

Bonus: Philatelic Playtime

Please join me on a carefree jaunt into philatelic play land. In the next few minutes I will show you one of the many fine pastimes of stamp-collecting. There seem to be any number of games philatelists can play. This one I call Soaking, Drying and Sorting.

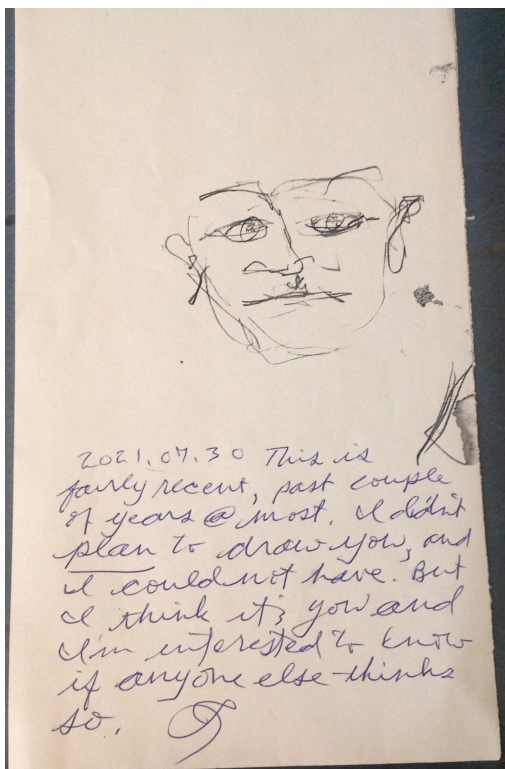


The game started after I received a holiday gift from my older brother Jonathan. He, my late father and I are/were the three collectors in the family.



Three Fiske philatelists (photo circa 2000).

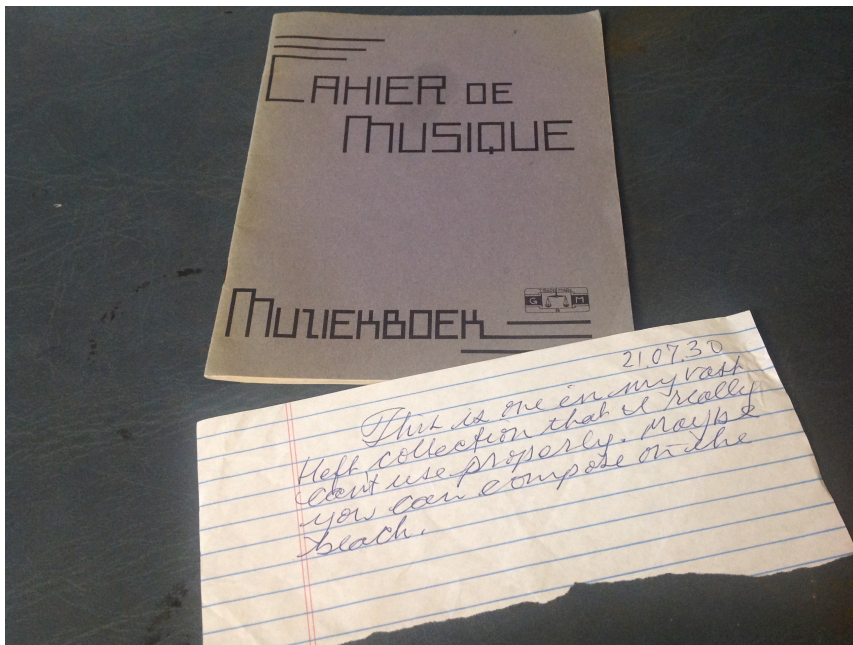
After opening the thick FedEx envelope, I first made my way through accompanying material my brother sent for my perusal. There was a sketch he had done which he thinks looks a lot like me (below). I'll let you decide.



He also included a New York Times story on the recent sale of two hot philatelic properties — the Inverted Jennies block and the One Cent Black and Magenta from British Guiana (see right).

But wait! There's more.





At left is an empty copy book for music notation. To the right is a newspaper marriage announcement in The New York Times for my daughter Molly and her Jeffrey.

