

Philately can help to educate children, avid collector says

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For 73-year-old Anthony Grech, philately is more than just about collecting postage stamps – it's a lifelong educational process that allows him to express his creativity.

"I don't just buy stamps and stick them onto an album. I like to immerse myself deeper. I do my research on the topic: the artist who designed the stamp, the subject matter and other details. Then, I handwrite the information I gather in my album," Mr Grech says.

And by "handwrite" he means he turns the information into a work of art. He uses calligraphy to tell the story of each stamp issue and frames the words in colourful sketches and paintings inspired by the stamp.

Mr Grech has been collecting postage stamps since he was a boy.

"Back then I started because that's what children did," he recalls.

"When I was about 18, I moved to Canada and gave all my collection to my friends. On returning to Malta, at the age of 23, I started collecting again."

With time, Mr Grech focused his collection on Maltese stamps. Today, he has the entire collection: from Malta's first stamp – The Halfpenny Yellow back from December 1, 1860 – to the latest Christmas 2019 stamp issue consisting of three stamps and featuring figurines of the Baby Jesus. His collection includes The Saint Paul 10s black –

Malta's most expensive postage stamp issued on March 6, 1919.

"I was very lucky with this as it was given to me for free by a neighbour who insisted I take it even when I told him this could be worth a couple of thousands," Mr Grech notes.

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For each stamp issue, he handpaints the first day cover – that includes the newly issued postage stamp on a stamped envelope showing the first day the issue is authorised for use.

As a member of the Gozo Philatelic Society, he often visits schools to tell children about stamp collecting.

"They are usually interested but I don't feel schools follow up enough on this," he remarks.

"Children nowadays have so much to cope with. If only we could free half an hour of their day and encourage them to do something like stamp collection. This is not about collecting stickers – they can learn about so many things.

"When my grandchildren come to me for information about a project, all I do is open my albums and find all the details."



Anthony Grech owns an entire collection of stamps, some dating from 1860.



Examples of first day covers – specially designed envelopes that include all the stamps of an issue and pictorial postmarks.

How are stamps made?

'We always ensure that there is a local connection in all themes we pick'

The head of philately, Mary Grace Simpson, told Times of Malta that, every year, her team mapped out the themes to be issued the following year.

Themes factor in national and international events happening throughout the year as well as the public's suggestions.

"We try to ensure that the stamps are appreciated by our collectors and appeal to children to instill a love of stamps in the younger generation," she said.

"We always ensure that there is a local connection in all themes we pick."

For example, on September 22, 2018, a commemorative stamp was issued to mark the 50th anniversary from the death of Padre Pio, a Capuchin monk who gained popularity for bearing stigmata.

While there was no direct link between Padre Pio and Malta, the stamp featured a painting of the saint by the Maltese monk Patri Krispin, found at the

Capuchin church, Santa Liberata in Kalkara.

After themes are picked, preliminary designs and concepts are sent to the Stamp Design Advisory Board for approval.

Once approved, artists or photographers are commissioned and their work is then designed into a stamp by an inhouse team of designers before being sent to print.

Stamps are printed on imported water marked paper for security purposes. The amount of stamps printed depends on postal needs, current stock as well as the nature of the stamp.

Commemorative stamps, for example, have a lower print run to retain their value.

Ms Simpson noticed that because of the low print run when compared to other larger countries, Maltese stamps are sought after by foreign collectors.

"Collectors love it that our stamps are not printed in large



quantities and that they are colourful with a strong local and traditional feel," she said.

She added the themes for 2020 were in the process of being finalised. All she could say was that one of the stamp issues would commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Pope John Paul II, who visited Malta twice, and the festa theme would focus on statues of St Joseph.

European themes will include ancient postal routes and gastronomy.