



It looks like people have always collected things. The earliest collections relate to religious activities and were found at burial sites that date back over 200,000 years.

Collecting things, however, just might be part of an innate human desire to own stuff—to gather the physical evidence of our lives and the natural world around us.

Some collections were put together by individuals and are rather unusual, like the collection of 139 human skulls in The Mutter Museum in Philadelphia. It was assembled in the 1800s by a Viennese doctor who believed that the shape of a person's skull was an indication of mental capacity.



Another example of an individual collector at work is the tin figure collection that was put together by a Swiss newspaper publisher. Toys like these were first produced during the middle of the 1600s by German manufacturers in order to illustrate daily life and military exploits. Some collections were put together by corporations. Motorcycle production began during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The manufacturers decided to incorporate everything they had learned about flight into their new motorcycles. They had a low center of gravity and great handling. BMW tried to acquire one of every motorcycle it made and return them to their original condition. The collection starts with their earliest models and runs through their most recent offerings.

They have also assembled an extraordinary collection of old films that tell the story of motorcycle racing.

Some collections were put together by official institutions. The government of the city of Krakow in Poland has assembled a collection of historical paintings. For many years Poland was a divided country. Part of it belonged to Russia, part to Germany and part to Austria. One way to keep some sense of national solidarity was to put together a collection of paintings that told the story of the Polish people. They selected paintings that were very large. They wanted the size of the paintings to give the viewer a feeling that Polish history was important.

During the European Renaissance wealthy merchants and banking families began collecting objects from Italy's classical history.

Many of the private collections that got started in the Renaissance were symbols of social importance for the ruling families. Eventually collectors became concerned with the future of their collections. They worried about what would happen to these works when they were no longer around to care for them. Some collectors built their own museums; others donated their collections to museums that already existed. Many modern museums can trace their history to these early individual collectors.



Well-funded museums and wealthy societies can collect whatever they please—things that most individuals could never afford.

There is, however, at least one area where the average person can collect on a scale that is always intellectually and financially rewarding—and that is the stamp.

## STAMPS OF APPROVAL

Worldwide, over 200 million people collect stamps. At present there are more than 500,000 different stamps and thousands of new designs are being issued each year.

Collectors consider stamps to be a great source of education. You can learn about history. You can learn about geography. You can meet virtually every animal on the planet. You can get a good look at famous movie stars and top athletes.



When you consider how many rich and famous people collect stamps it's easy to see how stamps can bring you into the best social circles. And when you look at the prices being paid for stamps you can see how a proper collection can be a source of great wealth.

Before the introduction of the postage stamp the person receiving a letter paid the postage, which meant that lots of mail was refused. Charges were based on the distance the letter traveled and its weight.

In 1837, Sir Rowland Hill presented a report to the Queen of England calling for radical changes in the British postal system. He realized that the distance the letter traveled and its weight were not the main costs.

The major expense was in the handling and sorting of the letter. When a letter was refused it went up and back without any revenue for the government. To solve the problem Sir Rowland introduced the first prepaid postage stamp. All letters that were carried within Great Britain traveled for a fixed rate which was a penny for each half-ounce. His stamps were an immediate success and letter writing increased throughout the nation.



Sir Rowland designed the first stamp himself. It

featured a crowned profile of England's Queen Victoria, was printed in black ink and sold for one penny. It became known as the "Penny Black". Millions of Penny Blacks were issued. Although Penny Blacks are highly regarded by stamp collectors they are not that rare. But if you happen to have one and it's in good condition you will probably be able to auction it off for about \$20,000.

Because Great Britain was the first country to issue postage stamps it was unnecessary to put the words "Great Britain" on the stamp. And they still don't.

What Sir Rowland did not anticipate was how easy it was to remove the mark that was put on the stamp to show that it had been used. In fact,



using chemicals to wash off the cancellation marks turned into a small industry. The Royal Stamp Collection in England has a stamp that was cleaned and used three times. Eventually Sir Rowland changed the Penny Black to the Penny Red because it was more difficult to remove the cancellation marks. Sir Rowland also came up with the idea for the letterbox into which the letter carrier delivered the mail.

