

# Making the Case for Brown University's Stamp Collections

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This paper draws on the work of students in fall 2015's "Museum Collections and Collecting" course, and especially the team that prepared a strategic plan for the stamp collections: Christina Ho, Anna Meyer, and Kara Noto. The project would not have been possible without the commitment and support of the Brown University Library staff. All photographs included were produced by Brown University Library Digital Production Services.

## Abstract

Postage stamp collections offer distinct challenges for special collections libraries. This essay presents a case study of the stamp collections in Brown University Library Special Collections from the perspective of a graduate student researcher and a professor who examined the holdings during a recent partnership with the University's Public Humanities program. Currently, the stamp collections are in transition from volunteer curator to professional library management. The partnership, which included development of a class project to explore the collections and production of an exhibition to increase knowledge of the postage stamp holdings and show their value in teaching and research, was one step in that direction. This essay describes the history, management, and development challenges of the stamp collections at Brown, as well as student interaction with the materials and takeaways from planning the exhibition.

*Keywords:* student outreach, philately, exhibitions, collection development, collection management

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In the fall of 2015, a group of graduate and undergraduate students at Brown University signed up for Professor Steven Lubar's "Museum Collections and Collecting" course to take a closer look at some of the university's hidden resources. On the second day of class, we visited some of the lesser known collections of the Brown University Library. We stopped by the Annmary Brown Memorial, established in 1907 as a library of incunabula and a museum of "ancient and modern" paintings, now a display space for some of those paintings and miscellaneous realia collections. In the John Hay Library, Brown's special collections repository, we viewed antique scientific instruments and were invited inside the stamp workroom, a space that is almost always closed.

The curator of the stamp collections welcomed the students and gave them an overview of the holdings. One of the best philatelic holdings in the country, it includes a complete collection of U.S. stamps, a complete collection for many countries, and specialized collections. Some of the collections have been gifted to Brown, while others have been purchased by curators. A bequest from a Brown alumnus had just arrived the day of the class visit. Opening the box, the curator told a story about each stamp, related it to the existing collections, and offered a quick assessment of its rarity.

The students were astonished, partly from the show of expertise—good curators tell good stories—but mainly from the idea that hidden in Special Collections was an enormous accumulation of postage stamps and that each held significance. Over the course of the semester, students would have the opportunity to explore the collections, and use them to curate an exhibition to reveal their breadth and depth. Their mission: make the case that a stamp collection is valuable to a university library and is useful for research and teaching.

## Libraries have Stamp Collections?

The students in the course were not alone in their surprise at finding a stamp collection in the library. Almost everyone reacts that way. Stamps are neither books nor manuscripts. They are not art, exactly. They are mass-produced official documents. They are ... collectibles. We expect to find them in personal collections not libraries.

There are postal museums, of course. Many countries have national postal museums or communications museums that include the story of the post office. The largest and best known in the United States is the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum. It houses more than 5.9 million stamps. The Spellman Museum of Stamps and Postal History, in Weston, Massachusetts, has the second largest collection at two million objects, mostly stamps. There are also postal libraries. The world of philately is awash in specialized journals, catalogs, and publications, many with very small circulation, and many quite rare. The National Postal Museum and the Spellman Museum have extensive libraries, as does the American Philatelic Society (more than 21,000 book titles and 5,700 journal titles), and the Wineburgh Philatelic Research Library of the University of Texas, Dallas.

But stamps at a research library? Until a few decades ago, it was not that uncommon. Several university libraries held significant philatelic collections through much of the twentieth century. Over time however, they became less aligned with university research interests. Many have been completely or partially deaccessioned. The largest and most famous library collection was the Benjamin K. Miller collection of U. S. postage stamps, donated to the New York Public Library (NYPL) in 1925. It was the first complete collection of U.S. postage stamps ever assembled. NYPL displayed it, but not enthusiastically, until two thefts in the 1970s prompted its storage (Bierman, 1989). NYPL later transferred the collection as a long-term loan to the National Postal Museum, where parts of it have been on display since 2006.

Princeton University held a sizeable stamp collection from the 1930s until the 1970s, when much of it was sold. Among those was an "inverted Jenny" block-of-four, which brought \$170,000 in 1976.<sup>1</sup> At the time, the proceeds were designated in part for exhibition cases for the remainder of the university's stamp collection. Before long, almost the entire collection was gone, presumably because there was not much interest in stamps as scholarly fodder. Princeton held onto its Tower Collection, which covers the history of postal marks and mail delivery from ancient Mesopotamia through the twentieth century. The University of Pennsylvania also held a stamp collection until the early 2000s, when it was deaccessioned.<sup>2</sup>

1. A U.S. stamp issued in 1918, the inverted Jenny has an image of a Curtiss JUN-4 ("Jenny") erroneously printed upside down.

