

# The Paradox of the Philatelic Business Turning a Private Collection into a Professional Trade

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Résumé de l'article

*L'argent joue un rôle essentiel dans ce passe-temps populaire qu'est la philatélie. La plupart des négociants professionnels du monde de la philatélie ont commencé par être des collectionneurs de timbres amateurs. En outre, de nombreux négociants professionnels continuent d'accroître leur collection personnelle d'une manière ou d'une autre. Non seulement les négociants ont des profils très variés, mais il existe aussi différents types de collectionneurs de timbres. En essayant de comprendre ce qui motive les collectionneurs, nous devons éviter les explications simplistes, réductrices, ainsi que mono-causales et donc je propose un modèle de configuration associant les motivations psychologiques, sociologiques, économiques et éducationnelles. J'émet l'hypothèse que, parmi les négociants, la motivation de l'enseignement (apprendre et transmettre la connaissance relative à la collection), associée à d'autres motivations, continue de jouer un rôle important. La conclusion porte sur les changements que connaît le marché philatélique contemporain.*

PAUL VAN DER GRIJP

## The Paradox of the Philatelic Business: Turning a Private Collection into a Professional Trade

### Résumé

*L'argent joue un rôle essentiel dans ce passe-temps populaire qu'est la philatélie. La plupart des négociants professionnels du monde de la philatélie ont commencé par être des collectionneurs de timbres amateurs. En outre, de nombreux négociants professionnels continuent d'accroître leur collection personnelle d'une manière ou d'une autre. Non seulement les négociants ont des profils très variés, mais il existe aussi différents types de collectionneurs de timbres. En essayant de comprendre ce qui motive les collectionneurs, nous devons éviter les explications simplistes, réductrices, ainsi que mono-causales et donc je propose un modèle de configuration associant les motivations psychologiques, sociologiques, économiques et éducationnelles. Jémets l'hypothèse que, parmi les négociants, la motivation de l'enseignement (apprendre et transmettre la connaissance relative à la collection), associée à d'autres motivations, continue de jouer un rôle important. La conclusion porte sur les changements que connaît le marché philatélique contemporain.*

### Abstract

*Money plays a crucial part in the popular hobby known as philately. Most professional dealers in the world of philately used to be amateur philatelic collectors. Moreover, many professional dealers continue to expand their personal philatelic collection in some way. Not only are there various dealers, there are also different kinds of philatelic collectors. In trying to understand collectors' motivations, we should refrain from simplistic, reductionist, mono-causal explanations, and so I propose a configurational model that combines psychological, sociological, economic and educational motives. I suggest that, among dealers, the motivation of education (learning and transmitting knowledge related to the collection), combined with the other motivations, continues to play an important part. The conclusion deals with changes in the contemporary philatelic market.*

### Philately and Money

In 2001, Bjarne Rogan could still write that, lately, much scholarly literature has been published on collecting in general, but “next to nothing” on the most practised collector's field: stamp collecting (Rogan 2001).<sup>1</sup> Since 2001, this situation has changed. In earlier publications (Van der Grijp 2002; 2004; 2006: 173-251), I

analyzed the amateur trade in philately through a number of case studies. Dissatisfied with the arguments and assumptions in philately research thus far (Gelber 1991, 1992), I presented a new analytical model for mapping the large spectra of philatelic amateur dealers: the professionalization scale (or P scale) of philatelic amateur trade. This article's focus on professional philatelic dealers is a logical follow-up to two of my earlier

publications on this matter (2002; 2006: 219–51). As far as I know, this article is the first scholarly publication focusing on philatelic professionals. By “philately” I mean the collection and study of postage stamps, letter covers bearing postmarks and related items (for example, revenue stamps). I approach the professional constellation around these “socially constituted and materialized physical artifact[s]” (Buchli 2002: 11) with a combination of economic anthropology, extended case studies in the form of life histories and a configurational perspective on collectors’ motivations. This article aims at providing an ethnographic account in this matter of the “ways in which artifacts [such as stamps and postal covers] are implicated in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social identities” (Miller and Tilley 1996: 5).

Stamps and other philatelic items indeed prove to be important material culture markers, as several scholars have discussed (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Reid 1984; Trammell 1992). Stamps reveal much about processes of modernization, globalization, production, consumption, transport and communication—including the development of the postal system itself. Such histories can be deduced from the depictions on stamps of ships, trains, airplanes, factories, waterworks, architecture, computers and other fruits of technological and scientific advancements (DeYoung 1986; Jones 2001, 2004). The height of their role as worldwide messengers can be situated before the massive influence of television and the Internet. Stamps used to be children’s and many adults’ first tangible encounter with other cultures (Moffat and Rich 1950). Images on stamps refer to geography, flora and fauna, history, ethnography, professions, art and literature. Also striking are the political messages that various countries send into the world, such as the ideological propaganda of the Third Reich (Lauritzen 1988), and of the Russian and Chinese revolutions (Grant 1995; Wachman 2005).<sup>2</sup>

