

Stamps and Postcards – Science or Play?

A Longitudinal Study of a Gendered Collecting Field

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Rogan, Bjarne 2001: Stamps and Postcards – Science or Play? A Longitudinal Study of a Gendered Collecting Field. – *Ethnologia Europaea* 31: 37–54.

The point of departure is a case study of a French collecting couple, with a focus on their very different ways of collecting stamps. I shall then go back to mid 19th century and follow the different modes of collecting postal history up to our time. These collecting modes depend on societal norms for gender patterns as well as on dominant scientific paradigms. The aim is twofold; I want to point out the impact of scientific thought on everyday life, even on leisure activities like collecting, and I want to trace some lines of development in the history of gender and material culture. Much literature on collecting has been published during the last decade, but next to nothing on its most widespread branch, that of stamps and postal history, a hobby with hundreds of millions of adherents in the 1990s and an annual economic turnover of around ten billion US dollars. Collecting habits reflect ideologies of order and discipline, of knowledge and methodology, and of gender. A longitudinal study of the history of postal history collecting may shed some light on these issues.¹

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Collecting Stamps on the Treshold of a New Millenium

Mme X, born in 1918 and living as a widow near Fontainebleau, a little south of Paris, seems to be the incarnation of a female collector. She collects continuously, although she has changed collecting fields several times; “It’s a must for me to collect”, she breaks in several times during the interview². And like most if not all collectors, she loves talking about her collections.

She started collecting faïence, then salt vessels – both typical female collectibles. Then she joined a club for cartophiles and later a local club for collectors of all sorts of items, where she specialized on stamps. As a postcard collector she specialized on homestead collecting, that is cards from the three departments where she has lived in France, and in addition one thematic field: violet flower motifs. Finally, she has taken a strong interest in genealogy, ‘collecting’ her own kin and filling in the holes in the different branches of the family.

When Mr X, her husband, died 7 years ago, he left her a large stamp collection. Mr X had specialized on France and a few other countries. His guiding star for classifying the collection had been *Yvert et Tellier*, a meticulously systematized and chronologically organized list of all the stamps ever issued, with all the main varieties and colour and print irregularities. As a systematic collector, Mr. X conscientiously followed their taxonomic principles – that is chronology, series and variants.

None of the children wanted to take over the stamp collection, and Mme X did not want to follow up in the spirit of her late husband. She stuck to her postcards. But after some years, she started picking out special stamps from her husband’s collection and put them together with other stamps, thus totally reorganizing it.

Her organizing principle was thematic, and among her themes are the French cinema, the resistance, transport, *la chanson française*, the life of general de Gaulle, etc. The themes are mounted on cardboard plates, about 35 x 30

centimeters, often framed with some sort of application, for instance a theatre curtain. In the center poses a magnified stamp or a postcard with an appropriate motif, and around are some 20 selected stamps, their number depending on availability, the story to be told, and the decorative effect – “selon la décoration ou l’ornement”. For the theme ‘The life of general de Gaulle’, a postcard showing The Lorraine Crux³ was surrounded by French and foreign stamps where de Gaulle was portrayed – as a young St. Cyrien or military school student, with Winston Churchill and other World War politicians, with Queen Elizabeth, at his family place Colombey, etc. The aim was to reconstruct the life of the statesman through the stamps.

In short, Mme X reorganized the old collection by choosing a totally different mode of systematization than her husband had done. With her, play and decorative principles replaced his traditional taxonomy.

The 1840s and “The industriously idle ladies of England”

“When was a folly so pestilent hit upon
As folks running mad to collect every spit-upon
Post Office Stamp, that’s been soiled and been
writ upon! ... ” (*Punch* 1842, after Hamilton 1939:121).

The first postage stamp, the famous penny black with Queen Victoria’s portrait, was issued in May 1840 in England, and other countries followed shortly after. The prepaid stamp and the simplified system of postal rates was an innovation of inestimable significance in the history of communication. An even more unforeseen result was that this new item within a year or two released a collecting mania.

The immediate popularity of the stamp as a collectible must be seen against the background of the general collecting vogue in this recently industrialized age. Collecting had been a pastime for the rich since Antiquity, but the mid and late 19th century saw a tremendous boom in collecting habits among a much broader part of the population, for several reasons. Industrialisation offered an abundance of things hitherto

unknown – cheap things included; consumer society was in its making, and romanticism had created a nostalgia for the past. Things both old and new were seen in a new light. The Victorians were great collectors, states Asa Briggs (1990:47), citing an English journal from 1869: “This is a collecting age”. Many collecting manias popped up in the last half of the 19th century, but none so lasting nor so widespread as stamp collecting. And women as well as men were smitten by the new mania.

From the first years after 1840, when there were yet few different specimens of stamps available, a strange collecting habit, more like what we would call hoarding, was reported. In 1842 the satiric journal *Punch* wrote about this “new mania” that had “bitten the industriously idle ladies of England”, namely to collect the penny black and the twopenny blue, or Queen’s Heads as they were popularly called. “The ladies of England are indefatigable in their endeavours to collect old penny stamps. In fact, they betray more anxiety to treasure up Queen’s Heads than King Henry VIII did to get rid of them”, was the journal’s witty comment.⁴ In the same year the journal asked, in the form of a satiric poem, if there had ever been a folly like that of collecting old soiled and spit-upon stamps. In the early 1840s advertisements for used stamps appeared regularly in the press, together with comments on their use.

Why hoard great numbers of identical stamps? One reason seems to have been bets or competitions. Men started the race, but women and children followed. Much more common, however, was collecting for decorative reasons. The stamps were glued on plates, screens etc., often in patterns or to produce some figure or picture. In short, it was a form of modern popular art. Another popular activity was to paper walls and ceilings with stamps. Journals brought stories of rooms adorned with from 80,000 to 150,000 stamps, first in England and later on in other countries, like Switzerland and Sweden.⁵

This decorative mania was often commented upon in the 1840–50s; the prephilatelic period that preceded stamp collecting in a modern sense. But the habit of using stamps for decoration must have lasted fairly long. Notices in the

press and in the philatelic journals show that pictures made from stamps were produced the whole century through. In the 1880s and 1890s these works of art, depicting landscapes, flowers, butterflies, portraits etc., were even admitted to the international stamp exhibitions (Antwerp 1887, Paris 1892). In spite of the turn to more serious collecting habits and a scientific approach, to be discussed below, *bloating* or *parforce*-collecting was admitted to the contests. A report from the Antwerp exhibition tells that “One single collector presented one million stamps. They are exhibited in 20 boxes, each containing 50,000 specimens.”⁶

Sources are scattered and sporadic, but it seems that in the early period it was mostly women who collected stamps for ornamental purposes. Admittedly, some men also used parts of their collections for creating pictures or they hoarded enormous quantities of stamps, but we hear much more about women and ornamental collecting in the first prephilatelic decades than we hear about women and philately in the last third of the century.