2. Brown purchased the Wickersham Collection of Liberian Stamps from the University of Pennsylvania sales.

Smaller collections survive at many university libraries. For example, the University of Notre Dame Special Collections houses about 200 volumes of stamp-related material, with a special focus on Irish postage stamps. It continues to accept stamps, but only specialized collections with a connection to other library holdings. Emory University's Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library houses the Israeli and Topical Judaica Postage Stamps collection—a gift from a donor. It includes every stamp issued by the state of Israel through the mid-1990s, stamps featuring Jewish themes from around the world, and a complete set of stamps issued by the Jewish National Fund.

## About Brown's Stamp Collections

Brown University Library stamp collections have grown through bequests and sustained acquisitions since an inaugural gift in 1938. Now approximately one million stamps, it is the third largest publicly accessible stamp collection in the U. S., after the National Postal Museum and the Spellman Museum, and a “mecca for philatelists” (Bierman, 1989).

The stamp collections began with a bequest from alumnus Webster Knight of an almost complete collection of U. S. postage stamps in blocks of four or more, as well as revenue stamps and provisional stamps that pre-date the first post office issues. Knight endowed the collections with funds to keep U.S. postal issues up to date, purchase errors, freaks, and oddities, and maintain protective storage for these collections. Knight's will stipulates that a committee of three from the Rhode Island Philatelic Society oversee the collection. The collection is displayed in vertical frame cases in a room of its own.

A good collection attracts additional collections, and in the following decades, Brown eagerly accepted offers that expanded its stamp holdings in significant ways. The Peltz and Morriss Collections of Special Delivery stamps arrived in 1947. In 1960, Rhode Island industrialist George S. Champlin donated his international stamps, which now consists of nearly 400 albums as ongoing support from the Champlin Foundations provides for new acquisitions. The Robert T. Galkin Collection followed with donations of nearly 200 albums of U.S. and international stamps, dating from the 1840s to 1990. There are more than a dozen other named collections, focused on everything from Chinese stamps to “Tin Can Mail,” from Tonga (Figure 1).

The library also holds philatelic material that is not part of the main stamp collections. Many collections include correspondence, some with remaining envelopes with attached stamps. At Brown, the students found interesting stamps in collections ranging from the Feminist Theory Archive (stamps collected as mementos of a 1965 trip to Cuba by an American academic) to

