PHILATELIC CLASSES: WEBSITES

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Websites in philately: A continuing and controversial debate that has been brought into focus during these times of pandemic and with the advent of virtual exhibitions.

In the development and realization of the Virtuafil platform (discussed later in this edition of the magazine), it was absolutely necessary to finally and completely resolve this question. It was decided to formally bring websites into the list of acceptable materials through the innovation of a new philatelic class dedicated specifically to the websites medium.

In traditional, institutional philately, there has been a great reluctance by it's leaders to accept websites as valuable sources of philatelic information and research, and the work of website producers is usually not deemed worthy of inclusion at formal exhibitions. The motives behind this attitude are extremely difficult to ascertain. Clearly there is technophobia among many of the aging members of the leadership. There also seems to be extreme conservatism in some groups, where the attitude is, that if it's not printed on paper, then it does not exist. Among the leadership of institutional philately I also detect a general feeling of what the Germans call "weltschmerz", the pessimism, apathy, or sadness felt at the difference between the real world and the ideal world of one's imaginings.

Indeed there are even some formal philatelic organizations that profoundly detest the internet and websites. I personally received one email from such an organization addressed as follows: "*Dear blogger Niall Murphy of the blog site MoldovaStamps*". In this case the word "blogger" was intended as an insult, to diminish the value of the work I had done. Strangely, this same organization was never produced a website or any other type of publication of their own, yet they feel empowered to diminish the work of others simply because they did not do it and because they do not control it. It seems that in conservative circles in formal philately, the words "blog", "website" and "social media" are taboo. What relevance such groups have in philately of this millennium is hard to quantify. In my opinion, those who do not play the game should not be making the rules.

Looking through the list of forthcoming international stamp exhibitions for 2021 and 2022, I am shocked to discover how many are not accepting digital works or websites: PHILANIPPON 2021 (Japan), HUNFILEX 2022 (Hungary), HELVETIA 2022 (Switzerland) and INDONESIA 2022. Whereas other exhibitions embrace electronic media: NOTOS 2021 (Greece), LONDON 2022 and CAPE TOWN 2022 (South Africa).

Amazingly, even some of the virtual exhibitions that have been arranged recently in response to the pandemic, do not permit electronic media or websites, this despite the fact that these exhibitions rely on websites, not only to publicize the event, but also to present the entire exhibition. In some cases, the "new" virtual exhibitions are really just

old fashioned "in person" events merely transferred to the internet but without any true innovation.

Position of the Fédération Internationale de Philatélie (FIP)

With regard to electronic (digital) media and websites, the attitude of the FIP is lagging 20 years behind. Whilst their European continental satellite organization FEPA has introduced some guidelines on the topic, proposing digital works as a subset of the Literature Class, the ruling FIP body in Switzerland still considers all of this to be "experimental". Whist the FIP is happy to use websites as a method to publicize exhibitions and even to host virtual exhibitions, but they do not consider websites to be worthy of participation at competitive exhibitions in their own right.

There was a very interesting and very controversial article by Colin Fraser published in the FIP "Flash" magazine (No. 130 September 2020) entitled "Can a pandemic finally change the world of philately?". Whist this is an opinion article by Mr Fraser, it reads more like a statement of policy by the FIP and it takes a very dim view of current trends in philately towards social media and questions the value of such work. I believe this article represents the general attitudes of the current leadership of formal, organized philately and that by publishing this article, they state that they will not accept new trends and will work towards maintaining the traditional status quo.

But things are not entirely bleak. The NOTOS 2021 exhibition in Athens is a notable exception where the organizers are making a special effort to bring websites into the mainstream of competitive exhibiting. This move is being led by Costas Chazapis, a progressive member of the FEPA Board of Directors and the Head of the exhibition Organizing Committee. Here Mr Chazapis shows leadership and an acceptance of the inevitable trends towards the use of electronic media in philately.

But is it all too late? According to popular social-media guru James Gavin, A.K.A. The Digital Philatelist, the current generation of collectors is no longer interested in organized clubs, societies or other traditional groups and prefers to operate only in the virtual world and without all of the formal rules and regulations. As the years go by and the ranks of the old guard continue to get thinner and thinner, who will replace them and what will their expectations be? It will be fascinating to watch how the hobby will evolve in the near future. I am fairly convinced that it will be almost unrecognizable from its current form, but I know that I still want to be part of it.

Position of American Philatelic Society (APS)

Here I will quote a review I made of the APS exhibition "StampShow 2019" which was published on the website of the Philatelic Webmasters Organization and seems very appropriate for this current article: https://www.pwmo.org/Contest/2019-APS-Competition.htm

Prior to 2017, the American Philatelic Society (APS) expressly prohibited websites from participation at exhibitions, on the basis of the "lack of permanency" of the medium. To my mind, this sounds like the invention of a problem for a solution. But in 2017, the APS completely reversed this attitude and published a revised edition of their Manual of Literature Judging and Exhibiting. Link.

