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Stamp Collecting: Why This Hobby Has Been Around For So Long

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Stamp Collecting: Why This Hobby Has Been Around For So Long

The Joys of Stamp Collecting

You will probably meet very few people who say they have never collected anything in their life. But there are people, even when not deliberately collecting a particular object, who tend to have more than one of the same thing. It can be anything - tennis socks of different colors, brand name trainers, books by a particular author or CDs of their favorite singer.

And then there are people who deliberately collect - baseball cards, foreign-made lighters, crystal vases from Europe, vintage crochet hooks or coffee mugs from the Far East. And there's a reason for their collection. One might say, "oh, I was in this baseball game and just watching idly.

When I turned around, I saw Mark McGwire - he had a baseball cap on and was smiling. Thought he was the cutest thing in the stadium. So I ended up collecting anything that had to do with baseball."

Why do people collect stamps? The reasons are not any different from those cited by baseball card collectors. It defines our personalities, it's a form of personal entertainment and enjoyment, it's an opportunity to learn more about stamps and the countries that issue them. It provides a chance for like-minded collectors to build friendships and swap knowledge.

There are added joys to stamp collecting: it is a good way to peek into a country's history, geography, biography and science and sports. A stamp, especially when it is beautifully designed in an attractive blend of colors sparks human curiosity.

First the colors and image attract people, and then they look closer at the stamp to see what it stands for. For instance, if someone from the Czech Republic sees a Canadian stamp with a beaver or maple leaf as a design, the person receiving the letter might be tempted to find out more about beavers or the maple tree.

Stamp collecting also satisfies our desire for order, symmetry and organization. Some people may start their stamp collecting by tucking stamps into a shoebox, but there will come a time when those pieces will need to be organized. By collecting stamps, our organizational skills become finely honed. And the aesthetic rewards can be emotionally satisfying.

Stamp collecting opens our eyes to foreign travel, and while we are not able to travel to every country on earth in our lifetime, our stamp collection will show us lands and sites that we have not yet explored, and introduce us to a country's flora and fauna, of high powered hydroelectric dams, of cliffs and mountains that no human has dared to venture out to.

Jim Watson says that anyone who starts stamp collecting can proceed at his own pace and at his own whim, but stamp collecting - or the field of philately - is a disciplined field of study.

There are standards and rules that guide the study of philately and there is a considerable amount of literature that documents the knowledge from long-time and sophisticated stamp collectors. Research continues, and there is always new knowledge to be gained.

No one has to pay dearly for nurturing a hobby such as stamp collecting. In fact, an expensive collection does not necessarily mean that it's the most interesting or the most valuable.

Rather, it is the way the collector has organized his collection in an interesting manner because of his knowledge and experience. Many prize-winning collections that have been declared "outstanding" in club shows often started as inexpensive endeavors.

While a few collectors of stamps have an investment objective in mind, the beauty of stamp collecting lies in the pure enjoyment of the hobby.

Think how much more there is to be gained if you just sat back and curled up on your sofa to admire your collection, or else show to friends and family. If you consider your collection to be a financial investment, then you'll need to familiarize yourself with evaluating the value of your collection, learning about stamp auctions, and finding the right dealers.

Making money out of one's collection is a fundamental right, but think of the many other possibilities open to you if you didn't limit yourself to profit motive.

Stamp collecting is about 140 years old. It all started when England issued its first stamp on May 6, 1840. There's a funny story about one of the earliest efforts at stamp collecting. A woman put an ad in a British paper looking for all kinds of used stamps so she could wallpaper her room.

The real fun started, however, when post offices realized that stamp collectors can be a huge source of revenue.

Given the production of numerous stamps in a given year, people branched out to "motif" collecting, instead of confining themselves to "country" collecting. A few collectors have even embarked on collecting stamps to tell a story, or focus on a famous person's biography, but this would entail an enormous amount of research.

The joys of stamp collecting are reinforced because it is not an expensive hobby. In the first few months, collectors don't have to invest a cent, except ask for used stamps from friends and family and fellow office workers.