Several philatelists and even some historians of the Victorian era have rendered the satiric *Punch* texts from the 1840s about English women who industriously collected an object void of intrinsic value and used them for decorative purposes. But no one seems to have grasped what it was really about, namely popular creativity in a predominantly female version. Even before the collecting boom that is associated with industrialization and the abundance of cheap objects, both men and women collected. But in a society where the majority had access to very few artefacts, the collecting urge found other outlets.

A biographical reminiscence from the 1840s illustrates this point. The context is an upper middle class milieu in Norway, where females and especially spinsters and widows had very little to spend, thriftiness was the norm – and stamps and other industrially produced items were not yet available: “One of the favourite pastimes of aunt Julie was to potter with sea-shells. She collected shells of all kinds on the beach and arranged them with taste and artfulness on lamp feet, box lids, screens, etc.” (Lindbæk 1929:34–35). No wonder that women found

a perfect collectible in the small, inexpensive, ubiquitous and fascinating coloured paper bits, once these postage items became available.

From Timbromania to Philately in the Last Half of the 19th Century

“The popular amusement amongst young ladies for some time past has been the collection of foreign postage stamps ...” (*The Bookseller*, July 1862, cited after Briggs 1990:47).

“If *method* be the very hinge of business, it is, none the less, the principal factor which makes any collecting pastime a *rational* pursuit. Philately is the *methodical* accumulating of postage stamps” (‘The Study of Postage Stamps’, in *The Collector’s Circular*, April 2, 1904. My italics).

Even if the fashion for stamps for ornamental purposes lasted most of the 19th century, stamps became a collectible in a modern sense of the term from the 1850s – first in England, then in France and Belgium, and later in the German-speaking area, and it did not last long before a Frenchman coined the phrase *timbromanie*.

The first advertisements for stamps for collections appeared in the early 1850s, and in the 1860s stamp collecting had become a widespread hobby on both sides of the Atlantic. The aim of stamp collecting in this period was to create a representative collection of as many different stamps as could be procured. The attraction of the stamp lay in its motif and design. Defects and damage were of less importance, as long as the motif was clearly discernible. A tiny hole in the stamp, due to the habit of putting them on a string or a spike, did not matter. And when the first albums appeared in the early 60s, shortage of space on the sheets invited collectors to cut margins down to zero round the motif. Of rare stamps, even copies were accepted in the collections. And the stamps were glued with the whole of the back into the book or the album.

The collecting vogue was strong, but we do not have very much evidence as to *who* collected in these early years. A couple of newspaper notices from 1860, from England and the USA, do state however that female collectors were in

majority.⁷ A notice in a British paper in 1862 repeats that collecting stamps had been a popular amusement among young ladies. This year a London eyewitness reported that “ladies and gentlemen of all ages and ranks were busy with album or portofolio in hand, buying, selling or exchanging”.⁸ And from Copenhagen we learn in 1867 that “people of all ages and both sexes” were trading stamps in “almost every basement in the small side streets”.⁹ We may conclude that men, women and children alike collected stamps in this early period, and there is no evidence so far that men were in majority; rather to the contrary.

The 1860s was the period when a stamp was a stamp and the motif was all that counted. In 1860 no less than 82 countries had issued stamps, so there was enough to do for those who wanted the world complete. When the first English catalogue appeared in 1862, Gray’s *A Hand Catalogue for the Use of Collectors* (one year after the first French catalogue), the stock of 1,000 copies was sold out in less than three weeks. The author asserted that the collectors should not care about the colours, only the motif and the value.

In the second edition, however, Gray had to retreat on the colour shade question, and during the 1860s French collectors began to argue for a more rigorous classification practice. They claimed that not only the motif should count, but also its back, its margins and colour shades. From now on the élite insisted on condition and quality. The stamp should be inspected from all angles and sides, which meant that the old practice of glueing them into books should come to an end. A new French invention at the time, tiny stamp hinges, came in handy. The perforation gauge or *odontomètre* was also a French idea. The new collector’s gaze discovered a wide range of variants – of shades, of perforation and of watermarks. The new approach invited specialization. Around this time the term *philatélie* was coined by the French and immediately accepted on the English side of the Channel.

It should be stressed, however, that it was the élite who promoted these attitudes. Very many common collectors did not care about variants and continued to glue their stamps



Page from an album started in 1889 by a Norwegian collector, probably a young boy. The stamps are glued into the book, there is absolutely no chronology, and we find a mixture of postage stamps, fiscal stamps, local private post and dead letter return labels. A few stamps seem to be in excellent condition (according to modern standards) and quite a few are damaged. The album includes very ordinary items and rare objects. This page even includes Norway no. 1 (in the midst of the upper row) with an interesting ink obliteration but a damaged lower line. This is the album of a collector, not of a philatelist. Album belonging to a private collector.

until well after the turn of the century, to judge from preserved albums.

By the end of the 1860s these issues were hotly debated in England between adherents of the French and the English schools of philately, for so they were called. In *The Stamp Collector’s Magazine* for March 1868, the last official defender of the English school claimed that a stamp collection was a collection of printed designs, neither more nor less; the study of perforation, shades, paper and watermarks, as practiced by the French, was absurd, wasteful and obnoxious. Finally, he maintained, the stamp should be glued nicely into a book! The counter-attacks were not long in coming. *The Philatelist* for November 1868 stated that the main princi-



Page from an album from the late 1890s (for stamps from 1850 to 1890), having belonged to a young philatelist. The stamps are in better condition than in the preceding album, although some are clearly damaged or defect. Some of the stamps in the album bear traces of the hard treatment of stamps that was normal in the 1850s and 1860s, and they are – contrary to what the philatelists now advocated – glued to the pages. Album belonging to a private collector.

ple of the French school was classification, and in order to do so, all variants of every issue were worthy of a detailed study.¹⁰

The new focus on the stamps' condition created a need for fora where philatelists could associate and exchange knowledge. The following years saw a tremendous growth in philatelic journals, clubs and societies. England got her first journal in 1862, Belgium and Germany in 1863, Canada, France and the USA in 1864, and so forth. By 1900 more than 50 countries had their national philatelic journals, and most of them had several. In 1901 England had 16 journals, not counting all the ephemeral journals that had existed for some months or some years. And the USA was far ahead. In 1911, the largest private philatelic library counted around 4,000 series of different philatelic journals.¹¹

The other sign of institutionalisation was the philatelic societies. Paris got the first in

1865, then came New York in 1867 and London in 1869. Other cities and nations followed, and soon there was a dense thicket of local clubs. Their number was probably not inferior to that of the journals. England alone could muster nearly a hundred clubs in the 1930s.