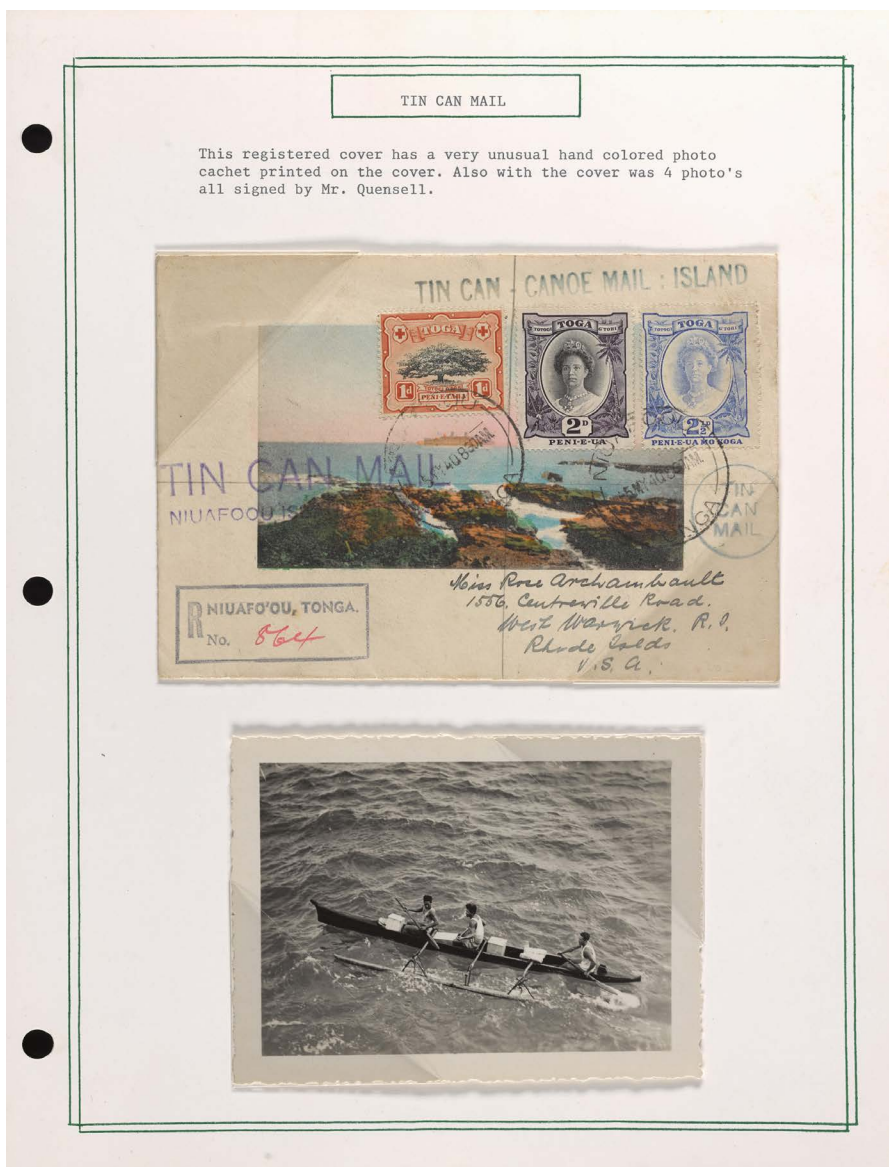


Figure 1: Album page from the Gustafson Tonga Island Collection. Image courtesy of Brown University Library Special Collections.

the Joe and Lil Shapiro Collection of Laundry Ephemera (advertisements printed on the adhesive side of stamps, see Figure 2).

## About the Course

Making sense of the Library's stamp collections was an ideal project for a course on collections. The collections raised questions about acquisition policy, intellectual and physical control, and especially, use. This focus also offered the opportunity for the class to provide a useful service to the library. Historically, the stamp collections have been little used, and it seemed that a group of students might bring new energy to the challenges of activation and access.



Brown's Public Humanities program has sponsored a range of collections courses over the years, working with the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, university library, and local historical organizations. A range of students enroll. In this class, there were five graduate students in Public Humanities, and eight undergraduates from first- to fourth-year, with majors including Egyptology, archeology, American Studies, and biology. Several were interested in museum careers.

Collections offer both theoretical and practical challenges, including the fundamental questions of why and what to collect. There are also a host of practical questions, such as how to organize, store, conserve, and make collections available. The syllabus promised the students would learn something about the way museums think about and use collections, best practices in collections management, development, and preservation, and how to conceptualize and create collections-based exhibitions.

The course started with background reading on the history and philosophy of museum collections and moved on to more practical readings on registration, conservation, and curatorship. We started by asking, with Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (2010) and "unpacking libraries" with Walter Benjamin (1964). On the more practical side, we spent some time on "Collections Management Policies" with museum attorney and ethicist Marie Malero (1998). We considered practical issues with the *National Park Service Museum Handbook* (2006) and conservation with Barbara Appelbaum (2003). The *AAM Guide to Collections Planning* (Gardner and Merritt, 2004) offered the backbone for our strategic planning process. And *Creating Exhibitions* (McKenna-Cress and Kamien, 2013) helped us, well, create exhibitions. Students undertook three detailed collections projects throughout the course, putting these readings into practice.

One project dealt with the Annmary Brown Memorial, a private library and art museum protected by a will forbidding any changes, which became part of Brown in 1949. The university has since wrestled with the best way to use the building and collections. Students cataloged some of the collections and wrote a plan to reimagine the building as a center for art and material culture.

The second project dealt with Brown's antique scientific instruments, which are scattered among departments, as well as in the Library. Students cataloged a selection from the physics, biology, and math departments, wrote a plan proposing further cataloging, and recommended that the University Archives keep track of them.

The largest project was the stamp collection. Students delved into the postage trove, somewhat skeptically at first. Their goal: make the case for the collection as a resource for university research and teaching and



Figure 2: : Sunlight Soap Company advertisements, printed on the gummed side of New Zealand postage stamps, 1892-1993. Image courtesy of Brown University Library Special Collections.

produce an exhibition and strategic plan for the collection. The class pored over the albums to get a grasp on the vast and diverse contents; researched the history of the collections; drafted a strategic plan for future management, growth, and publicity; experimented with platforms for presenting digitized stamps; and developed an exhibit and programming ideas to increase visibility and use. Students were impressed by the breadth of topics to which stamps could speak. Finds from the collections that inspired class research included the unconventional postage stamps of Bhutan, such as the “Talking Stamps” from 1972, and the international World Refugee Year issues of 1959-1960 (Figure 3). They raised questions about what was and was not included. For example, why were there some unofficial stamps included, like Christmas Seals, but not stamps made by artists?