People who were once collectors and who gave up the hobby would be pleased to give their collections away with the hope that it can be continued by the person taking over.

They have felt the joys of stamp collecting once so they would be only too eager to help out a beginning collector.

Stamp collectors will also find plenty of support from local stamp clubs, their neighborhood post office and the World Wide Web. Stamp collecting is a widely-discussed subject on cyberspace, and the beginner will be pleased to discover how many resources are available to him.

Some Common Terms Used in Stamp Collecting

Perforations

The very first stamps that came out did not have perforations, but cutting them became cumbersome. Perforating machines came into use to solve this problem. They punch holes vertically and horizontally so that stamps can be torn from the sheet more easily.

Even after stamps were being perforated, post offices also produced stamps that were not perforated, to help collectors collect them.

A perforated stamp has "perf" characteristics and the perfs go by number. Some stamps have perf # 12 on one side and maybe a perf # 8 vertically. So perforations come in different sizes. The larger the holes, the fewer perfs there are on the side of stamps.

Postmarks

Have you ever entered a contest where one of the rules state that all entries "must be postmarked no later than December 31, 2005?" When post offices have the letters and other material mailed by the public, they will mark the stamps or stamp "cancelled". This is to show that the stamp has been used so that people don't use them again. Post offices sometimes used a kind of hammer wet with ink to hit the stamp.

Envelopes / First Day Covers

When stamp collectors save the envelopes that have stamps on them, it is called collecting first day covers or simply "covers" for short. This is an interesting branch of stamp collecting because the covers actually provide information about a certain major event.

Three components go into a first day cover: the envelope, stamp and postmark. The last component - postmark - is the key element as it signals the date on which a particular stamp was cancelled. Generally, the United States Postal Service releases a stamp in one city on the day before a new issue is sold.

A new stamp that is issued is often a cause of celebration.

Commemoratives

Commemoratives are stamps that highlight or "commemorate" a person or event. For example the first landing on the moon by American astronauts produced a commemorative stamp to call attention to this milestone. While the stamp may be pretty, the first day cover is more meaningful because it contains information about the event.

Another interesting commemorative was the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. In Canada, the first day cover was issued in a town called "Coronation" in Alberta!

Overprints and Perfins

As we're going along this glossary, are you somehow getting the feeling that there are many facets to stamp collecting that you could specialize in? When stamps have something written on them, there is usually a meaning attached.

For example, the tutorial web site of the British Philatelic Society said that the letters "OHMS" may be put "over the stamp" which means (on His Majesty's Service).

When letters are punched into the stamp, leaving small holes, they are called "perfins".

The word "Perfins" stands for PERforated INitialS. This was to discourage postal employees from stealing stamps for their own use.

For collecting purposes, therefore, you may think of collecting just perfins that display the names of companies. This is one field of collecting that could intrigue you at a later time.

Coil Stamps

Coil stamps come in long rolls and have no perforations at the top and bottom sides. Because they are connected to stamps in the strip, they do not need to be perforated on the other edges. Note that coil stamps may be vertical coil or horizontal coil.

Booklet Pane

Stamps used to be sold in "booklets." The booklets usually had a sheet of five or six stamps. Each of these sheets was called a pane.

Errors

Stamp collectors spend hours looking for errors. It seems that laughing at people's mistakes is a favorite human pastime. The same theory goes for stamp collecting. Collectors have a great time when they do spot an error.

And because errors are not something you see everyday owing to automated stamp manufacturing, when errors do occur, the stamps can fetch a fortune. For instance, the US and Canada have stamps with the center part upside down.

While some errors will not fetch you a huge amount of money in auctions or stamp clubs, they are still interesting to most collectors. A good source of collecting entertainment would be the Canadian "Admirals" issues of 1911-1925.

They are not really errors, but they do have minute differences.

Color errors are also common. When a color is left out in the printing, this constitutes an error. So the next time you buy stamps, look at them more closely.

