Building a spec-tacular collection

According to The Guinness Book of Records, the world’s largest collection of stamps featuring eyeglasses belongs to Jane Lippert Hushea of Florida, USA. Jane’s collection may be hard to beat, but if you feel the appeal of optics then Paula Hammond has some tips on making a complete spectacle of yourself.

People have been using lenses to help them see since the time of the Ancient Egyptians. The Emperor Nero (37-68 AD) famously viewed gladiatorial fights using an emerald as a corrective lens. The first real ‘glasses’, though, appeared around 1280 in Italy. From then, various styles of eye apparel came and went with varying degrees of success.

Perhaps the most recognisable and long-lived were the pince-nez; glasses without earpieces, held in place by wires that pinched the bridge of the nose. For Georgian women of fashion, there was the lorgnette – a pair of spectacles set on a long handle, from which the phrase ‘take a sideways look at’ is said to have originated. Then there was the monocle, used to correct the vision in only one eye, and much beloved of the Planters’ Peanut mascot, astronomer Sir Patrick Moore and lesbian ladies of the Weimark!

Dr David Fleishman is a retired ophthalmologist who now runs a website dedicated to antique spectacles and other vision aids (www.antiquespectacles.com). His passion for eyeglasses began with his own small collection of antique specs, but has grown to such an extent that he’s now regularly consulted on the topic by the world’s leading museums and galleries. ‘I’ve always been a collector of sorts,’ says David. ‘I started coin collecting when I was seven. I had a small stamp collection... but I also developed a small eyeglass collection... maybe twenty or so. All were antiques and one, in fact, was a pair of leather-framed eyeglasses. These are the Holy Grail for eyeglass collectors in the same way that the Penny Black might be for philatelists. However, it was only when I had to retire, about ten years ago, that I settled down and had the free time to start to study my collection.’

His website grew out of his desire to share his knowledge and it was via this superlative site that he encountered Jane Hushea.

A passion shared

‘It was Jane who contacted me,’ David explains. ‘She had this huge collection of stamps with eyeglasses on them which she had collected over several decades.’ Mrs Hushea’s husband owned an eyewear company in Canton, Ohio. Jane created window displays and advertising promotions for the business, but it wasn’t long before she turned her creative eye to building a spectacle-themed stamp collection. Starting in the early 1950s, Jane painstakingly amassed a collection over 2,500 stamps, all featuring eyeglasses of some kind.

‘She would typically place a little advertisement or announcement in a stamp collector’s newspaper or magazine expressing an interest to have stamps with eyeglasses sent to her.’ David says, ‘Eventually, she and I developed a dialogue. She sent me her collection and this really stimulated me. I’d given lectures on spectacles on coins and on tokens and medallions, and now I was presented with this fabulous stamp collection. I photographed them and passed the collection on to Henry Lukas, Director of Education at the Spellman Museum of Stamps and Postal History in Boston. Henry and I then contacted Guinness. That’s how Jane ended up being awarded the record.’

For David, the meeting with Jane has opened up a whole new world of spectacle-related topics and he has even become involved in the world of stamps himself. Not only has he dedicated several pages of his web site
to the subject, but he has recently written to the United States Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC) suggesting that Benjamin Franklin, who invented (amongst other things) the bifocals, would be a suitable subject for a stamp. 'That,' he says, with obvious enthusiasm for his subject, 'would be really neat.'

Building big

Jane spent decades amassing her collection and the results, highlighted on David's web site, show just how innovative unusual 'thematics' can be. But just how do you begin to build a collection on such a strange topic? From eye health, to historical figures, from educational stamps to famous spectacle wearers, the key, as Jane's collection shows, is to think outside the box.

Stamps featuring famous spectacle wearers are perhaps the most obvious place to begin. In fact, celebrity specs wearers, like John Lennon and Ghandi, appear so often on stamps that it is possible to build a collection themed on them alone. However, not every glasses wearer is happy to be portrayed wearing them. It is been said that every US president has needed glasses, but very few are ever seen wearing them! Statesmen seem especially reluctant to admit any perceived 'weaknesses' but one famous exception is the founder of Pakistan. Muhammad Ali Jinnah was a well-known monocle wearer, and although the stamps issued during his time in office don't show his famous eye ornament, the Quaid-e-Azam Birth Centenary stamp, issued in December of 1976, is a superb exception. Quaid-e-Azam means Father of the Nation and this superb, gold-embossed stamp, complete with monocle, makes a fitting tribute to the country's visionary founder.

Stamps with world health or charity themes are a good source of spectacle images too. This is a rich vein, but two favourites are Zaire's striking 1981 International Year of Disabled People stamp, and Pakistan's 1965 Blind Welfare stamp, with its appealingly bold design. Education and literacy-themed stamps also often contain images of spectacles, such as the famous US 'Root of Democracy' 4 cent stamp, issued as part of the Americana series in 1977. Then there are those stamps which celebrate the great inventors and innovations which have turned spectacles from an expensive luxury into everyday objects. A great example is the 1988 stamp dedicated to the scholar, scientist and philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) who was one of the first people to use lenses to correct myopia. The Republic of Transkei issued a stamp celebrating his contribution to eye care in the country's third Heroes of Medicine series. And let's not forget sunglasses, safety goggles, binoculars, monoculars, telescopes, and 3D specs. Australia's 2011 Mythical Creatures collection actually included a 3D mini sheet and a pair of genuine 3D viewing glasses - which is sure to bring any eyeglass-themed collection into sharp focus.

GET INVOLVED

If you would like to support Dr Fleishman's campaign to have Ben Franklin's bifocals commemorated on a stamp, you can write to The Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee, C/o Stamp Development, U.S. Postal Service, 475 L'Enfant Plaza SW, Room 3300, Washington, DC 20260-3501, USA.