

Philatelic Definition of Postal History

Michael Laurence

Winton M. Blount Symposium on Postal History, November 4, 2006

Smithsonian National Postal Museum, Washington, D.C.

In the vocabulary of the stamp collector, the phrase “postal history” very specifically describes envelopes that have passed through the mails. Even to a lot of stamp collectors, this definitely seems odd. Well, it IS odd. This isn’t postal history, these are old envelopes. Postal history embraces a lot more than old envelopes.

Used envelopes with stamps on them—“covers” are what collectors call them—are certainly a part of postal history. But to call covers “postal history” to the exclusion of everything else, as stamp collectors tend to do, is to confuse artifact with archeology.

There’s a lot more to postal history than collectibles. But even if you limit your focus to collectible objects, there’re a lot more postal history artifacts than just covers. Covers are a PART of postal history, but so are stamps and wanted posters and badges and pillar boxes and maps and all manner of other materials.

But when a stamp collector tells you he collects “postal history,” you know he means he collects covers, not mailbags.

Getting the phrase “postal history” to apply solely and exclusively to one small category of postal collectibles was the life’s work of a single individual, an Englishman, Robson Lowe.

Robbie Lowe was a charming, prolific and media-savvy stamp dealer who flourished in the middle decades of the 20th century. It was his conception that rebranding covers as “postal history” would lend them a dignity that could attract attention and justify higher prices. Through his extensive publishing and auction operations, and in a long lifetime of after-dinner speaking, Robbie Lowe did everything he could to promote the transformation of covers into postal history. Simultaneously there was a huge increase in the popularity of covers, and the increased demand had a big impact on prices.

Last May in *The Chronicle of the U.S. Classic Postal Issues*, a scholarly journal devoted to 19th century United States stamps and covers, philatelic historian Herbert Trenchard contributed an important article that traced the evolution of collector taste by examining the awards won by classic U.S. stamp exhibits at U.S. international stamp shows going back to 1913. In the earliest stamp exhibits, covers were not usually shown. When they did appear, they were mostly in exhibits of scarce postmaster provisional or local stamps, where an on-cover

example was thought necessary to support the authenticity of the stamp it bore. So the sole purpose of the cover was to show that the STAMP was real.

Trenchard tracked the increasing popularity of cover collecting, decade by decade, through the 20th century. At the San Francisco international show, held in 1996, the best-in-show U.S. award went to an entry in the postal history category, a first in U.S. stamp exhibiting. Trenchard concluded this was the point at which postal history had won the day.

And victory was sweeping. At the next U.S. international stamp show, held last May right here in Washington, just down the street in fact, most of the objects on exhibit were not stamps but covers—now universally rebranded as postal history.

The narrowness of the philatelic definition of postal history is enforced by the groups that put on stamp shows and judge stamp exhibits. The body that governs competitive stamp exhibiting internationally, the Fédération Internationale de Philatélie (FIP, we call it), tells us the following. I'm quoting now. "Postal history exhibits contain material carried by, and related to, official, local or private mails. Such exhibits generally emphasize routes, rates, markings, usages and other postal aspects..." Unquote.

If you put anything other than covers in your postal history exhibit, you do so at your peril. Quoting FIP again: "a Postal History exhibit may contain, where strictly necessary, maps, prints, decrees and similar associated materials. Such items must have direct relation to the chosen subject..." This very narrow definition excludes whole categories of artifacts that any thoughtful observer would classify as postal history.

The problem is, we philatelists don't have a better alternative. If you meet a pretty girl at a party you're not likely to tell her you collect used envelopes. That smacks too much of the dumpster. It lacks GRAVITAS. Some collectors get around the problem by calling covers USAGES, an odd term intending to suggest that the cover illustrates how its stamp got used. But usage is a different word from use, and its application in this context is in my opinion a barbarism. I'd rather say postal history, even though I know that too is an abuse of the language. And I think most collectors feel the same. We just don't have a better substitute. Robbie Lowe would be proud.