Perforations may also contain errors. Many stamps have perms running right through the middle.

Stamp collecting does not end with the basic terminology. As you become more sophisticated in the activity, you may be motivated to begin visiting stamp dealers and stamp shows.

You will be meeting some symbols - usually a symbol such as an "asterisk" or acronym (two to three letters) that are used by stamp dealers.

Used and unused stamps have symbols: "0" for used; "*" for unused, and "***" for unused, never unhinged. These symbols don't have any mystery to them. When a stamp is cancelled (post office puts a mark on the stamp), then it is considered used. If it wasn't cancelled, then the stamp is unused.

Have you ever licked the other side of a stamp so you could affix it to your envelope and then mail it? Did licking it ever leave a pleasant or unpleasant taste on your tongue? Believe it or not, gum plays a prominent part in assessing the value of a stamp. A stamp's gum condition can be characterized with the following letters:

- NH

Never hinged: this means the stamp has never had a hinge applied to it. NH can also mean that the gum must be in like condition with no marks of any kind.

- H

Hinged: the gum has had a hinge applied to it.

- LH

Lightly hinged: the mark is small or minor after the gum has had a hinge applied to it.

- HH

Heavily hinged: the mark is very conspicuous after the gum has been hinged.

- HR

Hinge Remnant: a portion of the hinge applied to the gum was difficult to remove that it was left in place, attached to the stamp.

- DG

Disturbed gum: the gum was damaged except by hinging. Fingerprints, glazing or bubbling can contribute to damage. - The gum has been damaged in some way other than hinging.

- NG

No gum: there is no gum, stamp is unused.

Many other symbols are used but the above are the more commonly used. Also, you may encounter the word "centering" which is another determinant in a stamp's value.

Tools and Supplies Required in Stamp Collecting

Thank goodness, stamp collecting is not as expensive a hobby as hockey or skiing, where the tools and materials required cost thousands of dollars. Hockey or ski clothes are very expensive.

Stamp collecting is what we'd call a "financially comfortable" hobby. Unless you join the big leagues and treat it as an investment, practicing the hobby shouldn't cost an arm and a leg.

At some point in time as you progress in your stamp collecting, you'll have to fish out your stamps from that old shoe box under your bed so you can mount them on a stamp album. Like a photo album, stamp albums are a means of storing your stamps safely and to organize them in any way you want.

A good quality stamp album must have plenty of space for a growing collection, and have strong binding that won't separate the album sheets easily. Each page must be sufficiently thick with acid free paper.

Stamp albums are specialized and you will find a wide variety of albums being sold by retailers. Through their experience and conversations with collectors, manufacturers understand the important features of an album. Some examples of stamp albums include:

Minuteman Album

A good beginner's album especially made for collectors of US stamps.

Scott's Basic Album

For collectors of Canadian stamps.

Scott National Album (loose leaf)

This is the industry standard for specialist collectors of US stamps.

H.E. Harris Statesman Album Kit

This is an ideal starter kit for collectors of stamps from all over the world.

Stamp Catalogs

Essential tools are stamp catalogs. Catalogs are excellent references for knowing the present value of stamps, and provide information on how to identify them and collect them properly. If you're not prepared to invest in a stamp catalog, your local library carries them. Some catalogs come in about five or six albums.

Watermark Detector

If you want to examine the printed pattern that was embossed on the stamp, you can use a watermark detector. Not all stamps have watermarks but identical stamps, for example, may have different watermarks. Watermarks can help detect forgeries and can assist in identifying stamp varieties.

Stamp Tongs

If you handle stamps with your bare hands, you could be leaving dirty finger prints on the stamp, thus decreasing their worth. To avoid this, you will use stamp tongs (tweezer-like instruments that are used for handling stamps).

If your collection has been assessed with a high value, the last thing you want to do is NOT use tongs!

Collectors may choose from either stainless steel or plastic tongs.

They're about 3 to 5 inches long; good sets can be purchased for \$5.00 to \$15.00, but there are high-end models that sell for considerably more.

