Introduction

The lead article in the December 1969 issue of The Medal Collector is titled "Medals and Decorations on Stamps." It was written by the late Cornelius B. Tyson, who devoted the greater part of his article to listing the Scott Catalogue numbers of 202 stamps that featured or incorporated orders, decorations, and medals (ODMs) in their design.

Perhaps it’s time to revisit the subject of ODMs on stamps. Almost thirty-two years have passed since the publication of Mr. Tyson’s article, and last year was the centenary of the first stamp issue that featured an ODM. Much has changed since Mr. Tyson’s article. Most noteworthy, more than 300 stamps that feature or incorporate ODMs have been issued (made available to the public) in the intervening years. This increase is the natural outcome of subsequent stamp issues from nations in existence at the time of Mr. Tyson’s article plus those issues from nations that have emerged since then. For example, there were no U.S. ODM-related issues when Mr. Tyson wrote his article, but since then the U.S. has issued three stamps that feature American awards.

One might ask, “why even bother with collecting stamps that feature ODMs?” For me anyway, collecting these stamps is a relaxing diversion, and the beauty of many of these stamps greatly adds to their enjoyment. The stamps are also directly related to my primary hobby of collecting ODMs, and they are very inexpensive compared to ODMs and not especially difficult to locate. Finally, it’s an interesting marriage of phaleristics and philately that can also be instructive. For example, I was finally able to confirm from a Cuban stamp that recipients of Castro’s International Combatants’ Medal included participants in the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War, and I also discovered ODMs on stamps in full color that I didn’t know existed, such as the Hummingbird Medal of the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago and Morocco’s Commemorative Medal of the Green March.

It must also be noted that ODM-related stamps can have one very important purpose that cannot be achieved by stamps that feature most other subjects. Awards are symbols of the strength and character of a nation’s people, while stamps are miniature “billboards” because of their wide circulation. Thus the combination of ODMs and stamps can have great propaganda value. This aspect of ODMs on stamps was exploited to the greatest extent by the Soviet Union, but more about this later.

Sir Rowland Hill and the Penny Black

Organized message and later mail delivery, in some form or another, is probably as old as the use of awards to recognize individuals or groups. The first postal services were established in China about 4,000 B.C. and in Egypt and Assyria by 3,000 B.C. The Chinese and Egyptian services were intended for the transmission of correspondence among court officials, but the Assyrian service was open to both court officials and merchants. However, stamps and postal services as known today are the outcome of reforms implemented in Great Britain in the 1800s.

Stamps are merely printed labels that indicate prepayment of postage with an adhesive on the reverse to affix the stamp to an envelope. Although simple in concept, the modern stamp was not instituted until 1840 when Great Britain issued a black on white one-penny stamp that featured the profile of a young Queen Victoria. Prior to this time, sending a letter was an expensive endeavor. Postage was based on the weight of the letter and the travel distance to the addressee, thus postage had to be calculated for each letter. Moreover, the postage was paid by the addressee, who often refused to accept the letter to avoid the fee.

In 1837, the same year that Victoria became the reigning monarch, a former school teacher named Rowland Hill wrote a proposal titled Postal Reform: Its Importance and Practicability and presented it to an influential member of the House of Lords. Hill’s reforms called for a prepaid, adhesive stamp at the low rate of one penny that would be sufficient to send a letter up to a half-ounce in weight anywhere in Great Britain. Hill believed that sending a letter should be inexpensive and that the volume generated by the small rate would cover total post-
Among its distinctions, the British Penny Black is also the first "definitive" stamp, which is a stamp that is used for ordinary postage and is kept in general circulation for a number of years. In contrast, there is a very large category of stamps called "commemorative" stamps that commemorate an event or person, usually related to an anniversary, and are in circulation for only a short period of time. Commemorative stamps can be issued singly (a single issue) or in a "set" of two or more associated stamps. Stamps that feature some element of nature, such as tropical fish or flowers, are also considered to be commemoratives.

Topical Collecting

Gathering commemorative stamps from around the world that share the same theme is a popular aspect of philately known as "topical" collecting. The number of possible topics to be found among stamps is vast, but the topics that attract the most interest include Walt Disney, sea shells, scouting, dinosaurs, trains, Princess Diana, lighthouses, and even stamps on stamps. I know a lady who collects stamps that feature telephones because her husband retired from the telephone company. However, it appears that only a few collectors are interested in ODMs on stamps. There are also philatelic organizations of topical collectors, and the largest of these is the American Topical Association (ATA). Information about the ATA is provided at the end of this article.