Only two years after the first British stamps were printed, the Swiss cantons of Zurich and Geneva began issuing postage stamps. Within a short time Switzerland's postal service became one of the most efficient organizations in the world.



The United States issued its first stamps in 1847. A five-cent stamp with a picture of Benjamin Franklin and a ten-cent stamp with George Washington.

## THE BASIC SYSTEM

The earliest stamps were printed in sheets. When you wanted a stamp you had to cut it out of the sheet. The British Post Office developed a

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machine that produced little holes around the edges of the stamp. They are called perforations and make it much easier to separate one stamp from another.

During the second half of the 1800s almost every country on the planet began issuing stamps and their popularity led to many innovations. Italy began experimenting with airmail.

The United States started the first regular airmail service and the first regularly issued airmail stamps. Shortly after, the special delivery stamp was introduced which promised next day delivery.

Stamps can be divided into two major categories. Definitive stamps, which are mass-produced and in circulation for many years, are the most common stamps in any nation.

The second group is made up of commemorative stamps. They are only issued once and in a limited edition. Usually of greater artistic merit than the definitive, they are designed to honor a specific person, event, or subject.

The first commemorative stamp was the 5-cent scarlet locomotive issued by Peru in 1871. It marked the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first railway line in South America.



The second commemorative stamp was issued by New South Wales to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the New South Wales colony in Australia.

The next commemoratives came from Hong Kong. Dozens of countries in Latin America issued commemoratives for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus.

When the U.S. Postal Service listed the "Most



Popular U.S. Commemorative Stamps," the popularity was judged not by the number of stamps printed but by the number saved by collectors. The winner

was Elvis. Wildflowers did well. Marilyn Monroe was as popular as ever. And Bugs Bunny was right behind her.

Stamps are also categorized by their condition. A "mint" stamp is one that is in the same condition as when it was issued. The inks should be strong and not faded by sunlight. The images on the stamps should be centered on the paper. The more centered the printing the more valuable the stamp. Check the perforations along the edges and make sure that none of the teeth are missing and that they are of uniform length. No stains. No tears. No folds. No pinholes. In general stamps that are in mint condition will bring a greater price.

Stamps that have not been put into the mail, but the gum on the back has been disturbed, or there is minor damage, are described as "unused". Stamps which show postal marks or cancellation marks are called "used" stamps. Normally, used stamps are less valuable, but that is not always the case. Some used stamps can be worth thousands of dollars.

## COLLECTING

Within a year of the issuance of the first stamp there is evidence that stamp collecting had begun. An 1841 newspaper



advertisement in The Times of London was placed by a young lady who wanted to purchase cancelled postage stamps. She stated that her intention was to use them as wallpaper for her dressing room. That might have been her intention or she might have been in the illegal business of removing the cancellations and reselling the stamps.

Stamp collecting began with British schoolboys who were fascinated with stamps from other countries. At about the same time a teacher in a Paris school encouraged his students to collect stamps of other countries and paste them on their world maps. Societies for stamp collectors were formed in Paris and Brussels.

Serious collectors were concentrating on the

stamps of individual countries and issuing the first lists of stamps. Brown's catalog, issued in the 1860s, listed 2,400 different stamps. The standard Scott or Minkus catalogues, issued in the United States, now list more than 200,000 different stamps.



Because of the sheer number of stamps, the physical space they would take up, and their extraordinary cost, most stamp collectors concentrate on a specific area rather than attempt a general collection. They may collect the stamps of a single nation or a continent. They may focus on a specific time period. They may center their collection on a specific subject matter, like flowers, or flags or film stars. This approach is called topical collecting and during the past 50 years it has become both popular and profitable for the collectors.

**SHOW ME THE MONEY**

Stamps that were issued between 1840 and 1875 are some of the most valuable stamps in the world. They are historically important and rare. The one cent Black on Magenta issued by British Guiana is considered to be the world's rarest and most expensive stamp.

The British colony was running short of stamps and couldn't wait for a fresh supply from London. So the Postmaster General asked a local newspaper to print an emergency stock. Each stamp was initialed by a post office employee as security against forgeries.