By the end of the course, many students had reconsidered the value of stamps, and many confessed that they had found the collections much more interesting than they imagined. They were eager to spread the word about the possibilities of stamps in courses from art to history. But they also had come to appreciate the challenges of the collection. It was difficult to use because it was cataloged idiosyncratically. It was hard to know what was there without paging through albums. It required a great deal of staff time.

The process of research in the stamp collections taught students about the nature of collections. They noticed the differences between philately as a hobby and as academic subject matter, and between personal collecting and library management. From ascertaining exact terms of gifts to assessing access issues in a peculiar library collection of visual ephemera, the students gained a firsthand understanding of the complexities of special collections work and the challenges that libraries face in providing access to unique materials.

Three students collaborated to create a draft “Strategic Plan for Management and Development of the Philatelic Collections.” This document made the case that the collection maintained too many of the characteristics of a personal stamp collection, and had not been conceptualized or cataloged to be effective for university research. The Executive Summary offered this advice:

Future management of the collection must: revisit the stamp collection’s purpose, better integrate the stamps into the library’s mission and core services, re-envision programming and outreach to ensure its relevancy, and develop new and innovative approaches for collecting in order to best serve our unique student scholars. Adjustments in the methods of collection and access, combined with short-and-long term programming can



Figure 3: : “Talking Stamp” postage from Bhutan, 1973. Vinyl record, approximately 2 inches in diameter. Image courtesy of Brown University Library Special Collections.



better integrate the collections with the other holdings of the John Hay Library, align them with the mission of Brown University Library, and engage the students and faculty of Brown ...

The class also created the exhibit, *Thousands of Little Colored Windows: Brown University's Stamp Collections*,<sup>3</sup> which was on view in the main gallery of the John Hay Library during the spring semester of 2016.

## About the Exhibit

After a large scale renovation, the John Hay Library re-opened in 2014 with a formal exhibition space open to the general public as well as the Brown community. Through regular exhibitions dedicated to presenting and contextualizing the diverse array of resources and materials available to readers and researchers, the Library established an exhibition program to support courses, encourage scholarly inquiry,



Figure 4: View of the main gallery in the John Hay Library with the exhibition installed. Image courtesy of Brown University Library Special Collections.

and offer a peek into the collections. The class project was a perfect fit with this mission. Students worked with staff and curators to showcase this little-known portion of the Library's holdings.

During the planning, students focused on a range of topics. Some were immediately drawn to graphic design and imagery. Some were interested in national symbols and production of stamps as propaganda, while others were intrigued by the transactional purpose, implications of connectedness, or the collecting of stamps. The students worked in groups, sketching out ideas for a basic exhibit concept and organizational framework. Proposed themes ranged from letter writing and communication to the ways states present themselves to the world on stamps.

The exhibition space has seven cases, so *Thousands of Little Colored Windows* examined postage stamps and related historical materials through seven guiding terms. After a great deal of class discussion, the students chose definition, communication, art, politics, charity, collection, and motivation. Groups of two or three students worked to select content and develop interpretive text for each section. Each group did background research on their topic, and identified a quotation from a scholar whose research would help frame their investigation and support the presentation of stamps in a relevant, academic context. This curatorial concept presented challenges with regard to the selection of materials from the Library's collections as it's not the way the stamps are cataloged.

The student curators for the "definition" section chose items from a wide range of collections that shed light on the stamp's revenue generating function, its iconic shape, and how commercial entities, artists, and even stamp producing authorities have played with the familiar form and understood its authenticity over the years. The exhibit case included federally-issued alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana revenue stamps, collectible trading stamps, Fluxus artist Robert Watts' *Safe Post and Jockpost* "artistamps," and the non-governmentally issued "puffin" postage stamps of Lundy Island (Figure 5).

Students working on the "communication" topic were inspired by the revolution triggered by the release of the first postage stamp, the Penny Black, in the U.K. and the establishment of affordable long-distance communication. The exhibit case included first stamps from the U.S. and U.K., envelopes pre-dating special delivery postage that feature written requests for speedy service, Lewis Carroll's "The Wonderland Postage Stamp Case" and its accompanying booklet aimed at encouraging letter writing among young people, and a selection of postcards that show the range of formality within mailed communication.

The "art" group highlighted artists (including Alphonse Mucha and Normal Rockwell) who designed stamps to capture a national aesthetic.