Stamp collectors turned experts also use a very special tong with very pointed tips so that only a miniscule portion of the stamp is touched.

Magnifier

Many stamps are so tiny you can't even see the letters on them. And your eyesight is not exactly that of an eagle's. A magnifier should solve this problem.

A magnifier will enable you to see details that you might otherwise not have noticed or merely to help you examine its characteristics, as well as its conditions.

Color Guides

Stamps have one of the more beautiful colors ever produced by man. There are publications, appropriately called Color Guides that can assist collectors in identifying the various colors used by stamp manufacturers around the world.

Perforation Gauge

As we mentioned earlier, perforations differ in size and type. A perforation gauge helps collectors separate stamps on a sheet and helps in identifying which stamp is which. While stamps may look identical, they may have a different perforation.

Glassine Envelopes

Before mounting stamps on an album, you need to store them somewhere safe. This is the purpose that glassine envelopes serve. They are thin, transparent envelopes and come in various sizes.

Before they're ready for being put in albums, stamps need to be sorted by theme or by country, and these envelopes are ideal for that task. You can also use glassine envelopes to mail stamps to a relative or friend.

Stamp-Lifting Fluids

When someone sends you stamps that are still on envelopes, you can remove the stamps with the use of stamp-lifting fluids. These substances are used to "lift" stamps off from various forms of paper without damaging them. They are used when using water will not achieve the desired lifting.

Hinges/Safe Vinyl Mounts

When you're ready to mount your valuable stamps on an album, you will need hinges or safe vinyl stamp mounts. These hinges are sold already pre-folded to make a collector's life easier.

The smaller segment is moistened and then pressed into the center of the stamp, upper portion, after which the larger segment is also moistened, and then the stamp is mounted.

Care must be taken in moistening as the gum on a mint stamp may stick to the album page as well, thus making it difficult to remove the stamp later.

Stamp Periodicals/Newsletters/Magazines

Making your collection into an intelligent collection requires literature that you can refer to. Hence, stamp periodicals and newsletters and magazines will open doors for you as you want to expand or branch into another field of stamp collecting.

It's not just a question of showing your stamp collection to friends with pride, it's being able to talk about a portion of your collection in a very enlightening and educational manner. Reading about the latest developments in philately will make you appreciate the hobby at a higher level.

Getting Started in Stamp Collecting

Obviously the first step is to acquire stamps. Many beginning collectors hardly pay for anything when they're just starting to build a collection. Talk to your friends and family and colleagues in the office and simply tell them you'd like to have their stamps if they don't want them.

Word of mouth works like magic. Before you know it, you're receiving stamps from people you haven't even met.

Join a club of collectors. It doesn't have to be a fancy, high-brow club if you're just starting. First, learn the basics and when you decide you're ready to specialize, then join a larger club - one that's a regional chapter, instead of just a community-based organization.

By joining clubs, you get to enlarge your collection because fellow collectors will give you their duplicates.

When you've set saved enough money, you can buy stamps like most collectors do.

This involves looking for a dealer; make sure the dealer has a good reputation and is authorized to engage in the trade.

They usually put ads in newspapers and magazines, and will join a trade show in your town or city. You can write dealers to ask if they would send you stamps on approval, meaning they'll send you a set, you keep what you want and return the rest.

Once you've started collecting, you will need to decide what theme(s) you will use to build your collection. Or you may wish to specialize in collecting only mint stamps (they have never been cancelled) or on cancelled stamps. Many collectors prefer the latter, as they cost less.

In buying stamps, begin with mixtures. This is an unsorted bunch of stamps that some dealers will sell based on weight. You tend to get duplicates when you buy mixtures. This should not concern you. You simply trade them for stamps you don't have at your next club meeting.

Want more bang for your buck? Buy packets. Packets do not contain any duplicates, but are more expensive.

Or else, collectors will opt for sets of stamps. A set usually has all government issued stamps; sets can be either whole or broken. A broken set means that one or two stamps will be missing.

