

My Strategy for Thematic Exhibiting

By Yukio Onuma

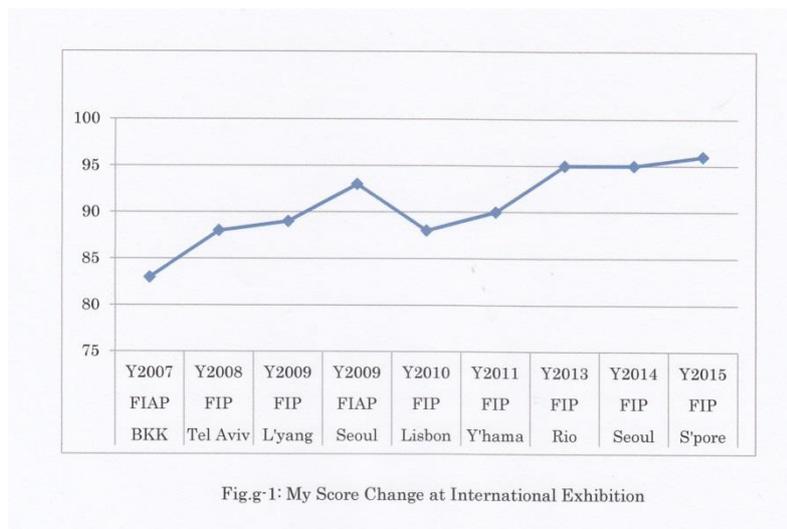
Introduction

At JAPEX2004 (National Exhibition), I first received a Gold Medal for my 3-frame thematic exhibit: “L. v. Beethoven-His life in a historical Context”. Nine years later at Brasiliana2013 (FIP World), I was the first Japanese to win LG in thematic class for 8-frame version of the same exhibit. In the following two years at Seoul and Singapore (both FIP World), I won LG consecutively. Within 10 years, I achieved my final goal of three LGs.

The chart (fig.1) shows all of my scores at FIP/FIAP exhibitions. You can see that the trend is on a gradual increase except a sharp rise at Seoul2009 (FIAP International)

What is the key to this achievement? I do believe three LGs for my exhibit was realized due to a well-devised strategy of allocating my limited resources (materials, money and time) in most effective way.

The objective of this article is to provide some useful reference to thematic exhibitors by showing my own strategic approach. There must be various routes to climb the top of the Everest but I hope this will serve as one of them to thematic exhibitors.



I. Strategy

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of strategic thinking in thematic philately. Here I want to elaborate my strategic approaches in three aspects: 1) theme

selection, 2) focusing 3) artistic quality.

First, “Strategic theme selection”:

If you choose a wrong strategy, you will never make up for it with tactics. The key points of thematic collection are variety and rarity of philatelic materials. It is extremely important to choose a theme for which abundant appropriate materials are available both in quality and quantity. The main reason why I choose Beethoven is quite simple. Beethoven and Mozart are the two outstanding composers for whom abundant philatelic materials are available. Then, why did I choose Beethoven? The answer is that the era of Beethoven was more turbulent than that of Mozart due to French revolution, Napoleonic wars and so forth. Although Beethoven was only 14 years younger than Mozart, it was time of transition from aristocratic to democratic society when artists were obliged to change their lifestyle drastically. Therefore, in case of Beethoven, I was able to expand scope of story lines better than that of Mozart.

Someone once commented, “It might be difficult to win a LG with such a limited scope of an individual’s history” However, by incorporating historical background, I was able to expand scope of my exhibit. I am convinced that my strategic choice was correct. At Seoul2014 a judge praised that adding historical background was very original. In hindsight, the inclusion of historical background gave depth and breadth to my exhibit.

Such themes as “Housing”, “Food” and “Clothing” have great advantage, because you can choose from a wide range of philatelic materials covering from pre-philately to modern items. But if you choose a theme of modern era, you have disadvantage because you cannot use rare classical materials. An ambitious exhibitor should choose his own theme very carefully in order to avoid stumbling blocks as he advances to higher level.