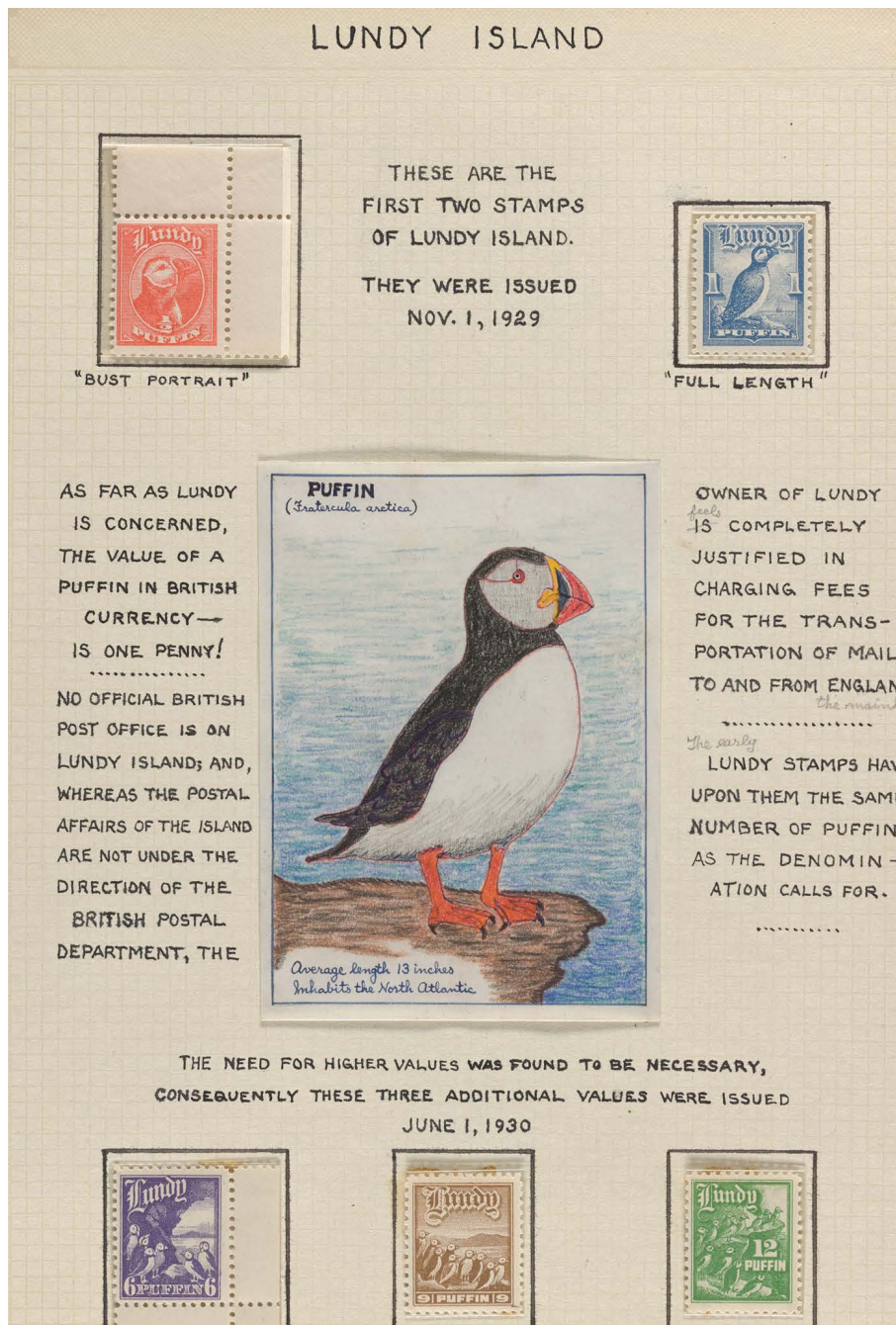


Figure 5: Postage stamps from Lundy Island, 1929-1930, mounted on a collector's exhibition page. Image courtesy of Brown University Library Special Collections.

Students interested in “politics” focused on internal and international conflicts as revealed on stamps, finding examples of regime change, occupation, decolonization, and territorial claims in the imagery. Under the “charity” topic, students investigated the medium of stamps for the transmission of solidarity messages and support for common causes across national boundaries, such as the public health initiative of “The World Against Malaria” postal campaign of 1961.

Lastly, the two groups working on “collection” and “motivation” collaborated to formulate a group of items that painted the picture of

the type of things stamp collectors accumulate and their many reasons for participating in the practice. Items such as the 1971 manuscript of Ayn Rand's "Why I Like Stamp Collecting" (a small manifesto on the cognitive benefits of the hobby), a 1962 Brown University Library internal memorandum reporting on educational uses of the stamp collections, and examples of postage printing errors that highlight the way market value shapes stamp collecting, all shed light onto the personal drives behind the activity. The exhibition's multi-perspective approach illuminated the breadth of the collection and highlighted the academic potential of stamps, an idea that aligned with the Library's long term goals and delighted the librarians who reviewed the students' proposal.

