



WHY I LIKE STAMP COLLECTING

by Ayn Rand

(Novelist Ayn Rand, like so many of us, collected stamps in her childhood, quit for several decades, and in middle age resumed collecting. The following is excerpted from an article which first appeared in the Minkus Stamp Journal in 1971. The text was obtained on the Internet; it has been abridged.)

I started collecting stamps when I was ten years old, but had to give up by the time I was twelve. In all the time since, I never gave thought to resuming the hobby. It left only one after-effect: I was unable to throw away an interesting looking stamp. So, I kept saving odd stamps, all these years; I put them into random envelopes and never looked at them again.

Then, about a year-and-a-half ago, I met a bright little girl named Tammy, who asked me – somewhat timidly, but very resolutely – whether I received letters from foreign countries and, if I did, would I give her the stamps. I promised to send her my duplicates....

Once I started sorting out the stamps I had accumulated, I was hooked. It was an astonishing experience to find my enthusiasm returning after more than fifty years, as if there has been no interruption. Only now the feeling had the eagerness of childhood combined with the full awareness, confidence and freedom of age.... No, I have not forgotten Tammy: I send her piles of duplicates every few months, and I feel very grateful to her.

In all those years I had never found a remedy for mental fatigue. Now, if I feel tired after a whole day of writing, I spend an hour with my stamp albums and it makes me able to resume my writing for the rest of the evening. A stamp album is a miraculous brain-restorer.

I am often asked why people like stamp collecting. So widespread a hobby can obviously have many different motives. I can answer only in regard to my own motives, which I have observed also in some of the stamp collectors I have met.

The pleasure lies in a certain special way of using one's mind. Stamp collecting is a hobby for busy, purposeful, ambitious people – because, in patterns, it has the essential elements of a career, but transposed to a clearly delimited, intensely private world.... A career requires the ability to sustain a purpose over a long period of time, through many separate steps, choices, decisions, adding up to a steady progression to a goal.... Purposeful people cannot rest by doing nothing.... They seldom find pleasure in single occasions, such as a party or a show or even a vacation, a pleasure that ends right then and there, with no further consequences.

The minds of such people require continuity, integration, a sense of moving forward. They are accustomed to working long-range.... Yet they need relaxation and rest from their constant, single-tracked drive. What they need is another track, but for the same train – that is,

a change of subject, but using part of the same method of mental functioning. Stamp collecting fulfills that need....

The course of a career depends on one's own action predominantly, but not exclusively. A career requires a struggle; it involves tensions, disappointments, obstacles which are challenging, at times, but are often ugly, painful, senseless – particularly, in an age like the present, when one has to fight too frequently against the dishonesty, the evasion, the irrationality of the people one deals with. In stamp collecting, one experiences the rare pleasure of independent action without irrelevant burdens or impositions. Nobody can interfere with one's collection, nobody need to be considered or questioned or worried about. The choices, the work, the responsibility – and the enjoyment – are one's own. So is the great sense of freedom and privacy.

For this very reason, when one deals with people as a stamp collector, it is on a cheerful, benevolent basis. People cannot interfere, but they can be very helpful and generous. There is a sense of "brotherhood" among stamp collectors, of a kind that is very unusual today: the brotherhood of holding the same values....

The pursuit of the unique, the unusual, the different, the rare is the motive power of stamp collecting. It endows the hobby with the suspense and excitement of a treasure hunt – even on the more modest level of collecting, where the treasure may be simply an unexpected gift from a friend, which fills the one blank spot, completing a set....

There is a constant change in the world of stamps, and constant motion, and a brilliant flow of color, and a spectacular display of human imagination....