Second, “Single-minded focus on one theme”

Once you decide a theme, you should study it in depth. I have read not only Japanese books on Beethoven, but also major books published in English such as by A. W. Thayer, Barry Cooper, Maynard Solomon etc. Especially I carried out in depth studies of episodes which I took up in my exhibits utilizing book’s index. Also internet website information such as archives of Beethoven-Haus Bonn was helpful.

Talking about philatelic materials, I collected probably 3 to 4 times more materials than I actually used for my exhibit. Out of those abundant materials I selected good items

really appealing to my aesthetic sense. Available resources (material, money and time) being limited, it is advisable to focus on one carefully selected theme, as a proverb says “He, who chases two hares, catches neither”

Third, “Aiming at Artistic Exhibits”

Thematic exhibit is a fusion of “image and text”. It is a condensed art of various elements such as research ability, story construction, logic, conciseness and coherent layout. An exhibit must be a fine art composed of proper density (materials are neither overcrowded nor sparse), well-balanced blending of materials and text, and artistic layout using personal computer.

My principle of writing text is 3Cs; **C**lear, **C**orrect and **C**oncise. Though only 5 points are allotted for presentation, lineup of neat sheets creates halo effects (by Mr. José-Ramón Moreno) giving favorable impression to the exhibit as a whole.

II. Information Gathering

To get high score at competitive exhibition, it is absolutely imperative to gather firsthand information concerning jury’s way of thinking. There is no standard text book on this issue. I mostly learned from my experience. Before winning LG, I exhibited 13 times abroad visiting all of them regardless of distance from Japan, such as Bangkok, Tel Aviv, Luoyang, Seoul, Rio de Janeiro etc.

1) Jury appraisal

You should not miss jury appraisal, since it is the most important source of information. First, I ask overall score and its breakdown. (tbl.1) I rarely make counter argument as it often loses valuable time. I prefer to listen into jury’s comments as long as possible to find out what he has in his mind. When I ask something, I usually ask a general question such as “Please tell me what I should do to get better result”

Item	Description	Point
1. Treatment	1) Title and Plan	15
	2) Development	15
	3) Innovation	5
2. Knowledge and Research	1) Thematic Knowledge	15
	2) Philatelic Knowledge	15
3. Condition and Rarity	1) Condition	10
	2) Rarity	20
4. Presentation	1) Presentation	5
Total		100

tbl.1: Point Allocation in Thematic Philately

Critique is an excellent opportunity to find out how jury is viewing your exhibit. An exhibitor is usually aware of “his own eyes” or “visitor’s eyes”, but what really needed is accurate understanding of how judges perceive your exhibit, if you want to get high score.

Let me quote some specific instances.

If you are told that “This is an artist’s die proof. Can you find a sepia die proof?” Then, you should look for a sepia die proof. It is a wonder that if you become serious enough to search an item you can always find it to your pleasant surprise. Joy of discovery is true attraction of the hobby.

One of juries told me that “As far as Wagner is concerned you should use rarer stationery issued by Bayern than the one you are exhibiting.” I was panicked as I immediately noticed what he really meant. Actually the item was so expensive and I could not afford it at that time. I managed to buy the item eventually.

Once I was told that “This cancellation does not seem to be directly related to the main story” In thematic exhibit one sometimes cannot resist temptation to use certain rare items though not directly related to topics, especially when one wants to show off its rareness or wants to use it as a space filler. In these cases one should be adamant to look for other materials more directly related or change story line.

I was determined to look for other materials more related to the story or change story line.

Sometimes I was advised about layout. “Here the original drawings are laid out in two consecutive sheets. As a result, good points of both drawings are offsetting each other. It is better to change positions of these sheets” My exhibit is basically arranged in chronological order and the order is automatically determined, so at first I hesitated to make rearrangement. Eventually I changed the order and found that the layout balance of the frame looked far better.

One tends to stick to one’s own idea, but it is important to have open mind to accept other’s ideas.

2) Seminars

I make it a rule to attend philatelic seminars. Since seminars are held for the sake of judges and their apprentices, it is an excellent opportunity to learn how exhibits are judged. Excellent lectures by Prof. Dr. Damian Läge, ex-Chairman of FIP thematic commission, in Luoyang in 2009, by Mr. Bernard Jimenez, Director of FIP, in Yokohama in 2011, by Mr. José-Ramòn Moreno, President of FEPA in Rio de Janeiro in 2013 were great help to me. I always take USB memory sticks with me and try to get a copy of presentation file.