Money has always played an important role in the world of philately (Buffier, Granier and Jullien 1998; Phillips 1936; Sutton 1959). From the very start, according to Gelber, “stamp collectors were acutely self-conscious of the ways in which their activities mimicked real-world commerce. They appropriated the language of

the commodity market and used it to both praise and criticize their leisure activity” (1999: 114). At present, the most rare and expensive stamps and other philatelic documents—such as old covers with cancellations, with prices increasing from dozens to tens of thousands of Euros—are sold via high-level, internationally operating auction houses.<sup>3</sup> As Narbeth observes, the rarest stamp is “for its weight the most valuable object in the world” (1968: 6). The rare Mauritius “Post Office” stamps are, according to Morgan, among “the most documented of all postal issues” and they would be “the most coveted scraps of paper in existence” (2006: 6).

The philatelic market is dominated by auction houses, philatelic shops in prime locations such as The Strand in London and the Rue Drouot in Paris, and dealers with stands at national and international philatelic exhibitions. There is also a whole range of—now rapidly disappearing—philatelic shops of various stock and quality in large and medium-sized provincial towns, closely followed by sales during lower-ranking exhibitions and a steady circuit of regional and local collector’s fairs. Clubs organize their own auctions and sales and include networks in which stamp exchange booklets circulate.<sup>4</sup> In specialized clubs and in the larger general clubs, such circulations of exchange booklets often involve several thousands of Euros, to say the least, changing hands every year between collectors within the same club. At the time of my research (1995–2002), some dealers used the Internet, but, since then, auction sites such as Delcampe and eBay have been taking over an even larger share of the philatelic market (Hillis, Petit and Epley 2006; Sinclair 2004).

The first major question dealt with in this article is: What remains of a private collection when one makes a profession of it? The second is: How professional are professional dealers in philately? In my conclusions I will suggest that they are professional indeed, but not in the usual sense. The distinction between “professional” and “amateur” is traditionally made on the basis of “amateurs” having a source of revenue in addition to philately; they do not depend on it for their livelihood—“professionals” do (Stebbins 1979, 1992). However, as we will see below, in the case of philately, these definitions do not necessarily apply. We can distinguish several categories of

professional philatelic dealers: retailers, wholesalers and auctioneers—who may or may not have their own shop. Retailers can be subdivided into shop owners and dealers at stamp fairs.

There are also different kinds of philatelic collectors. Some philatelic dealers like to distinguish their “serious customers” from those who merely “lick stamps.” Those who “just lick stamps” actually only lick stamp hinges, and their collecting ideal is to fill in as many empty squares as possible in pre-printed albums. This is the philatelic level of older children and debuting adults, or people who rediscover their childhood collection and corresponding philatelic passion at a later age, when money plays a more important role. Gelber correctly notes that “beginning stamp collectors c[an] salvage stamps from envelopes, but once past the novice stage no collectors c[an] realistically hope to build their collections from scavenging. They ha[ve] to turn, enthusiastically or reluctantly, to the marketplace” (1999: 122). After some years of successfully filling empty squares in their pre-printed albums they usually reach a price limit that they are no longer willing to pay for one stamp. At this point, they have to make a fundamental decision that will determine the rest of their philatelic career: either start a new collection in a new and more advanced form, or stop collecting altogether. Serious philatelists study their specialization and develop strategies for creating an excellent collection. They are not afraid to travel a long way and pay large sums for good and rare philatelic material. It is in particular the latter dimension that makes them “serious” in dealers’ eyes.

In countries such as France and the Netherlands, there may be some thousands of top level collectors, people with enough philatelic background, interest and, importantly, financial means to play a key role in the national and international philatelic scene. These collectors who specialize in traditional philately, postal history, thematic philately or revenue philately, to mention only a few branches, buy stamps and other philatelic documents regularly from well-known auction houses and participate in competitive philatelic exhibitions. Their specialization is often informed by relevant knowledge about political history and cultural backgrounds, and these collectors are aware of the subtle messages in images or words on stamps and cancellations.

At the other end of the spectra are hundreds of thousands of stamp (hinge) lickers. They are not looking to develop a collection as a strong philatelic statement. They may not be involved in philatelic organizations, and their interactions with the philatelic world are limited to incidental and mostly cheap purchases. Between these two extremes we find the modal philatelist: an important part of the population consisting of amateurs who enjoy exchanging or buying philatelic items from time to time, who like to discuss and read about philatelic topics and who usually are involved in philatelic organizations and incidentally visit fairs and exhibitions.<sup>5</sup> Although many dealers may want to specialize in the highest philatelic values—i.e., those with which they can earn most money, most of them are still obligated to adapt their strategies to the demands of these various categories of customers in order to survive.

