Cartophilately: The World of Maps in Miniature

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CARTOPHILATELY: THE WORLD OF MAPS IN MINIATURE

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My dad was, life-long, an avid stamp collector. In his last year we spent many companionable hours together working on his stamps. He was always sure that my librarian instincts for collecting and organizing could be stimulated into the same passion. But I have always been more intrigued by maps.

Now I am the reluctant owner of his large stamp collection, and still am more interested in maps than in postage stamps. To my surprise, I have discovered that these two interests do in fact intersect—in a specialized sport known as ‘cartophilately’.

Cartophilately is the collection of postage stamps which display maps. Stamp collectors are quite similar to map collectors, in that some are generalists and collect anything and everything, while others choose to specialize in certain areas or certain themes. Cartophilately is one of the more challenging thematic specialities in stamp collecting, although overshadowed in popularity by the more plebeian collections of dogs on stamps, birds on stamps and modes of transportation on stamps.

Just like map librarians and archivists, cartophilatelists have their own associations with educational and networking objectives. The largest group in North America is The CartoPhilatelic Society <http://www.mapsonstamps.com>, with approximately 115 members. Like ACMLA, they publish a regular periodical, The New CartoPhilatelist, to share brief articles and information about events and new releases. And very like the ACMLA Bulletin, some of these articles are quite scholarly and well researched. A check of the affiliation of some of the authors contributing to The New CartoPhilatelist indicates many retired academics and professional cartographers are actively engaged in this pastime, explaining the emphasis on research and good writing. High quality colour illustrations of new stamp issues are critical to the appeal and information value of The New CartoPhilatelist.

Also very similar to map librarians, the cartophilatelists are engaged in significant collaborative projects parallel to our union catalogue development and digitization initiatives. A ‘Maps on Stamps Checklist’, many years in the making, attempts to list and describe every known map stamp. At latest revision, the checklist contains 37,000 entries—a number amazing to the uninitiated! The Checklist is shared with Society members in Excel spreadsheet format and is keyword searchable using standard Microsoft functions, although authority control is weak.

Worthy of note, the stamps described in the Checklist are classified into categories:

- **A** – A generally good quality, identifiable map that is either the main feature of the stamp or a supporting or secondary feature

- **AR** – Reproduction of old maps or charts

- **O** – All other maps such as tiny maps, outline maps, stylized maps, globes, emblems (such as the UN emblem or symbol), stylized globes with no surface features identified, views of the earth from space (either partial or full view of the earth), views of old cities showing street or road layouts

- **OC** – Mapmakers and map making equipment

The category O reveals another interesting issue within the world of cartophilately—there are questions of definition even here. Some collectors do not consider a stamp to be a map stamp if it displays only a symbolized globe or an unrecognizable bit of stylized cartography. Even plans are excluded as not true maps. Early issues of The New CartoPhilatelist contain several articles debating “what is a map?” Purists in the hobby will collect only non-O categories, insisting that a map
must be a representation of the real world, drawn to scale. How frequently have we echoed this same definition to our first year geo students and yet our map collections also sometimes stretch the definition to include ‘map-like objects’ because of their beauty or their oddity! Figure 1 shows an example which a purist collector would reject as a map stamp. Although clearly utilizing the familiar cartographic style of Michelin, this stamp represents a road map rather than portraying a section of a real map.

Browsing through the article topics appearing in The New CartoPhilatelist shows further parallels with the world of map librarians. There is an article about different ways of portraying relief, illustrated with examples of map stamps that show ‘molehills’, contour lines, hypsometric tinting and hill shading. The stamps in this article remind me very much of the little colour illustrations providing examples of different ways of portraying relief which appear in our own cataloguing bible, Cartographic Materials. There are articles about map projection, illustrated with stamps that show Mercator, Universal Transverse Mercator and cordiform examples. There are articles about famous cartographers like Coronelli and Captain Cook and their maps on stamps. There are articles about map stamps that feature explorers and surveying, navigation instruments, prime meridians, latitude and longitude, geodesy and even a few stamps that celebrate geomatics (Figure 2).

One area of cartophilately particularly interests me, very much in parallel with my map librarian interests, and that is the political uses of maps (and maps on stamps).

Those who have enjoyed Mark Monmonier’s book How to Lie with Maps will appreciate the many ways in which ambitious governments have asserted their sovereignty and extended their territorial claims through the power of the map. People tend to believe maps. Because they are compelling but not widely understood, they are perceived as authoritative and scientific. Many countries have used this cachet of authority to bolster nationalism within their boundaries and to lay claim to neighbouring territories outside their boundaries.
Argentina is an excellent example of a government that consistently re-enforces its own territorial claims through its official maps. For many decades, Argentina has resolutely included the Falkland Islands (always labelled Islas Malvinas) and a large wedge of Antarctica on every national map. Their claim to the Falklands has been disputed by the United Kingdom, to the extent of war in 1982. Their claim to Antarctica is in direct opposition to the international Antarctic Treaty of 1961 which protects that continent from political sovereignty disputes. But for reasons of national pride, both internally and externally, Argentina continues its cartographic assertions.

This brings me to my only professional experience using a map stamp. I was presenting a session on ‘How Maps Work’ to a group of museum docents, in anticipation of an upcoming rare map display. The docents were very experienced and knowledgeable about how to view and interpret works of art, but unsure how to do the same for maps. We talked about maps as social constructs—man-made entities intended to influence the viewer—very much like works of art. To illustrate the power of the map in asserting territorial claims I used the example of the Argentine government map, enveloping Islas Malvinas and the wedge of Antarctica.

And then, courtesy of my dad’s stamp collection, I showed the same government map replicated on several of Argentina’s official postage stamps (Figure 3). The reaction of one docent was an immediate, “Double whammy!” In a eureka moment, he recognized both the power of the map to assert Argentina’s territorial claims and the power of the postage stamp to re-enforce and advertise this same claim, effectively and cheaply, both at home and throughout the world. Powerful propaganda on the face of an innocuous envelope!

So, now aware that there exists a parallel universe of cartographic interest, how might a map librarian make use of cartophilately? The Argentina example suggests that stamps can be a very effective addition to a teaching session, especially in the area of political cartography. They can also be an interesting supplement to a map display, as examples exist that seem to parallel just about every possible topic. Several websites provide searchable collections of images.

Or for the space conscious, perhaps map stamps offer a new form of poor man’s map collecting. Certainly my collection of Mercator map stamps vastly exceeds my (nonexistent) collection of Mercator maps, and it fits in a shoebox!
Notes

1Some cartophilatelists who ACMLA members might recognize: Dr. Norman Nicholson (University of Western Ontario, *Canadian Geographer* and *Maps of Canada*); John P. Snyder (Cartographer at United States Geological Survey and author of many works on projection).


Welcome!
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