Postage stamps present significant conservation and display challenges. The Library's conservator assessed gallery lighting to establish a safe level for the colored inks and helped determine the best way to show the stamps. They were displayed on polyester film backings to ensure that if humidity fluctuation activated the adhesive backs they would not adhere to the display surfaces. The conservator also used polyester strapping to secure groups of stamps to display risers and discourage movement resulting from airflow or natural warping.



Figure 6: View of the main gallery in the John Hay Library with the exhibition installed. Image courtesy of Brown University Library Special Collections.



The exhibition cases in the Hay Library are table-style vitrines, intended for much larger objects. Students worked with mock-up displays and staff tested options to find the most successful display solution. They decided to use risers of a uniform height to lift the materials close to the top of the case and closer to the viewer (Figure 7). Black case floors and risers allowed the text and imagery of the stamps to pop from their white scalloped borders. The recessed walls behind each exhibition case featured the guiding topic and quote, as well as introductory and item-level labels, numbered to correspond to materials. Removing all exhibition text from the cases made it easier for the viewer to concentrate on the small items.

The small size of stamps was a major concern in the exhibition design process, and the students played with the possibility of incorporating enlarged facsimiles into wall graphics. This was rejected as in the context of Special Collections, it was important to encourage visitors to focus on the original materials. Magnifying glasses were made available at the front desk and the introductory text of the exhibition prompted visitors to “look closely.”

The gallery also featured an interactive digital platform (TAG, or Touch Art Gallery, developed by students in Brown’s computer science

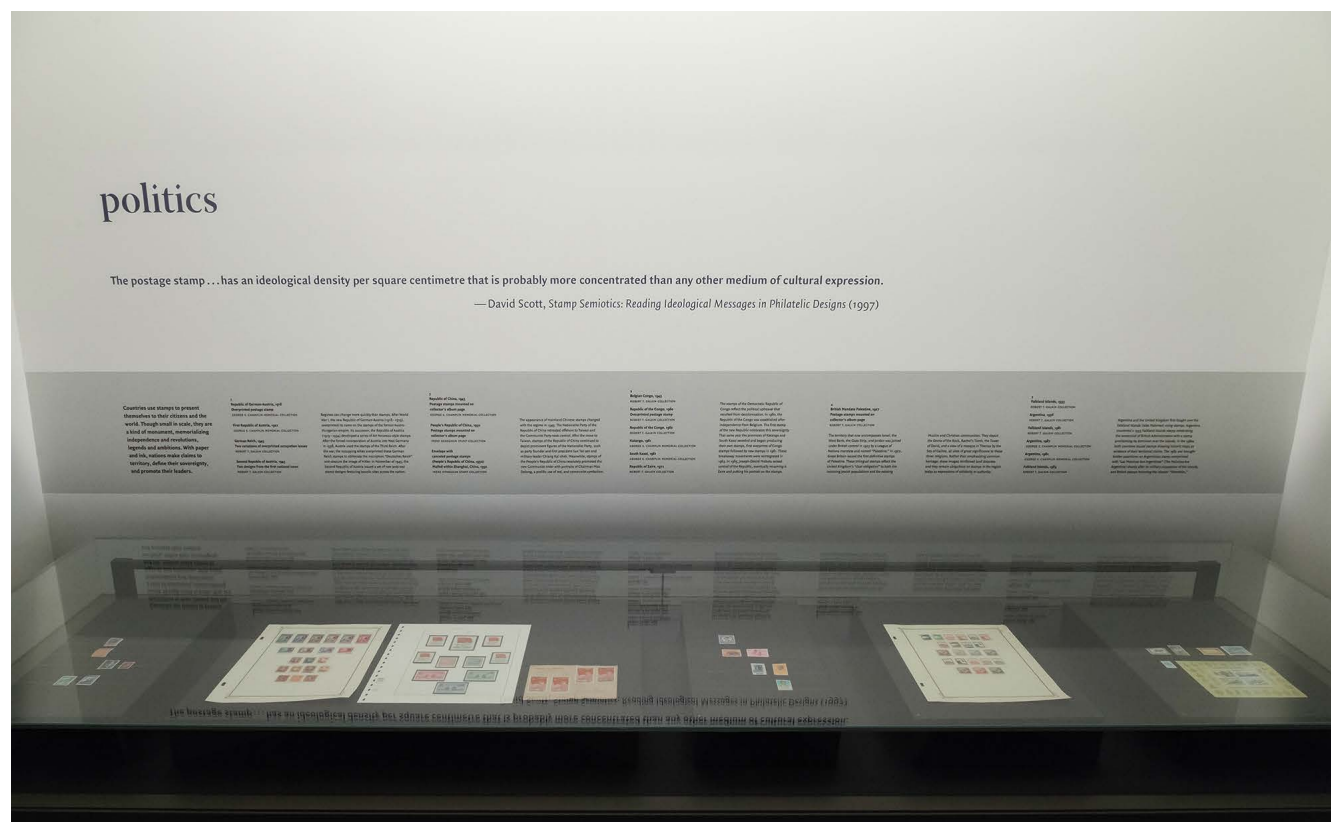


Figure 7: Detail view of one of the exhibition cases with stamps on display supports. Image courtesy of Brown University Library Special Collections.