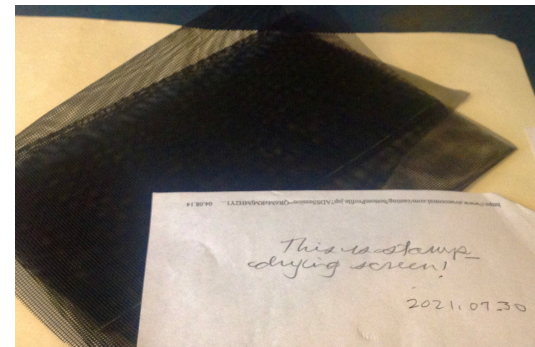


Thanks, Jonathan. I can never

have too many of those.

OK, on to stamps. Notice the item illustrated at right: screening material to use when drying stamps. You'll see more of this shortly.

The remaining contents of the package was a half-dozen legal-size envelopes bulging with stamps. Many stamps were just cut off the edge of their covers, with the paper backing still attached. A quick inspection told me these were stamps from all over the world — not a surprise, considering that brother Jonathan worked for Rotary International for years, in Evanston and Zurich, Switzerland. He scavenged and accumulated stamps from Rotary's global correspondence, with some competition in Evanston. "At least one fellow staff member had formed a special friendship with folks in the incoming mailroom for that purpose." he noted.



A couple of envelopes Jonathan marked "The Easy Part." These envelopes contained stamps already soaked off their paper backing. The stamps were ready to be sorted and added to my collection. Easy. Fun!

But Jonathan added this note: "Look at the other envelopes first." OK, OK. I picked up one of the other envelopes, which Jonathan had labeled "The Not



The easy part.

So Easy Part.” Out of the envelope poured stamps still stuck to their paper backing. They had to be soaked!

(A parenthetical note: These stamps were all “old” — that is, old enough still to come with dry gum on the back, which you lick to activate before affixing the stamp to the envelope. Gum is pretty much unknown in these days of self-stick stamps.

Collectors know about these stamps, of course, along with people “of a certain age.” Note to collectors: Don’t try and soak off a self-sticking stamp. It won’t work. This chore requires the use of fluids that could damage the stamp, I’m told. I don’t even bother to try. If I want to collect a modern used stamp, I just scissor a tight rectangle around the stamp — taking care not to cut into it — and display it that way in my stockbook.)



The not so easy part.



Here’s a freeze-frame view of the soaking-off process. Above left, I have loaded the stamps into a flat cooking pan; above right, I add water to cover the stamps in the pan completely; lower left, I impatiently check the stamps after 10 minutes or so to see if they have loosened their gummy grip on

the paper backing; lower right, I take the stamps that have loosened or floated free and transfer them to the drying screen.





Behold the result, left. Notice how I have suspended the screen between two folding tables, securing each side with heavy granite bookends. Underneath is a towel where a few spillover stamps are drying. On the table at left, in front of my ever-present coffee cup, is the detritus of paper backing that is suitable for recycling. (For

more on this topic, go to the FMF Stamp Project blog post of March 2020, "The Art and Craft of Soaking Off Stamps.")

It doesn't take long for stamps to dry, particularly with air circulating through the screen. (Good idea, Jonathan!) However, as you gather your dry stamps into a pile, you will notice many of them are as curled as kettle chips. They are in no condition to be sorted! If you're not careful, you could crease them as you try to flatten them. That's where The New Columbia Encyclopedia comes in handy (see below). Carefully uncurl the stamps and pile them up, one on top of the other, then place the heavy tome on top of the pile. using a protective paper towel. Wait a half hour, and they're ready for sorting! See in the

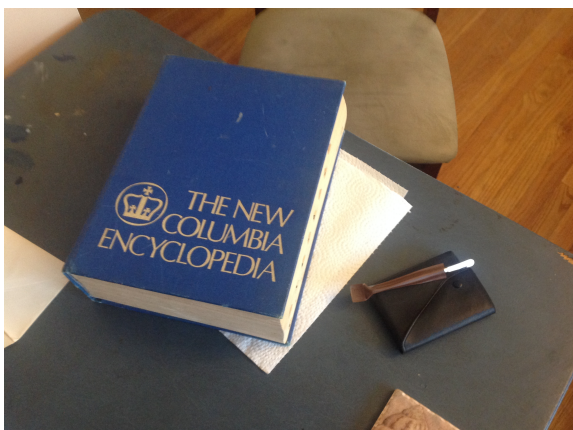


image (right) how tame the flattened stamps are. Now let the



magic begin!

(Brother Jonathan, reviewing a draft of this essay, points out: “It’s probably better that the piece not get into the design of the machine, but another layer of screen on top can keep the stamps from curling. ...” Another good idea, Jonathan!)