With the turn from collecting to philately and the institutionalization of the hobby, women disappear and men take over. A point in case is The Philatelic Society, London, from 1869. This gentlemen's club developed into the stronghold of philatelic research from the latter part of the 19th century. It was founded by men, and all its officers and all its members were men. It was an event when Miss Aidelaide Lucy Fenton, as the first female speaker, mounted the rostrum in 1873, and she impressed the gentlemen of the society with her lecture on "The Secret Marks on the Stamps of Peru". But Miss Fenton was the exception that proves the rule. It took another 62 years before the next woman ascended to the rostrum of this male bastion.

There were other clubs, less interested in research than in the exchange of stamps, where women probably had easier access. But women become more or less invisible during the last third of the 19th century. In the search for and study of variants men took the lead. In the late 1870s began the era of scientific monographs, and the philatelic journals poured out erudite articles. "This journal will always be a paper written by collectors for collectors, and its sole aim will always be the advancement of scientific and intellectual philately", were the editor's proud opening words when *The London Philatelist* was launched in 1892.

If the French had launched the first revolution, leading from collecting to philately, London represented the next. This second scientific revolution is credited Lord Crawford, a member of the Royal Philatelic Society from 1900 and later its president. His background was that of a natural scientist, a versatile specialist in astronomy, mathematics and oceanography, with an enormous private scientific library. He discovered philately late in life and became obsessed by stamps. The essence of his philatelic activity was to turn his stamp collections into postal history documents. He studied the production process of the stamp issue, from the artist's

first rough draft until it had passed through the post, in an obliterated state on an envelope. He resuscitated the interest in design, but in a thoroughly new way; the whole process should be documented, with drafts, proofs and if possible the dies, with the unused stamp (single and in blocks), with specimens from different prints (to document variants in paper, perforation, shades etc.) and reprints, and finally the different cancellations used throughout its issue period. The study of cancellations was a novelty at the time, as was his idea of annotating the album sheets with historical information. In modern terms, he introduced the historian's source criticism on an object which was the whole life course of a stamp issue. Philatelists on both sides of the Atlantic soon followed his example.

To sum up: During the last half of the 19th century stamp collecting moved through several phases; from a hoarding mania in the first years, to a persisting and accepted hobby in the 1860s, then to a serious study, and finally to a field of research. It looks as if both sexes were active – women perhaps most – as long as stamps were of little value, their numbers low and the variants few. But during the last third of the century men took the lead. One reason was probably that the prices of the most valuable stamps rose 30 to 40 times in the 1880–90s. But more important was the turn from collecting to philately, defined as the methodical accumulation and study of postage stamps. Philately became a prestigious field where Victorian and bourgeois values could be displayed: discipline and concentration of the mind, scientific training and objectivity, competition, trading, gain and investment. No wonder that the noble art of collecting was seen as an important pedagogical tool for young boys.

Perhaps women continued to collect stamps, in their way. But society lost interest in their way of accumulating these items, young girls were not stimulated to collect in the same way as boys were, and the evidence of female stamp collecting becomes scarcer.

Collecting in the Golden Age of Postcards

“Young ladies who have escaped the philatelic intention or wearied of collecting Christmas cards have been known to fill albums with missives of this kind [picture postcards] received from friends abroad; but now the cards are being sold in this country, and it will be like the letting out of waters” (The *Standard* 1899, after Briggs 1990:367).

A new collecting vogue, that of picture postcards, swept over the Western world around 1900. The picture post card had two forerunners, both of which were collectibles – the prepaid, pictureless stationery card that was introduced around 1870, and the seasonal congratulation card with picture that had to be sent in a closed envelope. The stationery was originally a purely philatelic object. Its second phase started when private cards with postage stamps were allowed by postal authorities in the 1880s, its third phase when the authorities accepted a small picture in one corner, and the final phase when the picture took over the whole of one side of the card, relegating the address and message to its back side. This transition and the merging of the two collectibles into one took place at different times in the different countries, but towards the end of the 1890s the postcard had become a collectible in its own right – and it was no longer a branch of philately. The common collector once more had access to a new, cheap and ubiquitous pictorial item, as in the early days of stamp collecting. And once more, the primary attraction was the motif.

Philatelists deplored the degradation of a philatelic object – the stationery with imprinted stamp – to a vulgar pictorial item. Like other philatelic journals *The Postcard*, founded in 1889 and devoted to traditional stationery items, warned their readers against the menace of an “inundation” of this new “rubbish” (Carline 1972:63). A few years later the prophecy was fulfilled and the journal itself ceased publication.

Some figures illustrate the “inundation”. When the postcard mania, as it was termed in the press, reached its peak in England in 1903, six hundred million cards passed through the

post in one year. The figures were even higher for the USA and Germany; more than a billion cards passed through the German post offices. At a rough estimate, the world's post offices coped with 7 billion cards in 1903 (Carline 1972:63–64). And these figures do not include the numerous cards that were bought and mounted directly in albums. Metaphors like “the letting out of waters” and “Europe buried beneath picture postcards” were used by the press.

The postcard craze is well documented. Cards could be bought in all kinds of shops, in libraries, in restaurants and railway stations, aboard steamers, from stage-coaches or from sellers in the streets. Tourists are reported to have bought, written and sent cards in large numbers, as an integral part of the travel experience. We are left with the impression that the cards were as important as the sites visited. Often the short messages on these cards show that they were primarily intended for albums. The hey-day of the postcard or its Golden Age, lasted until around 1920, when sale figures again fell far below the above-mentioned. The collecting zeal fell correspondingly, to experience a renaissance from the 1970s. From the 1930s to the 1960s postcards from the Golden Age were coveted by a small intellectual élite only.