department) for learning more about political histories through stamps (Figure 8). It displayed stamps from decades of political upheaval from a range of nations, offering the opportunity to explore the way conflict is portrayed on stamps. Students created metadata for these stamps and had a chance to think about the complicated questions surrounding searchable information and public interfaces for visual library collections. A beta web version of TAG is included on the exhibition website.<sup>4</sup>

## Challenges of Stamps in Special Collections

Cultural artifact and ephemeral collections like stamps pose challenges for library management. Often composed of unique and not self-describing items, these collections and their components do not fit easily with bibliographic or archival standards of cataloging. Since no single descriptive standard fits all needs, these items often require specialist input for full inventorying and may exist with limited documentation within a library, difficult for users to access and explore. In addition to these cataloging challenges, items outside of the definitions of bound and manuscript materials offer complications for storage and conservation.

Postage stamps and postal materials seem to hold a position in between self-describing items and ephemera. They have their own

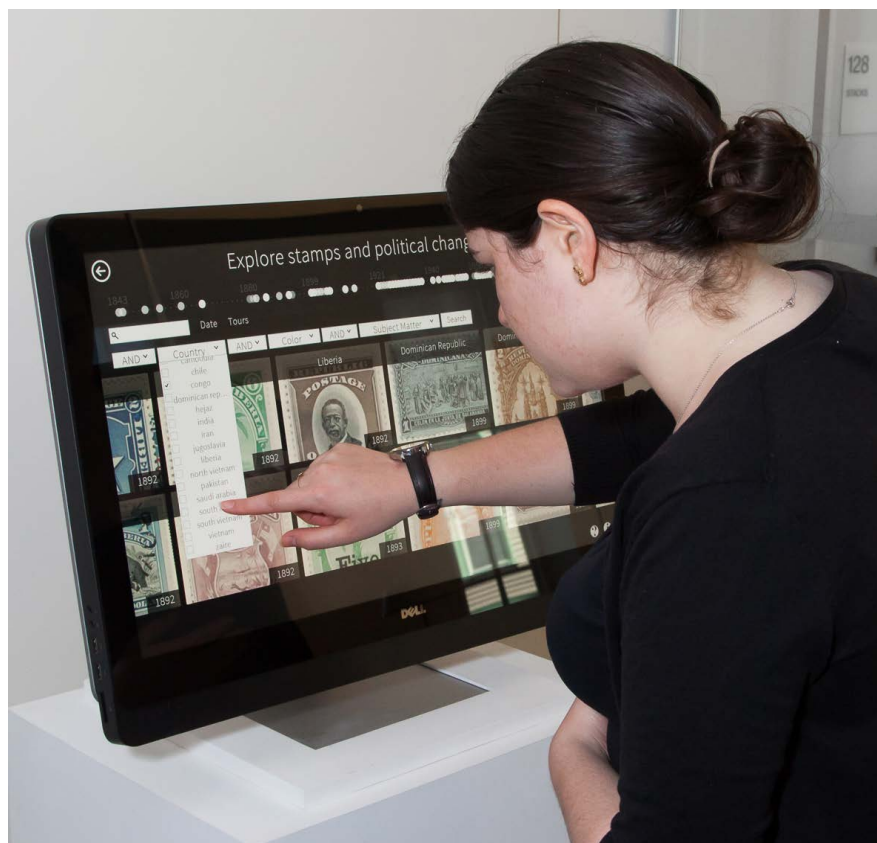


Figure 8: Student using TAG in the gallery. Image courtesy of Brown University Library Special Collections.



cataloging system, a unique numbering system initiated by John Walter Scott in the 1860s. The Scott Catalogue is issued annually; documenting the stamps produced in every country of the world and assigning each a “Scott number.” The Scott Catalogue also notes printing process, color variations, perforations, denomination, currency, and imagery. Looking at a stamp offers a large amount of this information. The country of origin is typically inscribed, as is the monetary information. However, accumulations of stamps, in most cases, stem from personal hobbies. Thus, inventory and arrangement is often idiosyncratic within a single collection, and the compilation of multiple collections into an academic library compounds the peculiarities. Students working on the class project encountered many of these with regards to management, access, and development of the stamp collections, and were struck with the complexities embedded in translating collections developed with personal aims and constraints for scholarly use.