I also attended a major seminar, Malmö 3rd Philatelic Summit held in 2014, chaired by Mr. Jonas Hällström, ex-Chairman of FIP thematic commission, under sponsorship of Postiljonen. Besides thematic philately I learned state-of-art approach through lectures of specialist in traditional philately and postal history.

3) Studying high-grade exhibits

World or International exhibitions give us one of the best opportunities to study LG and G medal exhibits by other people. It is also useful to receive CD-ROM from other exhibitors and study it later.

III Analysis of strength and weakness

You must understand your weak points in an objective way. I use three types of techniques in order to identify problems in my exhibits.

1) Variety analysis

This technique will tell you how diverse varieties of materials are used. For thematic exhibit it is imperative to use a wide variety of materials, for instance, die proof, color trial, postage stamps, imperforated stamp, booklet, specimen, error, commercially used cover, pre-philately, stationery, commemorative stationery and so forth. You need to maintain well-balanced mixture of those materials. For my exhibit I use as many as 28 types of philatelic materials.

The technique is simple. Make a table writing down type of materials in columns and sheet number in rows. By filling each box with quantity of materials and aggregating quantities frame by frame, you can create a pie chart from which you would know how far advanced in variety comparing with your previous version. (fig.1 g-2)

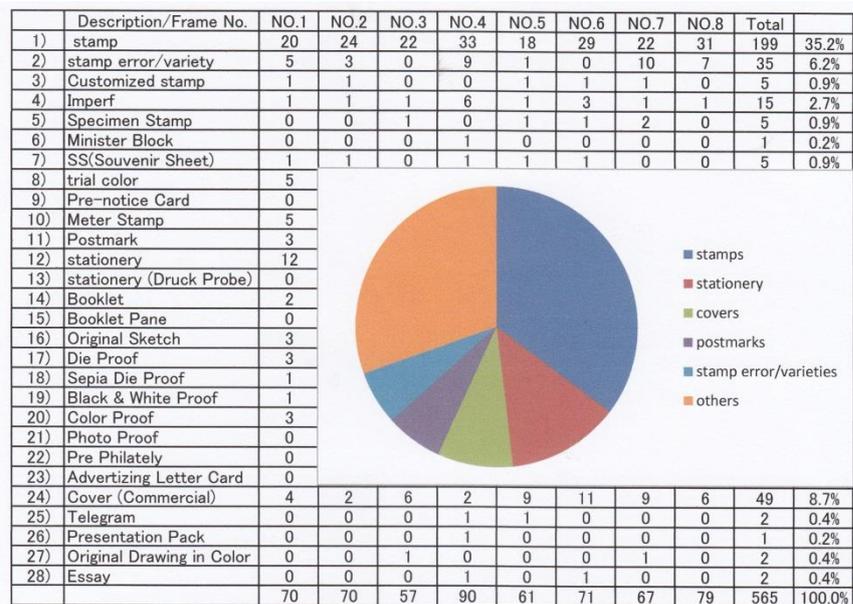


fig.g-2: Table of Variety Analysis and its Pie Chart

My early exhibit had proportion of stamps as high as 60-70%. By replacing stamps with other non-stamp materials, its current ratio has come down to about 35%. I also check balance of different materials in each sheet. For instance, if some sheets contain only stamps or stationeries, jury might think they are not well-balanced. There is no absolute standard for a right proportion, but this technique is an effective tool to see if a specific material has too much higher ratio.

2) Rarity analysis

This is a technique to judge rarity of materials in each sheet. In thematic philately, 20 points are allotted to rarity just the same as traditional philately. Even in thematic philately, rarity is of ultimate importance. If you use a material in which rarity is obvious at a glance, it will create a strong halo effect giving overall favorable impression to your exhibit.

It is often said that rarity is not necessarily related to price. It is true to say that such items as certain commemorative cancellations and used stationeries are sold at low prices but hard to get. But rarity is ultimately determined by supply and demand, thereby basically reflected in prices.