To quote an extract from Chapter 1 of the manual: "The world is migrating to the Internet, and to digital technology. We ignore this at our peril as the computer is increasingly where the public goes for information. If philately is to be at all relevant, it needs to be on the

web, and we need to be equipped to understand and use it whether on websites, blogs or message boards. We also need to be able to judge it, and provide feedback on it to assist its producers to improve their products. "

Because of the APS embargo on website participation and also because I (wrongly) assumed that APS was really only a place for American philatelists, only interested in American material, I had not paid much attention to this organization. But my frustration with the attitudes of organized philately in Europe to digital work, led by the FIP's seemingly indifferent attitude to the topic, forced me to dig deeper and to explore the attitudes of the Americans.

I have read so many IREXs for so many exhibitions. Even in the rare cases where digital literature is accepted, there is typically a requirement for the applicant to hold membership of an "affiliated" organization. In plain English, this means that applicants must be members of a club or society, belonging to a national federation, affiliated with either the continental federation (in Europe, it's FEPA), or with the international federation, FIP. My personal experiences in Europe are that philatelic clubs/societies who welcome new members with open arms, are few and far between. Usually there is a requirement for a reference, which is a code name for "a friend in the club". In many cases, there is no website with membership information and only an email address is available. One can apply for membership but one may never receive a reply. And needless to say, membership of most clubs is not free. The fee can vary from very reasonable to very expensive.

Even if you are a member of an affiliated society and you want to participate at an international exhibition, you need to get past the next level, the National Commissioner. This can be rather difficult if, like me, you were born in Ireland, live in Brazil, exhibit material from Moldova and want to participate at an exhibition in the UK.

The National Commissioner has the authority to accept or reject your application (without the need to give any reasons for a rejection), he will be responsible for processing your exhibition application fee. You can only hope that he offers an option for PayPal, especially if you live in a different country to him.

As President of PWO, Victor Manta, has said to me in previous conversations, many Philatelic Webmasters have been alienated for so long by the formal organizations, many are simply not engaged with any of these affiliated clubs/societies. The expectation/demand of exhibition organizers for such affiliations is unrealistic and results in the exclusion of much valuable work from public view and rightful recognition.



The Philatelic Webmasters Organization

Victor Manta, the President of Philatelic Webmasters Organization (PWO) has spent 20 years fighting for the cause of websites to be permitted into formal, competitive philatelic exhibitions.

The PWO website is well known to many/most of the world's philatelic website producers who have enrolled as members and presents a history of all the communications Victor had made with various organizations, including the FIP and the Association

Internationale des Journalistes Philatélique (AIJP) over the past 20 years. During the process of developing the Virtuafil platform, I consulted with Victor regarding the matter of websites in exhibitions. I am very pleased that Victor has indicated his support, both for the initiative and for the Virtuafil concept in general.



Victor Manta

Victor says: *"A class of philatelic websites can of course exist per se and there are no reasons for it to be considered a subclass of philatelic literature. This was decided by the FIP in 1999 just to simplify the self-assumed and then abandoned (for a long time) job to judge philatelic websites. It was also a means to grab it as representing JUST a part of the already existing philately, when in fact it represented rather a revolution than a natural technical evolution."*

Websites are Distinct from Philatelic Literature

For many, many reasons digital literature is far superior to printed material but also, websites are a totally different medium from digital literature and websites should not be considered a sub-class of literature. If anything, the roles should be reversed. If you take the analogy that a website's design template provides the shelves for a library and the site's content pages are the books on those shelves, then the website becomes a complete multimedia package, whereas, a piece of literature is simply one book on one shelf which, in isolation, will never be read unless it placed in a website library. On this basis, websites are far superior to simple literature.

As it currently stands, I could write a 50 page monograph about any philatelic and in competition, this would be considered equally significant as my 40,000 page website library about philately in the Republic of Moldova, itself containing 100s of articles and newsletters.

There are many reasons to justify websites having a distinct class of their own. Below are just a few examples:

- Literature is static. The author presents the text and images to the reader but there is no interaction between them.
- Websites can be highly interactive, allowing comments, suggestions and even edits to be made to an article.
- Websites support not only written text and images but also audiovisual elements. Even live voice conversation is possible.
- Websites can be instantaneously translated into a multitude of languages and using non-Latin alphabets.

In Conclusion

The decision has been made that websites (including blog sites) are a VITAL component of philately and that this medium is completely distinct from simple philatelic literature. They therefore require a distinct philatelic class of their own.

As it currently stands, the Websites Class is recognized only within the Virtuafil group and in philatelic exhibitions conducted on the Virtuafil platform. If the decision is made to proceed to the second phase of the Virtuafil platform, having Advanced judging criteria, we will discuss with properly qualified parties what exactly these criteria will be, but they will certainly not be based on the literature criteria currently used by the formal philatelic organizations.