National Postal Museum prepares ‘Favorite Finds’ exhibit

By Cheryl Ganz

Examine a philatelic collection closely and you will peer into its owner’s lifelong passions. Without fail, one item excites the collector more than any other. Its appeal might be in its detail or beauty, its rarity, or even in the story of the roads it has traveled. “Favorite Finds” will be the first special exhibition held in the rotating gallery of the William H. Gross Stamp Gallery at the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum. The exhibit brings together an assortment of cherished items, each from a different home, all with different stories.

“Favorite Finds” exhibitors include members of the Council of Philatelists, philatelic curators, and museum supporters. The exhibit will be on display from Sept. 22 through early January 2014. Why create this special exhibit, which will be displayed for only four months? The answer goes to exhibit types.

Ken Gilbart describes his 1862 3c Washington on fancy valentine cover: “Wow! That’s what I thought when I saw this magnificent valentine. It’s like a fragile, lacey doily. That it survived the mail in perfect condition is miraculous.”

Janet Klug comments on her favorite find, a 1937 Tin Can Mail cover from Tonga: “The fantastic artwork reminds me that, regardless of weather, outrigger canoes carried mail between ships and Niuafo’ou (Tonga).”
Museums create both permanent and temporary exhibits. A permanent exhibit remains for several years, perhaps even 15 to 20 years. A temporary exhibit might be displayed for only a few months or a couple years, sometimes with objects changing during the duration.

Dedicating a space for special, short-term exhibits offers curators a chance to tell different stories or associate exhibits with anniversaries. It also provides a chance to draw new audiences to the museum and bring other visitors back to see what is new.

For example, "Fire & Ice: Hindenburg and Titanic," a temporary exhibit currently on display in the National Postal Museum's philatelic galleries, has attracted considerable media attention. Many new visitors have come to see the rare mail and objects salvaged from the two iconic transports.

With this special exhibition, as with some of those in the past, there is a free takeaway printed piece for visitors, an online companion story, and a printed exhibition catalog. "Fire & Ice: Hindenburg and Titanic," closes in January 2014.

"Favorite Finds" is organized in a way never before done at the museum.

Each item on view comes from a different person's collection. Each has a great story that will appeal to collectors and noncollectors.

Each stamp, cover, or document is amazing. The captions are particularly appealing. Written in first person, it feels as though the collector is speaking.

The captions describe the item and also tell why the collector considers it a favorite. The many reasons collectors cherish an item include its aesthetic appeal or details that make it special, the many places it has traveled, how it reveals history, or the story it tells.

The exhibit includes spectacular items: a newspaper printed by Benjamin Franklin that is the earliest known example sent through the British post to Boston, exquisitely engraved die proofs, stamp and cachet artwork, a charming Valentine, Hawaiian Missionary mail, a double bisect cover from Mexico, and even a metal container with revenues for imported opium cigarettes.

Particularly spectacular are three postmasters' provisionals from towns near Washington, D.C. These items and more will delight visitors and, hopefully, inspire some new collectors.

Cheryl Ganz is the Smithsonian chief 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.