Over the years collectors began to realize that there might be only one example of this stamp left. In 1922, Count Philippe Ferrari took a break from making race cars and purchased the stamp for \$30,000. In 1970, it went to a group of collectors for \$280,000.



In 1980, it was purchased at auction by the millionaire John E. DuPont who paid \$935,000.

But he didn't get to see it often because he is serving a 30-year prison term for murdering a friend. Along with the distinction of having owned the world's rarest stamp, he also holds the record for the richest American ever convicted of murder.

Another category of stamp that is worth millions of times its weight in gold are stamps that contain printer's errors. In 1918, the United States Post Office announced that it would issue a new twenty-four cent stamp. It commemorated the first regularly scheduled airmail service and was the first airmail stamp. The day before it was to be issued a stamp collector showed up at the post office and asked if the new stamps were in. The clerk said yes and sold him a sheet of 100 stamps. The collector's heart skipped a beat when he realized that the plane in the center of the stamp had been printed upside down. He



tried to buy more but this was the only sheet with the error that had somehow slipped passed the printer's inspection.

The plane was a Curtiss JN-4 biplane, known as a "Jenny" and the stamp with the error is known as the "Inverted Jenny". It is one of the most famous and highly valued of all U.S. stamps. In 2002 a block of four Inverted Jenny stamps sold for two and a half million dollars. Not bad for a 96 cent investment.

The Central Intelligence Agency of the United States, better known as the CIA, has its own stamp story. Some people say it's not true, some people say it is. Conflicting opinions are often part of CIA history.

In 1985 a few CIA workers went to buy stamps for their office. One of them noticed that the stamps they had bought had a printer's error. They were one-dollar stamps that showed a glowing candle lamp. But the stamps the CIA guys got had the glow in the wrong place. Each agent kept one stamp, the rest were sold to a stamp dealer and



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the money divided. When the CIA found out what had happened they asked the agents to return them. Some refused and were fired.

### STAMP COLLECTING IN CHINA



Today there are over 20 million stamp collectors in China and their numbers are growing every year. The All-China Stamp

C o l l e c t o r s Federation has over 45,000 local offices.

Every year in the Chinese calendar is designated by an animal whose spirit controls the progress of the year. And each year the Chinese government marks the New Year with the publication of a New Year stamp. But before the stamp is issued it must be blessed by the gods and protected from evil spirits, a process that requires a traditional ceremony. Then a few words from the officials. Finally the stamp is presented.

The designer autographs copies. Drums continue beating, and horns continue blaring, both of which are essential for keeping away evil spirits. And judging from first day sales the ceremony works.

Beijing is the nation's center for stamp collecting and there are two large markets where both professionals and serious amateurs gather.

The market even has a specialist who will authenticate any stamp you might be considering.



The government believes that stamp collecting is a valuable way for young people to learn about history and ethical values and they are promoting the activity in schools throughout the nation.

China's long history has given stamp designers a great deal of material to choose from. The natural landscape has been used for hundreds of designs. Significant events have been represented. And there are hundreds of stamps with pictures of important people.

Some of the most popular stamps for collectors in China are stamps that honor



h i s t o r i c occasions. The 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Long March, the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the victory of the War of Resistance Against Japan, the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of The People's Republic of China, and the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the postal service.

The fastest growing area for the buying and selling of stamps is the Internet. Stamp



collecting has been going on for over a hundred and fifty years and though each generation finds it new and exciting it is considered to be a

traditional subject.

From the ancient markets of Europe to cyberspace, collecting is constantly evolving. And how and what you collect expresses who you are, or who you want to be, both as an individual and as a society.

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#### 88 XINTIANDI

380 HUANG PI ROAD SOUTH  
SHANGHAI, CHINA  
TEL: 011.8621.5383.8833  
[WWW.88XINTIANDI.COM](http://WWW.88XINTIANDI.COM)

#### CONSULATE-GENERAL OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA IN NEW YORK

520 12TH AVENUE  
NEW YORK, NY 10036  
TEL: 212.244.9392  
[WWW.NYCONSULATE.PRCHINA.ORG/ENG/](http://WWW.NYCONSULATE.PRCHINA.ORG/ENG/)