Like philately, the new vogue had its communication channels, though on a more modest scale. Great Britain had 6 postcard journals during the early years of the century, most of them of the ephemeral sort, and France had 16. Similar journals flourished for a short period in many European countries, the USA and South America. But few if any survived the Golden Age. These journals served mainly advertisement and exchange purposes. The number of postcard clubs was far behind that of philatelic clubs. This may be explained by the collectible object itself. As long as people collected *contemporary* items, there was little need for clubs and societies to exchange expertise and knowledge about them. The philatelic societies had appeared when people started studying *old* items, and the post card vogue faded out before this could be the case.

Who were the collectors? The earliest description of this vogue from Norway, in 1902–



From a specialist's collection of Golden Age postcards (later reconstruction). The cards all represent passenger ships of the Hamburg-Amerika Linie, posted between 1902 and 1909. Motifs like these appealed to male collectors, and great collections of ships, railway station buildings, locomotives, aeroplanes, bridges, etc. were created.

03, tells us that collecting postcards was primarily if not exclusively the hobby of young girls (Rogan 1999d:224ff). Other evidence indicates that women were diligent postcard collectors all through the Golden Age, but that men joined the tribe when new themes appeared, like (foreign) humorous cards, ships, locomotives and other transport history topics.

Nor in England was postcard collecting a male hobby in the early years. When the editor Tuck began publishing postcards in 1899, they launched a competition with high prizes to those who collected the highest number of their cards within two years. Duplicates were accepted as long as they bore different postmarks. When the entries were judged, the first award went to a lady of Norwich who submitted over



Cards from the early 1920s, from a young girl's collector's album (original, 1920s). Christmas cards, Easter cards and New Year cards are mixed with birthday cards, landscapes and a few cards showing the royal family, works of art, polar expeditions, and local events. The album betrays a mixture of personal souvenirs and a fascination with a broad range of motifs.

20,000 cards. Another lady received a special award for a collection of over 2,000 cards from one single series. In a new competition in 1904, it was once again a lady who won the first prize for having collected over 25,000 Tuck's cards, but this time with a gentleman in second place (Carline 1972:64).

A close reading of advertisements in British postcard journals confirms that in 1900 the great majority of collectors were women. A similar reading in 1906 shows that men had taken over, outnumbering the women by about five to one. Carline (1972:66) finds the explanation in the motifs. The early postcards showed views, landscapes and works of art, all motifs that appealed to women. When comic cards appeared a few years later, men's interest be-

gan to pick up. Between 1904 and 1906 cards of actresses and 'posed beauties' led the field and men took completely over. This observation is probably valid for the public exchange market and for the 'big' collectors. However, albums that have survived and other scattered evidence indicate that postcard collecting on a more modest scale remained a predominantly female activity.

On the other side of the Channel there was also a female dominance in the early years. In 1900 an international club for lady collectors was founded in Paris. The members wore a silver badge with a blue ribbon, which enabled them to recognise one another if they happened to meet. Gentlemen were excluded (Carline 1972:67). In the postcard section of l'Association philatélique nancéenne, which counted 2,600 members in 1904, the ratio of men and women was one to one in 1903. Later on men have taken over. In 1978, the proportion of women in Le cercle français des collectionneurs de cartes postales had sunk to 15% (Ripert & Frère 1983:163).

Early stamp and postcard collecting show interesting parallels. In both fields, women had a head start but soon lost the lead. And history repeats itself when it comes to collecting for ornamental purposes. Among other things, the use of postcards for papering rooms was advocated. In 1906, the Tuck publishers made the disposal of postcards the subject of their third and largest competition, with the title 'Home Decoration'. Prizes were given for the best use of postcards for decorating tables, screens, cupboards, overmantles, etc. The winners once more proved to be ladies. A Miss Bull gained the first prize for a table mosaic, a Miss Payn the second for a screen creation, and a Mrs. Hatcher the third for her decoration of bellows (Carline 1972:69).

Finally, there is a clear parallel in the reactions to these early modes of collecting. Or as a French male collector contemptuously stated in *Revue Illustrée de la Carte Postale* in May 1900: "To fill up an album with haphazard picture postcards, that is nothing but tedious routine work of hoarding cardboard pieces." To merit the title of *cartophile*, one had to make "an intelligent selection", to procure beautiful views

from the most exotic places on earth and annotate them with interesting legends. “Find yourself a field of specialization” was the advice from another French collector, addressed to the “vulgar cartophile” who looked for quantity rather than quality.¹²

Cartophily, or deltiology as the modern term goes, did not develop into study and research the way philately did. Serious postcard collecting, which had as its object contemporary and not old items, claimed aesthetic ideals rather than scientific. But the parallels are clear: the early hoarding and ornamental phases were replaced by serious collecting, and during this process the female hegemony was replaced by a male dominance. But women went on collecting in their way, out of sight from the journals and male collectors. My mother’s picture postcard album, compiled in the late -20s and early -30s, contains an unsystematic collection of some 50 or 60 Christmas cards, Easter cards and birthday cards, mixed up with a few views. The album betrays a mixture of personal souvenirs and a fascination for the motifs. As such it is probably more representative of female picture card collecting (of which very little evidence has survived) than the conspicuous 400 to 700 card albums on Golden Age topics that every now and then pop up at auctions.

Scholarly Quest for Varieties in the 20th Century

“It is possible to be a *stamp collector* or a *philatelist*: to collect stamps simply according to design and endeavour to get as many distinct varieties as were issued, or to take any selected simple stamp and study it as thoroughly that a lifetime is passed and still questions remain to be answered” (Kehr 1947:61).

“There are ... those who firmly believe that the study of stamps is nothing less than science ... It is, almost like in bacteriology, written heavy and erudite dissertations on seemingly small matters” (Middelthon 1942:21–22, transl. BR).

The depth and intensity of philatelic studies, performed by amateurs, have surprised many observers. The scholarly energy invested in this

pastime is difficult to combine with the notion of hobby.