The management of stamp collections at Brown is a product of the terms of Webster Knight’s 1933 will. Care and collecting is entrusted to a self-perpetuating committee of three volunteer curators from the Rhode Island Philatelic Society, the country’s oldest philatelic society. Significant endowments and gifts fund the growth of two of the major stamp collections, allowing the curators to acquire new stamps issued each year, along with a range of related materials, from small topical collections and printing errors, to historical stamps missing from the collections.

The storage systems for the majority of the collections are a product of their original collectors, and employ the supplies of traditional philatelists—binders, named pages, and polyester film slipcovers. The curators continue to use these. Stamps are only loosely attached in the binders, so the system does not enable secure viewing of the materials, which impacts accessibility and security of the collections.

The inventory of the collections is also the result of transferred management and collector perspective. There is no standardized record of the collections, nor are they incorporated into the Library’s online catalog. Postage stamp holdings from the major global collections are logged on printed pages in a binder available in the workroom. Holdings are listed by country. However, national identities change, confusing users, and date ranges of the holdings are not specified. Lists of holdings by country serve to orient a visitor to the collection, to give them a starting place in the room, but using the collections this way remains very difficult. It is a large, complicated set of collections, with only minimal finding aids.

The unusual management structure and difficulty of access offers the library significant challenges. Volunteer curators are enthusiastic but

not easily integrated into the Library's managerial oversight. They are not academic librarians, and the acquisitions, collections management, and access policies for the collection reflect this circumstance. The focused student work on the collection for the course and the exhibition showed the possibilities latent in the Library's stamp collections, but also its problems. The next step for the Library is to figure out new management, collecting, collections control, and outreach plans.

## **Future Work with the Stamp Collections**

Future plans for the stamp collections build on many of the ideas that the students outlined in their strategic plan. The Library intends to create a formal collecting plan and coordinate the actions of the Philatelic Society curators to support such a plan. It will identify users and partners in the university community, refine the current collection, expand on its strengths, and initiate standardized organizational systems. These changes will allow the collections to become a resource for professors, students, and general researchers, and align with current scholarship at Brown.

Inventory and housing initiatives will heighten control and accessibility of the collections. A detailed collections-wide inventory will illuminate the peculiarities of the collections and shed light on the best way to organize a finding aid for the materials so the contents have maximum discoverability. The collections should be described in a way that highlights aspects useful to researchers, such as personal collecting methods, or stamps created in colonial versus sovereign national contexts—making these facets of the collections enticing to researchers rather than hindrances to access. The inventory initiative will also reveal the extent of duplication in the collections, enabling the Library to create a plan for how the sale of duplicates can support access or fund further refinements. Refining storage methods and shelving organization will go hand in hand with this effort to lessen barriers to information and discovery.

The question of what to collect is also pivotal for the future of the stamp collections and their path toward academic relevance. Through formal planning and assessment of gift terms, the Library will be able to weigh the benefits of continuing annual stamp purchases for the U.S. and many foreign nations versus focusing on a few targeted collecting areas. The students came to the conclusion that on the whole, contemporary stamps after 2000 or so are less useful as a resource for teaching and research. They recommended limiting acquisition of annual stamp production to instances where the issues show significant graphic design or communicate political messages due to governmental upheaval or international tensions.

Future acquisitions should also focus on regions where Brown researchers are active, especially postcolonial histories, nationalist, and irredentist movements. Focusing on a few regions would allow for a thorough assessment of a political landscape through stamps and make it possible to cultivate a strong connection to professors and departments. Moving beyond official stamps offers a second collecting opportunity. What philatelists call “Cinderella stamps,” materials that resemble stamps but are produced outside of governmental authority, show stories of resistance and insurgency, whether produced by political figures or artists. This would attract faculty and students from new departments, including visual art and art history, to the collections.

Reprocessing and repositioning the stamp collections will increase their relevance, interest, and usefulness. To be successful, it will require active outreach to the university community. The Library must work with scholars within departments and centers where there is a potential for stamp-related research, including American Studies, History, Africana Studies, the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, and the Watson Institute for International Studies. It should also focus on the collections’ teaching potential. While it may be difficult to move faculty to adopt new research methodologies, this project-based course demonstrated that the appeal of stamps for student projects, research papers, and public outreach is clear. The Library should monitor course offerings and let faculty know about stamps that might be useful in teaching.

When the stamps are organized and accessible, next steps will include public programs, additional exhibitions, and the establishment of fellowships or research award opportunities. It will take an investment of time and effort to transform the stamp collections into a unique and useful library resource, but the students’ enthusiasm—and our own—convinces us that it will be worthwhile.

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