My rarity analysis tool is very simple. You make a table writing up rough amount of money you spent for each sheet. It will tell you at a glance which sheet is of high or low rarity. Using this table you can easily identify which sheets need to be improved.

Sometimes if rare materials do not exist for a sheet which handles thematically important topics, I replace the topics with another one so that I can use rarer materials. Since rarity is of ultimate importance, I will try to use best possible materials provided that there is no much digression from the main line of story.

Prof. Dr. Damian Läge, ex-chairman of FIP thematic commission, once said that an exhibit which can get 20 points in rarity should have “rare items and top rarities throughout the exhibit, including material of very high philatelic importance”. It means that in high level competition, rarity is a decisive factor to win the game.

3) Importance. Analysis (Matrix approach)

This technique is to tell relative importance of each material. There are two types of importance in materials, philatelic and thematic.

Philatelic importance is judged by genuineness and rarity. In case of a used cover, genuineness means a pure commercially used cover. In other words it is not produced for the sake of philatelists only. Core philatelic materials such as postage stamps, cancellations, stationeries issued by authentic authorities have high degree of genuineness, but, stamps issued for philatelists for commercial purpose (so-called dubious items) have extremely low degree of genuineness. Further down is the border line item and then completely private items such as postcards have negative degree of genuineness.

Meanwhile, thematic importance is judged whether a material is directly and deeply related to the theme or not. For instance, if it is apparent that a postage stamp is directly related to a theme through its design or its issuing purposes, it will have a high degree of importance.

Please see diagram (fig.g-3). The importance can be best illustrated graphically. X-axis indicates thematic importance and Y-axis philatelic importance respectively. Importance increases following direction of arrow. You can judge level of importance by which quadrant the material in question lies.

1st quadrant: Philatelic materials which fall under this quadrant and lie near the tip of bold arrow are first class in importance both thematically and philatelically. Original drawing, sketch, die proof, commercially used cover, postage stamp and stationery etc.

all fall under this category. Unaddressed FDC, Maximum Card, postage stamps for philatelists only (what is so-called “dubious item”) have less philatelic importance, even if they have high relevance to the theme.

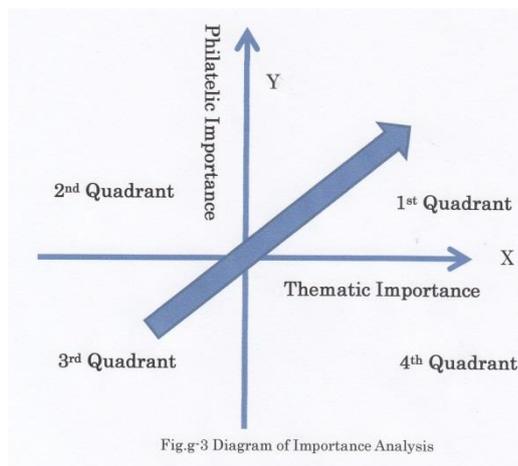
Materials come near the tip of the bold arrow are the most favorable ones. Meanwhile, materials staying near the X, or Y-axis are the least favorable ones.

2nd quadrant: Materials in this quadrant which are philatelically excellent but not apparently related to the theme need convincing explanations to show thematic relevance. (Ex. Hindenburg crash cover, Augarten porcelain stamp-see My Website) Consequently, it gives a good opportunity for an exhibitor to show how deeply he studied his theme.

3rd quadrant; Being neither thematically nor philatelically important, materials in this quadrant are out of question.

4th quadrant: Materials in this quadrant are thematically closely related but philatelically of no value. Examples are the case of postcards and repiquage. You may use those non-philatelic items in you plan page but not in the main pages of exhibit.

In summary, I always keep the matrix (fig.g-3) in my mind and select items which lie as close as possible to the tip of bold arrow.



IV. Tactics

1) Input your resources all at once (not little by little)

If you want to raise level of your exhibit one grade higher, it is important to put in impressive high-impact materials all at once. High-impact material means “material

which any philatelist can appreciate its high rarity at a glance” If you change materials bit by bit each time you exhibit, there is a risk of your evaluation being fixed at a certain level. Like at a battlefield, your tactics should be putting resources all at once instead of little by little.