Got all your stamps now? Next step is to sort them. You also need to separate them from their backings. Choose which ones you will work first. Put the rest in glassine envelopes until you're ready to tackle them. Do not try to rip them, the risk of damaging them is too high.

Try soaking them in lukewarm water in a clean dish and let them soak until they separate from the envelope or paper. Take blotters and blot them dry, or you use a face towel. If your stamps end up wrinkled, put them between sheets of paper and put a paper weight on them overnight.

If you choose to do country collecting, arrange them in piles and do it in alphabetical order by country. When you've finished sorting them, you can start mounting them on your album.

Before mounting them, however, do a sort one more time - and this time by the condition of the stamps. Put stamps of the best condition in the album.

Do not develop an emotional attachment to all your stamps, the way investors stick to their stocks like glue. Not all stamps - like stocks - are worth keeping. Only rarity and a stamp's condition will determine its value.

Stamp Grades

Want to know how dealers and collectors grade stamps? We'll provide an overview:

- Superb

This means the stamp is as new with a clean and fresh color. No creases or tears mark the stamp. It is perfectly centered with even margins on all sides. The perforation is perfect and complete.

- Very fine:

This is a physically perfect stamp - like a beauty queen of sort. Color might be slightly off and margins are slightly uneven. It does not equal a superb stamp.

- Fine

This is a stamp that is free from defects or stains or imperfections, but it is not up the very fine or superb standards.

- Good

A good stamp does not have tears or wrinkles. Color may be faded, however or may be heavily postmarked. It could also be a little off-center.

- Poor

Very low quality stamps are poor stamps. They could have a tear or may be creased, even have thin spots. Keep them only if they are irreplaceable.

It's now time to open your album and mount your stamps. Make sure you have your magnifier, tongs and catalogs ready. Remember that good quality albums will provide plenty of room for you to manipulate your stamps with ease.

Each place for a stamp is also clearly marked. In some albums, images of the stamps are printed so all you need to do is mount the stamp over where the image is.

One of the preliminary steps in stamp collecting is buying your stamps. Follow these tips when you spend to acquire your stamp supply; you should especially be careful when you intend to buy rare or very expensive stamps.

Check out the seller or dealer. Was he recommended by a fellow collector? Has your club included his name on the list of authorized dealers?

It is correct to assume that a dealer who has been selling stamps for a long time is reliable and is therefore safe to deal with. He should also be a member of a philatelic society or the American Stamp Dealers' Association.

Identify the stamp correctly. When you go to a dealer, make sure his collection is properly identified in terms of color, paper, watermarks, perforations, etc.

These features play a role in determining market value of stamps. Stamp catalogs are good references to have handy when identifying stamps.

Assess the stamp's condition. Use the parameters we provided earlier. Check for tears, creases, marks, perforations. Stamps in poor condition are not worth spending the money on, no matter how dirt cheap the price is.

Determine whether the stamp is being sold at a fair price. You can do this by referring to the Scott Standard Postage Stamp Catalog. Note, however, that catalog prices are mere estimates, as most stamps sell below their catalog values.

Try to develop a keen sense of detecting forgeries or counterfeits. To the average collector, it may be a little tricky to tell a genuine stamp from a repaired one. Unless you believe your stamp collection is very expensive, it may not be worth the money to use the expert services of evaluators that some philatelic organizations charge.

Additional Tips!

Two more tips for you: Have you got dirty or stained stamps in your collection? Try soaking them carefully in a small amount of undiluted liquid dishwashing detergent (not dishwasher detergent - there is a difference!), then rinse the stamps in clean, cool water.

If your stamps are badly stained, try washing them in a mild solution of water and a bit of enzyme laundry detergent, but be very, very careful. This might prove too efficient and remove the printing ink as well.

A note about self-adhesive stamps. These were produced in the US in the beginning of the 90's. These are the ones you can soak in water, but you can't do the same for self-adhesive stamps produced at an earlier period.