3. This medal is known as "Wyon’s City Medal."

4. The government also issued a two-penny blue stamp for letters weighing between a half ounce and one ounce.
Setting Up a Collection

The first step in forming a topical collection is to carefully define the topic. Some topics are easy to define. For example, the parameters of a “lighthouse” topical collection could legitimately be “any stamp that has one or more lighthouses in its design.” Defining an ODM topical collection, however, is much more difficult and involves some hair-splitting. I omitted stamps commemorating a person who is portrayed wearing awards, as did Mr. Tyson. In these cases, the awards are incidental to what the stamp was commemorating, which is the person and not the awards. On the other hand, Mr. Tyson ignored but I listed stamps that commemorated both the person and the award(s). The largest number in this category are Soviet stamps that commemorated the various Heroes of the Soviet Union and incorporated a small replica of the gold-star badge of the Hero of the Soviet Union in the design of the stamp. Equally problematic are the interesting and attractive sets of Italian stamps issued in 1934 that commemorated the centenary of the Military Medal of Valor. Not one of the 18 stamps in each of the two sets depict the decoration being honored anywhere in its design, which mainly consist of various military scenes. The question here is whether or not the Italian stamps are appropriate for a collection of ODMs on stamps. I excluded these stamps, although they were listed by Mr. Tyson. In sum, exceptions such as those just described caused some differences between my list of stamps and Mr. Tyson’s list. The point I’m trying to make is that there are no hard and fast rules regarding the stamps that constitute a particular topical collection. Ultimately, the parameters for a particular topic will be based upon the interests and desires of each collector.

Your definition of the topic will also include the types of stamps that you want to collect. Among the different types of stamps are ordinary stamps, “souvenir sheets,” “semi-postal” stamps, airmail stamps, “se-tenants,” and “omnibus issues.” Other collectibles that are not stamp types per se include “first-day covers” and stamps sold by post offices in booklets and coils and in panes of four or more stamps. Mr. Tyson did not discuss stamp types, but his list was limited to ordinary stamps, semi-postal stamps, airmail stamps, and omnibus issues. My list contains the same types of stamps plus souvenir sheets, and se-tenants. I recommend that you obtain a good glossary of philatelic terms to help you sort out the various stamp types, but the types that you decide to collect will largely be a matter of personal choice.

The third step is to prepare a list of stamps that will form your collection. The approach that I used was to build on Mr. Tyson’s list by carefully searching, page-by-page, through Scott’s six-volume, worldwide standard postage stamp catalog for stamps that featured ODMs. Not only did the sheer volume of stamps make the task tedious, but some stamps were initially missed because usually only one stamp in an issue of a number of stamps is illustrated, and the stamp descriptions were not always helpful. A case in point is a series of four stamps issued by Australia in 1995 that commemorated famous Australians from World War I. Scott illustrated two of the stamps that comprised the issue but not the last stamp, which prominently included the Victoria Cross in its design. I “discovered” this stamp by accident while foraging through a huge pile of loose stamps available for five cents each that was laid on a table during a local stamp club meeting. Because it is not practical for Scott to illustrate every stamp ever issued, I am certain there are omissions in my list, as there were in Mr. Tyson’s list, that hopefully will come to light. It must also be noted that the task is not ended when the list is completed, however accurate. The list is actually a work in progress that must be updated annually to accommodate new worldwide issues of stamps that feature ODMs. I have not made my current 25-page list a part of this article in the interest of conserving valuable space in the Journal; however, I will gladly forward a copy to individual members if requested (please include $5.00 with your request to cover my costs).

The final step in forming a collection is to obtain or prepare some means to display the stamps. Most collectors prefer using one or more stamp albums, and there a number of published albums available by country as well as a few albums on topical subjects but not ODMs. I prepared the pages for my own album on a personal computer, and the pages are kept together in a three-ring binder. How the album is organized and the appearance of the pages are matters of personal choice.

5. The Scott Publishing Company presently produces eight catalogs each year, six catalogs covering all worldwide issues and two specialized catalogs. The Scott catalogs are the standard reference for collectors in the U.S. The six worldwide catalogs are divided into volumes alphabetically by country, and each country has its own sequence of stamp numbers. Altogether, the eight catalogs list more than 600,000 stamps from some 600 plus countries. The company was founded by John Walter Scott, who is known as the “Father of American Philately.” When a young man, Scott immigrated to America from England and in 1863 began dealing in stamps at an outdoor market in New York City.