The first characteristic of this passion for knowledge is the enormous body of philatelic literature, in the shape of elementary and advanced introductions, manuals and catalogues, and monographs or special dissertations. During the first two thirds of the 20th century, thousands of monographs were published. There were several thousand philatelic journals, many of them ephemeral things that lasted a few years or sometimes only months, whereas others are now centenarians. Before the 19th century was over, philatelic literature had become a collecting speciality in its own right. The philatelic library of the Swede Nils Strandell counted more than 15,000 volumes in the 1940s (Psilander & Swanström 1943). When the philatelic library of the Earl of Crawford was registered in 1911, the index alone comprised over 1,000 pages – in quarto and with miniscule type.¹³

In the interwar period special publishing houses for philatelic literature popped up – in London ‘The Philatelic Institute’, in Berlin ‘Der philatelistischer Bücherwurm’, in Paris ‘Groupeement philatélic de France’, in New York ‘Scott Stamp & Coin Company’, etc. Some were established publishers, others philatelic journals or stamp traders who undertook the publishing. But quite a few authors had to dig deep in their pockets in order to have their narrow dissertations printed and distributed as private editions, sometimes in as small editions as 30 or 50 copies – another attraction for the bibliophiles! The plates and the reproduction of details and colour shades made many of these books costly productions.

A second characteristic is the high degree of specialization and the quest for details. “With a Complete List of all Varieties Known to the Author” is the subtitle of a 1916 monograph on a small stamp issue by the Mexican province of Sonora in the 1880s. Many of them might have borne a similar subtitle. Or as a reviewer of a two volume study of stamps from the Netherlands and the Dutch Indies (1920) states:¹⁴

“... what a detailed philatelic study these stamps have given rise to ... it fills us with admiration

... the four main types, the endless number of plate errors and their position in the original printing plate and all the different perforations ... fill around one hundred pages in this voluminous opus ... we cannot remember ever having seen a field that has been the object of more profound research ... The result demands admiration and amazement from every collector. And all the later issues have been treated in the same extremely comprehensive manner.”

The study of variants had been advocated by the French School as early as the late 1860s, and this trend was strengthened in the first decades of the 20th century, although in a Crawfordian spirit where the integral history of the stamp prevailed. The philatelic parade discipline was *plating* or the reconstruction of the whole stamp sheet of early issues. Early printing techniques, with manual carving of each die in the plate and lithograph production meant that no stamps in the sheet, be it 40 or 200, were absolutely identical. When the original plates were lost, it was still possible to reconstruct the sheet if the material, including strips and blocks, was sufficient. This meticulous work was undertaken again and again for old issues, and quite a few enthusiasts succeeded after years of deep studies, thus furnishing other collectors with a tool for deciding the exact place in the sheet for their specimen! However, the old plates often became worn, some of the dies were repaired or changed, and then new variants appeared in later impressions of the sheet – and the philatelic researcher could go on studying the chronology of variants within an issue. No philatelist who aspired to the honorable title of researcher could do without a solid knowledge of old printing techniques, a field that became one of the fundamentals of philately.

Other specialities were the study of paper types and of colour shades. Detailed studies of the relative chronology of impressions and reprints, through colour and paper analysis and with support from dated postmarks, enabled the collector to date the chronological sequence of their variants. And so forth with perforation studies, as the printing houses changed perforators from time to time. And when *coins datés* or dated stamp sheets appeared in some countries

around 1930, the philatelists compiled catalogues that enabled collectors to tell the exact date when a certain colour shade variant in their collection was printed! Another speciality that became very popular from the 1920s, first in Germany and the USA and then in the whole philatelic world, was the study of postmarks (cancellations or obliterations). A lifelong devotion of some philatelists resulted in comprehensive catalogues of every single post office in the selected area or country.

The results of these variant studies were accumulated in monographs. The ideal national monograph should cover the history of the issues, a presentation of the plates and their characteristics, of paper and gumming, of the prints, their colours and perforation, the composition of the sheets, blocks and margins, postal tariffs, postmarks, editions and stocks, reprints, and forgeries of stamps and post-marks.

This corpus of thousands of monographs and tens and perhaps hundreds of thousand of articles does indeed impress a distant observer today, even if this philatelic literature displays erudition rather than science. One of the best entries to this enormous literature are the book reviews that abound in the philatelic journals. The authors often had high ambitions, and they were judged by their peers – at least in the best of the journals – by the scientific standards of the time.

The book reviews are permeated by a vocabulary and metaphors that invoke science and scholarly research. To practice philately is “to systematize”, “to study”, “to be absorbed in”, “to highlight problems”, ... The authors are described as “philatelic researchers” with qualifying adjectives like “great”, “learned” “unselfish”, “prominent”, “outstanding”, ...; they are “great authorities” who are “thirsting for knowledge”. The published results are described as “reference works”, “monographs setting new standards”, “philatelic treasuries”, “magnum opus” ...; the works are “monumental”, “basic”, “brilliant” and “erudite”. And we are told that these “thorough” and “exhaustive” monographs “where no detail is omitted” or “where there is nothing left that is worth knowing” were based on “new and independent research”, “with complete source references” ... have cost the authors

“15 years”, “a lifetime” ... of research.¹⁵ The rhetoric excessively reminds us of the scientific pretensions of philately, as this small selection of quotations will have shown.

The scientific standards that were rhetorically invoked, whether one looked to the humanities or the taxonomic sciences, were empirical, comparative and positivist. But some of the practitioners – albeit amateurs – were well versed in the development of contemporary research disciplines. In the 1930s the Swedish philatelist (and businessman) Nils Strandell consistently discussed new manuals in elementary and advanced philately in terms of “philatelic grammars” and treated their contents as “the philatelic syntax”. Structural linguistics was probably the most successful discipline in the humanities in the 1930s, and its stringency seduced the philatelists.

Comparison – as practiced in archeology, in folklore, in comparative disciplines like linguistics, dialectology and history of religion – was the undiscussed method for a science of variants like philately, and taxonomy – borrowed from botany and other natural sciences – its obvious ideal. An American catalogue published around 1910 clearly reveals the influence in a long subtitle: “Being a system of alternates as is used in Botany and Zoology in the determination of plants and animals, a system unique in Philately and so simple that a child can with accuracy determine the most difficult die of United States envelopes”.¹⁶ Strandell warmly welcomes the book, stating that it might appropriately be used “in about the same way as a flora is used in botany”. Then follows the great revelation: “This book is heartily recommended to *gentlemen* specialists” (1947:9–10, my italics). Science, and especially science à la Linné, was obviously regarded as a male activity!