Some self-adhesive stamps are made with a special, water-soluble backing, and while you can soak them, they just take a bit longer, like an hour or so.

If you don't want to soak them, just cut the paper as close as possible, making sure you don't touch the perforations and then mount them on your album.

A Treasure Trove of Resources for the Stamp Collector

Stamp collecting is an enriching hobby because it has educational and cultural value. In about six months, you shall have learned about countries and special events, and a lot about the stamp collecting industry as well. You will probably meet a lot of interesting fellow collectors with whom you can swap notes and news.

Stamp collectors, however, must try to gain knowledge continuously by reading and by joining clubs and seminars and talking to as many dealers as possible so that they get a flavor of current market news. We'll start with the basic references you will need to help you gain a better understanding of stamp collecting:

Books

Here are some suggestions for stamp collectors:

About Stamps: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Philatelic Terms

This was written by Wayne L. Youngblood and targets both the amateur and the more sophisticated collector. The reference is rich in high quality photographs and provides references.

It talks about Cinderella stamps, Omnibus issues and uses terms like socked-on-the-nose cancel. In paperback form, published in 2000 by Krause Publications.

The World Encyclopedia of Stamps & Stamp Collecting: The Ultimate Illustrated Reference to Over 3000 of the World's Best Stamps, and a Professional Guide ... and Perfecting a Spectacular Collection (Hardcover).

As the title suggests, this beautiful hardcover is the collector's guide to the world's best stamps.

The Romance of Stamp Collecting: Notes from the World of Stamps, Stamp Collecting and Stamp Collectors

This book by Ernest Anthony Kehr is expensive (\$144.00 at Amazon), considering it was published by T Krowell Company in 1947! But stamp collectors who are passionate about their hobby will be attracted to the title - who can't use a bit of romance even while stamp collecting? Stamp collectors also share their experiences.

Blackbook Price Guide to United States Postage Stamps

This EXTREMELY good book is a complete reference and price listing of US stamps as far back as 1847! It's very well organized (via the Scott numbering system), and also has some wonderful tips on caring for, and grading, stamps.

Stamp Collecting by Stephen Datz

This fun, easy to read, and introductory book on stamp collecting is a must for new stamp collectors. It covers where to find stamps, how to grade them, and how to build a collection from the first stamp to the 1000th. It also has a great glossary for stamp collecting terms.

All About Stamps: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Philatelic Terms

This tremendously useful book from author Wayne Youngblood is a beauty all its own. It contains pictures of stamps, reference information, and insight into everything there is to know about stamp collecting. A MUST for the new and serious collector alike!

Postal Service Guide to U.S. Stamps

This wonderful resource, published by the USPS, takes readers on a beautiful historical journey of US stamps and stamp collecting. It includes EVERY stamp ever issues by the USPS, and has gorgeous illustrations that are sure to impress every collector, novice and expert alike!

Stamp Collecting for Dummies

What list of book recommendations would be complete without a mention of the astonishingly popular Dummies series? Stamp Collecting for Dummies by Richard Sine is a wonderful and straightforward introduction to the hobby. It covers how to acquire stamps, how to keep them organized, how to care for them, and how to sell them.

Websites

The World Wide Web - you can start with the philatelic societies of your country and then branch out to philatelic societies in other English-speaking countries.

American Philatelic Society - www.stampcampus.org

They have an excellent course program that covers basic stamp collecting, first day covers, using the Internet to collect stamps, and exhibiting your collection - all taught by qualified philatelists.

British North America Philatelic Society (BNAPS) - <http://www.bnaps.org/>

This site has tutorials, and many articles on Canada and US stamps. They also have a youth program, a "Krazy Collection", regional groups and study groups.

The Royal Philatelic Society of Canada - <http://www.rpsc.org/>

The site has links to other web resources such as the International Philately Federation, Vincent Graves Greene Philatelic Research Foundation, the Canadian Stamp Dealers' Association and other useful links.