### A Configurational Perspective on Collectors’ Motivations

My research results are structured around seven case studies, a selection that I consider representative of the middle range of the philatelic business culture in Europe: a retailer who only sells at stamp fairs, a wholesaler, and five shop owners, one of whom also organizes auctions. Observations of and interviews with five of these dealers were made between 1995 and 1998 in the Netherlands and with the two others between 1998 and 2002 in France. The methodology includes a combination of observations, interviews in Dutch and in French, extended case studies including philatelic and business biographies, and analysis of discourse.<sup>6</sup> Before starting my case studies, I would like to present a theoretical model.

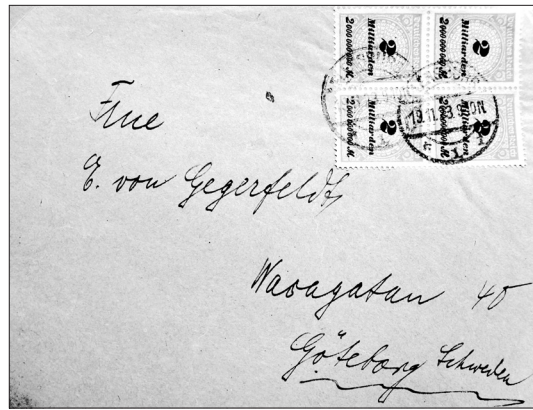
In his study of the art market in the metropolitan area of St. Louis, Missouri, Stuart Plattner (1996) distinguished three axes necessary in order to understand collectors of high art: psychological, sociological and economic—or, in other words, the motivations of ego-enlargement, augmentation of social status and investment. In accordance with this model, I developed an anti-reductionist or configurational perspective on private collecting in general, which can also be

applied to philately (Van der Grijp 2006, forthcoming). These three axes are important indeed, especially for the implication that in order to understand collecting as a cultural phenomenon, one cannot reduce the motivations of collectors to one axis. The various motivational axes form a structural set, a configuration, which is also to be understood as a process, a reconfiguration. However, for a full cultural understanding of collecting, including philately, I think it necessary to add a fourth axis of motivations: to acquire and transmit knowledge about a certain category of objects, an axis which I call educational. Here follows a brief explanation of the four axes.

(1) The psychological motivation can be characterized by its dimension of ego-enlargement, by seeing one's collection—especially when it is a “good” and “important” one—as an extended self. Another psychological dimension is nostalgia—restoration of a lost world by making it manageable, habitable and emotionally compelling in a microcosm or time capsule. The psychological motivation relates to Glassie's idea that “history is not the past. History is a story about the past, told in the present, and designed to be useful in constructing the future” (1999: 6). Among philatelic collectors, history is told by means of their collection.

Often, psychologically or psychoanalytically inspired propositions such as those by Baudrillard (1996 [1968], 1994) and Muensterberger (1994), however, tend to reduce collecting to subjective values. They search for a mono-causal explanation and belittle collectors' motives, for example, by deeming collecting to be childish behaviour. Baudrillard's collector, in Naomi Schor's lucid evaluation, is “a neurotic, unable to cope with the struggles of intersubjectivity” (1994: 257). For Muensterberger, “collectors share a sense of specialness, of once not having received satisfying love or attention or having been hurt or unfairly treated in infancy, and through their objects they feel reassured, enriched, and notable” (1994: 44). These negative hypotheses (the drive of collecting being identified as a lack) embody the mono-causal determinism diametrically opposed to a configurational approach to collectors' motivations (Van der Grijp 2006: 14-21).

(2) A sociological motivation may be summarized as a desire to augment one's social status. Bourdieu demonstrated the link between the taste



**Fig. 1**  
Letter sent from Germany to Sweden, on November 19, 1923, during the German inflation period, franked with a total of 8 billion (“milliard”) German marks. (Photo by author.)

for aesthetics, art and culture and socio-economic backgrounds (1984 [1979]: 326), in keeping with Veblen's analysis of the non-working or only symbolically working leisure class. For Veblen, “the occupations of the [leisure] class ... have the common economic characteristic of being non-industrial” (1934 [1899]: 21) and “Leisure’ ... connotes ... non-productive consumption of time” (46). I argue that the creation of a serious collection equals—or at least represents—the production of culture. A collection is a social identity marker that provides (in Bourdieu's terms) cultural capital and augments the social status of the collector. The successful bond trader Bill Gross, for example, was able to acquire the only known copy in private hands of the so-called “1 cent Z-Grill” U.S. stamp for the equivalent of three million U.S. dollars (Blankfeld 2010). By thus becoming the owner of the only complete collection of U.S. stamps, his social status within philatelic circles was augmented considerably.

