

# The Exhibitor's Workshop

Alan C. Campbell

The Philatelic Exhibitor, Vol. 14, Nr. 3, July 2000

My impression is that the novice exhibitor these days - with help from Randy Neil's books, a subscription to *The Philatelic Exhibitor*, careful scrutiny of exhibits at national shows and attendance at the jury critiques - can often make a surprisingly competent debut. And with experience, he or she may quickly reach a level of confidence at which outside advice is no longer actively sought. But keeping one's own counsel exclusively can lead even the most experienced exhibitor into dead ends. It is a fatal trap to become too close to your material, storyline, and even a certain beloved font or matting technique. Only fresh eyes and a detached independent judgment can extricate us, then, when we stubbornly persist in including an ugly over-sized cover - showing some arcane marking that only a few specialists can appreciate, or because it has been a comforting presence in every previous incarnation of the exhibit, or because a dear friend lovingly deaccessioned it from his own collection. Sometimes only an outsider can be ruthless enough to make the final painful cuts.

In San Diego, exhibitors for many years have enjoyed access to a unique forum conducted at the home of veteran exhibitor Fran Adams. There, after a delightful meal prepared by his German-born wife, Barbara, and daughters, Kim and Garnet, (the privilege of selecting the entrée is often given to the guest of honor), the dining table is carefully wiped down, and the first victim lays out one frame from the exhibit he is currently working on. Those in attendance study it carefully, and after a round of insincere compliments, the feeding frenzy begins. Even if no one else in the room knows anything about the topic, much of the criticism is useful. Everyone brings something to the table; a good eye for graphic composition, an intolerance for spelling and grammar mistakes, an exhaustive, wide-ranging knowledge of postal history, access to state-of-the-art mounting supplies and windowing techniques, whatever. Even the most ignorant questions about a certain cover may cause the exhibitor to rethink his write-up, if through over familiarity he has failed to make clear that item's unique features. There are often heated arguments about the ideal amount of text on a page, with a guest who actively judges pleading for telegram-like concision facing off against a more ruminative type, who would like an engaged onlooker to be able to get primary education about the field from viewing just this one exhibit.

In theory, each guest has the opportunity to lay out one frame, but typically at any given time, only a few of the participants will be actively reworking their exhibits. A guest might, for example, have brought only one problematic page, which at its last public showing proved to be a real eyesore. If at his last two outings, the exhibit looked flat because of bad lighting, he might bring different samples of a brighter paper or a punchier matting stock for review and comment. Advice may be given on the archival papers locally available which best take laser printing. Another exhibitor might bring proof printouts of the same page - with subtle changes in the title positioning, style, and font - to compare and contrast. There is no substitute, though, for laying out a full frame, so the sequence of pages can be studied and if necessary rearranged to achieve the best overall composition, balance and flow. The gleaming cherry dining table is an adequate substrate, although a real upright frame would be ideal. In a dense exhibit, it is often necessary to maximize the actual page size beyond the standard 8- 1/2" x 11", and some of us have discovered through painful

experience that the plastic runners on the new frame backing paper are rarely attached in a regular spacing. (The sickening result is that regardless of how carefully one computes it, the titles on the top row of pages sometimes get overlapped and covered-up by aluminum).

Of course, the exhibitors' workshop is most useful to the individual who is either just starting to pull together a new exhibit or is undertaking a major remounting of an existing collection, because the input gathered from critiquing the first frame can then be efficiently utilized as the subsequent frames are worked up. There is usually a core group of regulars and an invited guest, who has been sought out and sounded out by Fran Adams as someone who is thick-skinned enough to take all the criticism ladled out, sieve through it, and find something of use. Although the disputation can get heated, we always part as friends, often going away with a renewed appreciation for each other's fund of arcane knowledge. Any exhibitor in San Diego can request an invitation for a critique, and on several occasions we have reviewed the exhibits of philatelists visiting from out of town. Meetings are of necessity irregular and timed according to the WSP show schedule in California.

Personally, I have found these workshops to be enormously helpful in developing my own exhibit over the years, and not just from the criticism directed at my own pages. For those of us who are not judges, the exercise of occasionally being forced to hone your powers of concentration in order to offer useful criticism to someone else has its own rewards. Somewhere down the line, each of us in our exhibits will face a dilemma. Having attended the workshops, we may already know how to solve it, and if not, at least know whom to ask. My guess is that most successful exhibitors across the country have cultivated their own mentors, or mentor others themselves. Wherever possible, I would encourage them to consider trying a format similar to the exhibitors' workshop in San Diego, where barbs traded in a congenial setting have produced surprising results.