The Malcolm MacGregor collection of autographed stamps

By Daniel Piazza

In the summer of 1946, stamp collector Malcolm MacGregor began sending stamps of the world to the individuals pictured on them, with a request for their autograph.

MacGregor's quest for personally signed stamps became a lifelong passion. He eventually obtained more than a thousand of them, and bequeathed his collection to the Smithsonian Institution.

Some of MacGregor's autographed stamps are mounted with the covers in which they were mailed to him, revealing the numerous ways he reached his subjects: through friends, consulates and embassies, private secretaries and other intermediaries.

In the post-World War II era, he captured the autographs of former royalty living in exile and leaders of emerging nations, such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India.

The most difficult autograph for MacGregor to obtain was that of Gwoya Jungara, a central Australian Aborigine also known as "One Pound Jimmy."

A famous photo of Jimmy, taken in 1935 by a photographer for the travel magazine Walkabout, appeared on an 8½-penny stamp issued in 1950 (Scott 225).

An Australian Native Affairs Branch patrol officer finally succeeded in securing Jimmy's thumbprint "autograph" for MacGregor's collection.

All of us can probably recognize a little of ourselves in Malcolm MacGregor's pursuit. Aren't we all in it for the thrill of the chase?

MacGregor once wrote about himself as a hunter of sorts; stamps and signatures were his quarry.

Some of his best trophies will be on view in the Stamps Around the Globe section of the William H. Gross Stamp Gallery, scheduled to open in 2013 at the National Postal Museum in Washington, D.C.

Sir Winston Churchill's autograph on a 15-centavo El Salvadoran stamp commemorating the Quebec Conference of 1943 (Scott 609), at which Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King laid the foundation for the D-Day invasions.

Daniel Piazza is a Smithsonian curator of philately.

The National Postal Museum is devoted to presenting the colorful and engaging history of the nation's mail service and showcasing one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of stamps and philatelic material in the world. It is located at 2 Massachusetts Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C., across from Union Station.

For more information, visit the museum web site at www.postalmuseum.si.edu.