Where were the women? They are hardly visible in the sources on the history of philately. They appear either in the dedications of philatelic works, in the shape of “This book is dedicated to the collectors’ wives: noble women who all too often have to share with a hobby the time and love of their husbands”¹⁷, or a very few female philatelists are mentioned in collectors’ reminiscences – as the exceptions that prove the rule. When Mrs McCleverty mounted the

rostrum of the Royal Philatelic Society, London, in 1936 to give a talk on aerophilately, none of her sex had been given the floor for 62 years (*The Royal...*). And when the young Miss Lichtenstein entertained the gentlemen of the New York club with the early French issues, it was an event that was long remembered (Kehr 1948). A common genre in the philatelic literature is reminiscences and biographies of great philatelists. These books (or chapters) are almost exclusively dedicated to male philatelists. One of them, however, brings a chapter on the American “philatelettes” (Kehr 1948). But this anecdotal chapter is one of the shortest of the book, far shorter than the chapters on the “Patriarchs of Philately”. The term *philatelette* has not found a fertile soil in the English language – another proof that she was a rare species.

So much for the philatelic temples and strongholds. Women were probably better represented in unpretentious, local clubs, but it is difficult to find evidence.¹⁸ It is symptomatic that when a national roll of Swedish philatelists was published in 1943, it was entitled *Philately and its Men* (Psilander & Swanström). The roll comprises around 1,900 philatelist collectors. Many but far from all were organised in clubs, there is a broad range of social categories and professions represented – from directors to manual workers, and the collections range from the exclusive to the modest. With this broad spectrum one might have supposed a fair representation of women. However, among the 1,900 philatelists we find only 31 women, or 1.6%. There certainly were more female collectors in Sweden, but very few of them aspired to the title of philatelist.

As shown above, philately had much in common with research as it was practiced in academic institutions. It follows from the empirical nature of this research that new finds mainly led to the accumulation of knowledge. But in some cases new methods opened new fields of research, like the *plating*-studies, new insight (for instance into the old printing techniques) resulted in reversed chronologies, and new analytical techniques for paper and colour gave new determination keys.

Another common feature is the debates, which might sometimes reach a certain temperature.

The quotations above from Strandell's book reviews are all of the benevolent kind, but he could also be critical. Erudite as he was, he discreetly points at factual errors in the books. He brings up stronger arguments when authors mess up classification principles¹⁹, and he swings the whip when philatelist colleagues aggressively attack each other. When the German-Austrian philatelist Paul Ohrt published the fourth and last volume of his lifework on all the known reprints in the world,²⁰ Strandell states that²¹

“His emotional attacks against opponents and the insistence upon every minor personal controversy should not be allowed in a reference work. It is definitely a great pity that a prominent researcher like Ohrt neither earlier nor later in his production is able to distinguish person from matter. His furious, senseless, polemic style badly suits a reference work like this one.”

Unfortunately, this problem is not unknown in academic circles.

To sum up: Philately, as it was practiced by the happy amateurs during the first half of the 20th century, presents many parallels to academic life: a taxonomic approach borrowed from the natural sciences, combined with the historian's source criticism and a comparative methodological approach from the humanities in general, chemical and optical analyses as auxiliary methods, a comprehensive publication activity, discussion and sometimes polemics. To this should be added the omnipresent rhetoric that invokes research and science. It all points towards the self-image and the self-consciousness of an academic discipline. The invisibility of women in the field is another trait that fits well into this picture.

This makes it relevant to ask why philately never became a university (museum) discipline, as another collector's speciality – numismatics – did. Both focus on determination and classification, on reconstruction of historical processes, and on situating their objects in a technical, historical and cultural context. One explanation is that the stamp was too young to attract the attention of the historians, in contrast to numismatics, which through its antique material became a dialogue partner to archaeology,

art history and history. Philately got a certain anchorage in museums, but it never reached the university museums, as numismatics did. Another difference is that while coins might serve as sources and proofs in the reconstruction of lines of kings and old cultures, the opposite was the case with stamps. Knowledge about old print techniques, paper types etc. served to explain the stamps and their use. While philately in most cases did no more than highlight its own objects,²² numismatics also served as an auxiliary science to other disciplines, and this opened the gates to Academia – in some cases with teaching and courses, chairs and even degrees.²³

Thematic Collecting: from Pariah to Scientific Recognition

“For the collector with a whimsical taste, considerable amusement may be gained from the formation of a collection on illustrative lines ...” (Lowe 1935:12).

“[The plan for the thematic exhibit] has to be logical, correct and balanced, and cover all aspects of the heading ... [The development of the theme] requires the detailed analysis and synthesis of each aspect of the theme” (From § 3 of the F.I.P. regulations for competitive thematic exhibitions, 1988).

Philatelists have always insisted upon their superior status in relation to stamp collectors. The structure is clearly hierarchical. But the broad body of common collectors has not always followed the philatelic élite and their scientific aspirations. They have sometimes even forced philately to follow in their path.

Fashion has played a major role in the history of collecting and philately. The number of issues have long since forced collectors to specialize, and new collecting fancies come and go. And some philatelists wearied of the search for minor variants, an addiction sometimes ending up in ‘flyspeck philately’. Thus the main track of classic philately has been divided in several sidetracks. Two of these, postal history and thematic collecting, have grown bigger than classic philately, both in number of adherents

and as classes at competitive exhibitions. Both may be traced back to the 1920s, and both have had to fight for recognition from the philatelists.

For postal history – i. e. the collecting of covers with stamps and postmarks and the study of postal rates, postal markings and mail routes – the branch of aerophilately was very early accepted as an exhibition class of its own, but it was not until around 1970 that general postal history became acknowledged as a philatelic class. The most popular sidetrack within this class is now – on the national level – homestead philately, or the collecting of covers and postmarks from one’s home region.

In thematic (US: topical) collecting the underlying interest is the postage stamp design, and the aim is to gather stamps related to a specific subject, like flowers, minerals, portraits, ships, etc. As a collecting style it became immensely popular in the 1930s, but for a long time it was stifled by silence in philatelic circles. It was finally accepted as a competition class in 1950 – under the designation of Constructive philately. Today it is the most common collecting style of new entrants to the hobby, and it is the favourite of female members of stamp clubs (*The Guide* ...1999:30). Thematic collecting was probably the common female way of collecting in the interwar years also, but sources are scarce when we leave the philatelic highway.