Australian Philatelic Society - <http://aps.org.au/>

Most of the philatelic societies' web sites will also lead you to links of stamp dealers and collectors. The American Philatelic Society, for instance, will carry sub links to dealer members, shows and conventions, specialty societies, local clubs and chapters.

You'll never run out of resources. There are stamps and more stamps, and there are collectors who keep growing in number!

So What's So Special About Stamp Collecting?

Stamp collecting is a "mature" hobby - not because its enjoyment is limited to older adults - but because of its colorful role in history, because of how it has evolved into a pastime that has brought joy to millions of people around the world.

Yet stamp collecting has an innocence all its own.

It's a hobby that stirs something in each collector - a longing to visit foreign lands, a keen investigative sense for print and color errors, a yearning for friendship, and an intellectual curiosity about what other collectors are up to or have discovered.

Photographs in an album preserve those Kodak moments that cannot be re-lived again. They trigger friendly and humorous conversations among cousins and aunts and great grandfathers, and they remind people of what it was like when their hair was curly 10 years ago and not dyed. They bring to mind the tall and lanky years, the awkwardness of a first kiss and oh yes - that toga that was worn with so much pride.

But stamps in an album? How about history, geography, and culture, for starters? How about friendships that know no barriers or frontiers? How about an all consuming passion that never ebbs or flickers?

This is the beauty of stamp collecting. It opens doors, it's the bottomless well of knowledge, and it's the pictorial story of a country and its heritage. It's also about the story of the men and women who work five days a week to deliver our mail.

It's about stamp dealers who wheel and deal and know all about value and price and rarity. It is or was - once a upon a time, about you and me.

Stamp collecting is probably one of man's older pursuits that can be labeled "wholesome" and "promising." It is wholesome because of the educational and cultural value that collectors are treated to every time they acquire a stamp.

Once they acquire one, they then put their knowledge to a test when they try to identify it. Whether one is a grandfather or a grandchild, stamp collecting can offer many hours of enjoyment.

It is up to you to decide whether you want to pursue an expensive hobby or one that is within your budget, for stamp collecting can be both.

While it is true that there are hundreds of stamps all over the world that are out of reach to the average collector, there are many more thousands - out of the 200,000 recognized varieties - that will only cost collectors a few cents to own.

As proof that stamp collecting is a hobby with a huge following, there are reportedly some 30 million stamp collectors all over the world, and 10 million of them are in Canada and the United States.

Once upon a time we too started a stamp collection and we did begin with an old shoebox. But once we mounted them on albums, their aesthetic qualities came out. One never really tires of flipping stamp album pages. The colors alone make them a prized possession.

While many stamp collectors are happy, there are those who pursue the hobby out of loneliness. Stamps have been known to uplift the morale of downtrodden souls, and when they discover an error, their spirits soar - for who can possibly resist telling anyone, "I found a mistake, I found a mistake!"

These errors can be a source of laughter and joy. Perhaps post offices deliberately produce one or two in every issue because they are aware that sad people become happy - even if only momentarily - when they uncover a slip-up.

Barry Krause once said, "stamps are a window to the past, a paper link between living and past generations, a documentary record of the glory and foibles of human beings."

Many people who live on the fast lane will probably want to slow down at some point in their lives, consumed by what modern society calls a "burnout." Burnout is such a fashionable term these days, simply because it can tear whole beings apart. Of course there's always Yoga. Or your parish priest. Or that unopened bottle of Sangria, imported straight from the Andalusian region.

But perhaps stamp collecting can be the permanent cure to being harried and hurried. It can probably slow down the aging process too because once hooked, you'll bury yourself deeper and deeper into a stamp and delving into the mysteries of its message.

Instead of having doctors poke at you with their stethoscopes, plucking out some kind of tumor that grew out of nowhere, you will be the one poking and dissecting your collection - with magnifying glass and tongs.

And with childlike expectations. With stamp collecting we can be children again, excited with every discovery because we just spotted a true mint amongst the lot.

We think "superb" is the term used by graders.

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