basically for licenses for duck hunters.

These were created with the primary goal to conserve ducks and their immediate environment. This was evident when a well-known conservationist by the name of Ding Darling designed the first Federal Duck stamp, which was released in the year 1934. These stamps slowly became a tradition, with annual competitions participated in by many wildlife artists. At the end of the day, the winner ends up having his or her design printed on the year's Federal Duck stamp, alongside the instant fame and prestige coming with having the winning entry. The U.S. government, through the Department of Interior and local state agencies, spearheads the sale of these Federal Duck stamps. Revenues from the sales of the stamps go to the acquisition of wetlands, home to these ducks, with the intention of protecting and preserving them.

First-day covers (FDCs), which are increasingly becoming popular with stamp collectors, are stamped envelopes cancelled on the very date the stamp is issued. The later designs of FDCs bear the theme of a particular stamp's issue, otherwise known as a cachet. Known philatelist George W. Linn cacheted the first FDC in the year 1923 for the Harding Memorial stamps. Today, cachetmaking is considered an art, and is achieved by various methods. These methods include drawing directly on the envelope, lithography, block printing, and laser printing, among others. Today, the U.S. produce huge volumes of cacheted stamps through the services of known cachetmaking companies like Artcraft, Colorano, and House of Farnam.

However, stamp collecting in the United States was not always a smooth road. In the period of 1920s, the value of U.S. stamp issues increased significantly in value. This caused many Americans to collect mint U.S. stamp issues in bulk, with hopes of re-selling them some years down the line for a higher price. However, due to the fact that there are too many available in the market, among other reasons, these stamps are priced only a little over their original face value.

Whatever the case, the trend of philately and stamp collecting in the United States may continue to grow over the years. Critics predicted a decrease in philately with the dawning of the Internet and email. However, the continued demand for stamps and the volume and frequency of turnover of stamp design continually increase over the years, bringing much excitement and celebration to the world of philately.