On its ascendance to recognition, thematic philately has been through an interesting metamorphosis. The earliest collections consisted of stamps with a common motif. To strengthen the documentation of the subject, some collectors added photographs, drawings, maps, etc. But organized philately banned all non-philatelic material. Such collections were considered “cosy hobby collections that may yield much to the collector, but they are without philatelic value” (Evensen 1987:15). For a thematic collection to be accepted it may – and it even should, at exhibitions – include all types of philatelic elements, like covers, stationery and postmarks. Classic philatelists have obviously played their cards well.

The latest regulations for thematic philately, approved by Fédération Internationale de Philatélie (FIP) in 1988, distinguish two branches: thematic and documentary. The first should



Modern thematic collection. *The Guide for the Development of Philately* (Berne 2000).

make a *synthesis* of a theme or an idea, for instance ‘Conservation of nature’, ‘The scout movement’, etc. The latter should be an *analysis* of an institution, an organisation, a recurrent event, etc., like ‘The Olympic Games’, ‘Red Cross’, etc. Pure classification of material is banned; the exhibit should function as a ‘text’ that relates a ‘story’.

Organized thematic philately demands of its practitioners a high level of proficiency. To participate at exhibitions they must have a thorough knowledge of the subject matter and prove “originality of research”, they must be well versed in the philatelic aspects of the material, and the exhibit must show “consistency of the plan with the title”, have “a correct, logical and balanced subdivision in parts”, and show “depth and balance of elaboration”.²⁴

There is a long way from collecting stamps with related designs to research, logic, synthesis and analysis. Thematic collecting has been

thoroughly disciplined through the process of acceptance. In a recent manual the newcomer is warned against starting only because he thinks it looks amusing, and he is told that "it is not sufficient to believe that you know the subject ... You must know it from A to Z and inside out" (Evensen 1987:12–13). Thematic philately on a competition level has become more saint than the Pope, according to some practitioners. The ghost of 'flyspeck philately' once more lurks around the corner.

But history repeats itself. Wearing of the terror reign of rules and regulations, some practitioners have opened new sidetracks. New international philatelic Experimental Classes have been introduced in the late 1990s. One of them is Open Class, with virtually no rules; up to 50% non-philatelic material is accepted, i.e. drawings, photographs, textiles etc. The circle of thematic philately seems to have been closed. Another experimental class is Social Philately, concentrating on the interactions between postal administrations and society. Even a postman's uniform has become an accepted 'philatelic' collectible! It is hard to see how classic philately can catch up with this development!

Why has the international organisational superstructure of philately accepted all these innovations? Much of the answer lies in the difficulties of recruiting collectors and in market interests.

Collecting and Philately in a Wider Context

"Why Open Class?" "I think people have realized that competitive philately has come to an end ... If the hobby is to have a future, there must be some development ... People must be allowed to collect as they like."

"Women in Classic? In Homestead? In Open Class? Boys only, all the way! Well – in Thematic I have met ladies, even in Norway. And in Classic I know the name of one lady who has a splendid collection of Norway. [One?] Yes, you're right – ONE, I know ONE!" (Interview with male Norwegian philatelist, b. 1949).

Stamp collecting and philately enjoy a special

position, compared to other hobbies. No other pastime can present a) such a comprehensive body of literature, b) a corresponding competition and exhibition structure, c) a comparably strong and active worldwide secondary market, and d) a so well developed organisational body. The latter includes a properly organised structure at national level in over 80 countries, with an international superstructure of five worldwide organisations: one for the national post administrations (UPU), one for the national philatelic societies (FIP), one for the stamp dealer associations (IFSDA), one for philatelic journalists (AIJP), and one for publishers of philatelic publications, stamp catalogues and albums included (ASCAT). And on the top of it, the organisations have joined forces and created the World Association for the Development of Philately (WADP). The reason for this late creation (1997) is a deep concern about the declining interest in stamps in Western countries (but not in Asia and in the developing countries). The decline has been especially strong among the young. This concern is easy to understand, as the postage stamp business is a worldwide industry that annually turns over about ten thousand million dollars between the primary market (philatelic sales by postal administrations) and the secondary market (dealers of used stamps and auctions).²⁵

The new competitive classes and the more liberal exhibition policy may be seen as an effort to revive philately. Other efforts are directed towards children and youth collectors, to assure recruitment for philately in the future. Market surveys are used to assess the structure of the body of collectors. To the extent that the results have been released, it has been estimated that in advanced economies up to 25% of the population have collected postage stamps at some time in their lives.

The surveys enable us to quantify the ratio between collectors and philatelists and between male and female collectors. The philatelic service of the Norwegian postal administration has around 100,000 customers who subscribe to all new issues of postage stamps. On the other hand, all the Norwegian philatelic clubs and societies together, under the aegis of a national philatelic society, cannot muster more than

5,000 members. This gives a ratio of 1 to 20 between philatelists (of all classes) and collectors of modern stamps.

But official membership lists do not tell the whole truth. In a recent survey (1990), 19% of the Norwegian population over 15 years answered YES to the (perhaps oversimplified) question "Do you have a stamp collection?", which gives between 600,000 and 700,000 persons (of a total population of 4 millions). One half of these stated that they regularly bought new issues for collecting purposes (MMI 1990).²⁶ To this must be added the age groups under 15, where we find the highest rates of collectors (8 to 10 years). A conservative interpretation of these data indicates that the ratio between organised philatelists and non-organised persons who collect stamps (or have preserved their collection) is 1 to 100. We obviously have a pyramidal structure in the world of stamp adherents.

But there is also a strong hierarchy *within* the the group of organised philatelists. Among the 5,000 organised philatelists in Norway there are not more than between 50 and 100 who participate in international competitions (and are liable to contribute to the philatelic literature).²⁷ This means that the ratio between the ordinary collector and those who belong to the international jet set of philately is one to five or ten thousand. This ratio is not very interesting in itself, but it confirms that our knowledge of the social structure of collecting and philately earlier in the century, as it is inferred from the rich body of literature, stems from a very, very tiny élite – an élite that ignored the rich thicket of ordinary collectors. This is the source problem that I have alluded to several times.

The ratio between adult male and female collectors in the 1990 survey gives another surprise. Behind the average of 19% who confirmed having a stamp collection hides a high proportion of women, namely 15% (against 22% men). Even if there is some reason to believe that the ratio between male and female collectors may have been more out of balance earlier in the century, the result tells us that women are well represented in the underbrush, a fact that other sources overlook.