When I say “let the magic begin,” I mean the process of bringing order out of chaos, creating visual patterns and associations that generate aesthetic pleasure and cultural meaning. How’s that for a mystical take on stamp-collecting! You might as well say mystical, or metaphysical, because it’s not like there’s any practical

reason for doing any of this. The stamps all are common, of no real value. Any stamp “sets” I am able to draw out of this undifferentiated mass are bound to be incomplete. Some of the sets are quite beautiful, with pleasing color combinations and contrasts, as well as striking designs. But it’s all just a game, folks.

First thing is to start sorting. Since the Rotary mail that produced this collection came from multiple continents, I used that as my first sorting criterion — Asia, Europe, South America and so on. I began to identify stamps from similar sets, which is exciting to a stamp collector — like a prospector seeing the glitter of gemstones in the stream. OK, maybe not that exciting, but you get the idea. Below are more than a few partial sets of cheap philatelic gems I

picked out of the murky mass.



Starting with South America, below is a random partial set from Argentina circa 1977 (according

to my catalogue.) I find the changing colors around the line drawings of buildings quite ... soothing.



At right is a partial set from Brazil, also with a building motif. Left is a pretty humble group of Brazilian definitives. Note the stamp tongs. No collector sorting stamps should be



without tongs! Below left is another humble group of definitives from Uruguay, reproduced actual size.



I don't know who the statesmen are on stamps from Venezuela and Chile (right). I'm happy to present them because of the delicacy of the engraving and the pleasing contrasts of colors. Each color gives the face a different mood, doesn't it?



Moving on from South America, at left is a short set from Cyprus, featuring pleasant scenes on that fairly exotic island nation in the Mediterranean.



Below that is a group of definitives from Germany (left) depicting technology marvels. If you look closely you will see that the stamps are beautifully hand-engraved.

Sweden must have lots of enthusiastic Rotarians, because the stamps from their correspondence make up a fair share of the total. The series below features royalty. The beautifully



engraved faces radiate a strong sense of character: royal, yet personal and direct.



I'm not sure all four stamps in this floral group (right) belong to the same set, but they're a good enough match for me. Aren't the engravings exquisite?



Here's a peek at part of a Swedish set featuring traditional dress (left).

Wonderful drawings, eh?

At right is an entry from Finland, featuring geological artifacts. Eye-catching, don't you think?



Here are a couple of entries from Asia, both of which suggest by their numbers that Rotary was thriving in India and Japan in the 1970s and 1980s. The set of Indian definitives (left) presents a unifying design element: a monochrome subject sharply outlined on a stark white background, producing a modern effect.

The Japanese definitives (below) are instantly recognizable to collectors, not just because of the inscription "Nippon," but due to the design elements — small rectangles with iconic images on colorful backgrounds — that graced the nation's stamps for decades.





Yes, there are (and were) Rotarians in Australia! Below is a pleasant partial set picturing water transports. How about that hydrofoil racing



past the famed Sydney Opera House? Cool!

Don't forget the Antipodes. This New Zealand group (above) shows familiar or exotic crustaceans of that faraway land. Quiz question: What three design elements identify these stamps as part of the same set? (Answer: One, the common type style for name and value. Two, the border. Three, the theme.)

Well! That's enough excitement for this episode of the FMF Stamp Project. I leave you with this image (below). It's the pile of stamps that came out of the envelopes identified as "The Easy Part" — stamps Jonathan's neighbor helpfully soaked off their paper backing — and flattened. All I have to do is sort them and see what I come up with. (I already see some cheap gems gleaming in the pile.) Some fun — for another day.



A Weedy Postscript

In a recent note, brother Jonathan offered what came across to me as an almost zen-like meditation on soaking off stamps. Imagine! Read what he said here, and be amazed:

Here's some arcana; ... (T)here was the occasional postcard with an interesting stamp. Sophisticated soakers know very well that one key to success is avoiding any attempt to pull a stamp from the paper. If pulling is essential, for some reason, one always seeks to pull the paper off the stamp instead of vice versa. A slight residuum of paper on the back of a stamp is not much of a problem/ a residuum of stamp left on a postcard is a big problem - so a damp paper towel on the stamp at the corner of the sacred [it's in the file] postcard can loosen it to the point where the card can be pulled away from the stamp, if you're really, really careful.

As you contemplate the difference between pulling a stamp from its paper backing and vice versa, and removing a stamp without damaging an official Rotary postcard, you are entering a region of nuance and subtlety worthy of a Platonic dialogue.

THE FMF STAMP PROJECT CONTINUES