Please see fig.g-1 again. The score sharply increased by 5 points from 90 points of 2011 to 95 points of 2013. This shows my tactics was correct. In 2012 from April to June I had an honor of displaying my exhibit at Beethoven Haus Bonn for 3months. (See: <http://www.beethoven-haus-bonn.de/sixcms/detail.php/63993>)

As a result I could not participate in any world-class stamp shows and obliged to concentrate my efforts to find impactful materials. During this period I was successful in acquiring quite a few rare materials, such as, Hindenburg crash cover, original drawing of Brahms and Goethe, Pre-philately of Maria Theresa and so forth which gave a dramatic change in my exhibit. I believe it was the main reason why I received sharp rise in score in two years.

2) The principle of “Guilty until proven otherwise”

If a jury member throws a skeptical look at a material, I never use it until I am 100% sure that it has no problem. Contrary to the principle of “innocent until it proved guilty” in criminal law, my principle is “guilty until it proved innocent”

Now, I quote typical examples.

When I used water colored original drawing of a certain country, a jury member cast doubt on its authenticity. As anticipated, one day my close friend collecting Beethoven dropped me a line asking “I got the same original as you have. Do you know which is genuine?” So I inquired the dealer who sold the material to me. To my surprise his answer was “The original drawing you have is the second original. You can use it at an international competition without any problem” But I wondered the existence of plural originals for a stamp and decided not to use it any longer.

Repiquage is additional private printing on issued postal stationery and is an easy case to make mistake. I have some bitter experiences of jury shaking head to my repiquages in negative way. Since then I have not used any doubtful materials. Since repiquages occasionally come into market at high prices, they are easily misunderstood as good items. Private postcards, however, which were printed by official organization to

meet private order (named Privatganzsachen in Germany) are regarded as authentic philatelic materials. There are meticulous catalogs of those materials in Germany and you can easily identify them. I suggest you make careful prior studies whenever you have some doubt in similar materials.

I neither use unaddressed FDCs nor Maximum Card, because jury members have sterner eyes as higher the level of exhibits becomes. In principle, I do not use so-called dubious items. I use only a few of them only when I have no other alternatives in telling some important topics.

3) Thorough quest for rare materials

In thematic class judging, philatelic elements constitute only 45% of total evaluation scores, while non-philatelic ones, such as treatment, knowledge and research of theme and presentation, account for the rest of 55%. If you are a beginner, you will have enough room to get higher score in non-philatelic criteria. It will be more productive to put your efforts on areas other than mere chase of rare materials.

For advanced collectors, however, having reached a saturation point in non-philatelic criteria, only room left for further improvement will be rarity. Competition ultimately becomes competition of rarity, thus, quest for rarity become the most important tactics.

In pursuit of higher score I make every effort to use relevant yet as rare materials as possible such as fancy cancel, streetcar mail, cover for unusual destination, pneumatic mail, prisoner of war mail, Ballon Monté, Catapult mail and so forth.

What will be best way to find such rare items? My suggestion is to establish contact with major auction houses. You cannot, however, always find what you want at major auction houses. It is advisable to approach small-and-medium auction houses as well. Today there are some websites which provide centralized information on current listings of many auction houses. They are extremely useful for continuous search for what you want by registering your needs.

(For example:

<https://www.philasearch.com/>

<http://www.stampcircuit.com/>

<http://prestige.delcampe.net/page/main/action.home.language.E.html>)

V. Examples of material usage

Please see the following Website for my latest collection. Please click “English” version, and open “the exhibit” where you can study my enlarged exhibit page by page.

<http://beethoven-philately.com/index.html>

Conclusion

Let me summarize the tips for success. 1) Select an appropriate theme, 2) Use as many rare impactful materials as possible, and 3) Pay good attention to jury’s observation.

Thematic exhibiting is continuously changing with the times. The current high level exhibiting is termed as “4th generation” by Mr. Jonas Hällström. Serious students of thematic exhibiting must keep close watch on new trends of 5th or 6th generations in the future. End