Does the great distance between the élite and the common collector mean that the impact

of philately with scientific ambitions has been insignificant? Certainly not, because stamp collecting was generally considered a handy educational tool to teach the young (boys) geography, history, etc. There was also a widespread belief in the value of philately for the improvement of mental faculties. Or as an American manual of elementary philately spells out: "By [philatelic] training I mean the systematic development of certain of your mental faculties that collecting stamps will give you. There are at least five of these abilities and named they are (a) method, (b) carefulness, (c) discrimination, (d) alertness, and (e) steadfastness." (Collins 1936:21). And the author goes on to show how, through philatelic training, each of these faculties will naturally be extended to other fields of endeavour and human relationships. From late 19th century until far into the latter half of the 20th, authors of both philatelic and general educational literature argue along these lines. And fathers encouraged their sons to collect stamps. To collect stamps, even on a modest level, meant to follow at least some of the methods prescribed by philately.

Some Conclusions, or: Elite and Masses, Competition and Play

"Yes, there are few girls here yet. It's like that when topographical postcards are auctioned. They will turn up later, for the motif cards ... Women prefer to collect royalty and Christmas cards ... Men really get hooked. They've got to have a thousand cards once they get started. But women may collect 10 items of a motif and then they're satisfied" (Interview with an auctioneer, Oslo, March 1997).

When Madame X at Fontainebleau set her eyes on stamps, she followed a more than century-old cultural pattern that reflects the distance between a tiny philatelic élite and the great mass of collectors, but also a common gender pattern. When selecting and removing certain stamps from her late husband's meticulously systematized collection and rearranging them in her own way, she replaced taxonomic principles by decorative.

Collecting stamps has been subject to different modes, but two have prevailed, namely the playful and decorative versus the competitive and scientific. Or perhaps it would be better to see them as poles on a continuum. Competition is the rulebound variety of play, and aesthetics is not void of rules and principles.

When Mme X rearranged the stamps along thematic lines, she did not adhere to the principles of modern thematic (competitive) philately, but rather followed the familiar formula of generations of (playful) motif collectors, who have been occupied by the stamp design. She feels no need to produce a logical, balanced and comprehensive exhibit nor to analyze or synthesize her themes. Compared to their thoroughly prepared narratives, her mountings are small impressionistic poems.

Within philately history tends to repeat itself, in several ways. Stamp collecting and philately have been splintered several times, but the philately with scientific ambitions has so far shown itself very apt to catch up with the changes and bring back strayed disciples. New tracks have often been beaten by women, for example the early stamp and postcard vogues, but men have been quick to take over. In doing so, they have changed the mode from the playful to the scientific.

The élitist philately with scientific ambitions, from which derives the historical sources, has to a large extent concealed the broad popular participation in the field. We have continuously been told that stamp collecting is the king of hobbies (and vice versa), but information about how and by whom it used to be practiced is hard to find. This especially applies to the gender pattern. The male hegemony has contributed to the concealment of the role and the extent of female participation. Only lately, through recent market surveys, have we got some insight into the contemporary gender structure of the hobby. From this we may infer retrospectively that female stamp collecting, although almost invisible for more than a century, must have been a widespread phenomenon.

A final point is perhaps the shift of scientific paradigms. Empirical and positivist science perfectly fitted classic philately with its penchant for comparison and taxonomy. But classic

philately did not find much support in the qualitative and phenomenological trends that have characterized much of the research in the humanities and social sciences from the 1970s. It is perhaps not too farfetched to interpret the new experimental classes of philately, as well as the new openness to decorative and non-taxonomic modes of collecting, as a faint reflection of new research paradigms. Everyday life, including leisure activities, mirror society's ideological superstructures.

Notes

1. The article is a revised and extended version of a paper given at the European Social Science History Conference, Amsterdam, April 2000. Thanks to professor Reg Byron for language revision help.
2. Interviews November 1999 and September 2000.
3. The symbol of the free French forces.
4. Cited after *The Collector's Circular*, April 2, 1904.
5. For references, see Rogan s.a.
6. *Nordisk Frimærkeblad* 1887 no 11, p. 72. Translation BR.
7. Suppanttschitsch 1901:8.
8. Cited after Briggs 1990:351.
9. Cited after *Nordisk Filatelistisk Tidskrift* 1894 no 1, p. 6.
10. See *The Royal ...* 1969 for further details.
11. The library of the Earl of Crawford, see Bacon 1911. See also Suppanttschitsch 1901.
12. After Ripert & Frère 1983:160–61. Transl. BR.
13. See Bacon 1911.
14. Strandell 1947:87–88, review of *Handboek der Postwaarden van Nederlandsch-Indie*, Deel II. Harlem, 1920.
15. The citations are drawn from the reading of ca. 250 book reviews by the renowned Swedish philatelist Nils Strandell, written between 1910 and 1940. These reviews contain hundreds of expressions of this type. Strandell 1947.
16. *A Synoptic Key to the Catalogued Envelope Stamps of the United States*.
17. *The Stamp Collectors' Round Table*, ed. F. W. Loso, New York 1939, cited after Strandell 1947.
18. A problem with membership lists is that female members often enjoy a family membership, for social reasons rather than philatelic.
19. See e.g. Strandell 1947:251–259.
20. *Handbuch aller bekannten Neudruck staatlicher Postfreimarken, Ganzsachen und Essays nebst Angabe ihrer Kennzeichen*.
21. Strandell 1947:102. See also p. 123 for another case.
22. This does perhaps not apply to the same extent to the new-comer branch of philately called postal history.

23. Numismatics have been taught at several universities by the staff of national, state or university museums (e.g. Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford), and some of these curators (normally historians or archaeologists) have obtained chairs. Some universities arrange graduate seminars, e.g. in the US, whereas some European universities have established numismatic institutes (among others Austria, Belgium, Norway). The University of Oslo has a numismatic department with a scientific staff (including one professor in numismatics who has recently retired) who perform both curating, research and teaching – leading to a master's degree in numismatics. Furthermore, in various European countries theses in numismatics have been defended by historians. For an overview, see Skaare 2000.
24. From § 4 of the F.I.P. regulations for competitive thematic exhibitions, 1988.
25. *The Guide* ... 1999:9, 48ff, 119ff.
26. MMI 1990.
27. Interview with philatelist b. 1930.

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