(3) Collecting can also be, and often is, a form of economic investment. Collectors can sell a part of their collectibles, generate profit and reinvest this profit in their collection. In so doing, they can accumulate a reserve of personal capital, and even become professional dealers, as will be shown in this article. Financier Bill Gross, already quoted above and depicted in *Forbes Asia* as “worth \$2.1 billion,” explains his philatelic investment strategy as follows:

I researched the hobby from an investment standpoint, much like I researched bonds.... Rare stamps are like fingerprints: You can trace them as they've traded in auctions back almost a hundred years. So I traced pricing patterns and related them to growth rate of stocks and the economy. (Blankfeld 2010)



The notion of profit can also be an economic metaphor that may be applied to the psychological and sociological drives: ego-enlargement and the augmentation of social status are also forms of profit.

(4) I add a fourth motive: the educational one, which deals with acquiring and transmitting knowledge about a certain type of objects. Collectors presume that this increase in knowledge goes hand in hand with the ownership of the objects concerned. According to collectors, the daily and physical contact with material such as stamps, postal covers and the like is a precondition for knowledge. Collectors learn about their objects, many become real specialists, and they like transmitting this knowledge to others. Russell Belk (1995) provides an example of a self-educated high school dropout named Michael (thirty-five years old), who works as a librarian in New York City and collects postal covers from 15th-century Venice.<sup>7</sup> Michael taught himself ancient Greek, Latin and Italian in order to improve his historical knowledge, and he published several articles about his collection in the philatelic press. Another example is the New Zealand author Roy Shuker who, in an appendix in his book on record collecting relates that he “built up a fairly comprehensive philatelic reference library, joined a number of philatelic societies, and researched, wrote about and exhibited on the [postal history] areas [he] was collecting in” (2010: 203). Here too, there is a kind of profit—that of knowledge about one’s collectibles.

Below, I will present seven philatelic dealers, five of whom are working in the Netherlands and two in France. This will be followed by a section detailing their first steps in philately during childhood and adolescence (the learning process); an analysis of the transition to trade and individual trading strategies and, finally, an answer to the question of what remains of the collection after having become a professional dealer and to the question about their degree of professionalization. The aim is to provide detailed insight into the European philatelic business culture and the actual strategies of philatelic dealers from an economic anthropological perspective by means of extended case studies, the biographical method and discourse analysis.

## Seven Professional Philatelic Dealers

Antoine, my first case, worked as a financial advisor of computer applications in documentation systems for a multinational enterprise for ten years. In the aftermath of an announced merger, which in the end did not take place, the enterprise was reconstituted. Dissatisfied with the state of affairs, Antoine started working for a competing company, but there was another merger and he lost his job in the process, and, at forty-two years old, when he applied for other jobs, his age proved to be an obstacle. Because of his difficulties in finding a new job, he chose to go into the philatelic trade.

When Bernard, my second case, was still a student, he had a lot of time for philately. At stamp fairs, he noticed that there was a demand for the most recent stamps of certain areas worldwide. Collectors are able to obtain mint copies of the latest stamp issues much more easily than cancelled copies. The highest values in particular are scarce. Bernard started to buy, soak off and stock kiloware (packages of stamps sold to stamp collectors by weight) and in order to supply this demand. At age twenty-two, he started to deal in loose stamps as an amateur for the first time. He began acquiring recent kiloware and bought about 4,000 kilograms of unsoaked stamps from foreign companies, individuals and charitable institutions per year.

At the age of forty Charles, my third case, started dealing as an amateur at regional exchange fairs. He frequented approximately twenty fairs a year in a radius of 100 km of his residence. When his philatelic club no longer allowed amateur dealers at its meetings, he registered himself as a professional dealer with the Chamber of Commerce. At age forty-nine, while working his usual job, he opened a stamp shop at the border of the old city centre in the large provincial town he was living in.

In the beginning, Daniel’s stamp shop was his and his older brother’s project. Both Daniel and his brother had jobs in the social insurance sector, which gave them a lot of free time. His brother invested in the business, was in charge of buying and selling philatelic material at auctions and took care of the administrative aspect of the business. He owned 50 per cent of the shop, but he rarely went there; Daniel’s wife received a sal-

ary for looking after it. In 1986, his older brother died, and Daniel continued running the shop with his own family. All of his children—three sons and two daughters—were young philatelists, but only the boys continued their hobby at a more advanced age.

Edwin is Daniel's second oldest son and my fifth case. After Edwin finished school, he worked in his father's shop for a year before he was drafted into military service. After his military service, Edwin re-enlisted for seven more years as a professional soldier, after which he worked in his father's shop definitively. In 1995, Edwin became a partner, buying 50 per cent of the business. He enjoys the work, and the turnover is increasing.

François, my sixth case, who lives in the south of France, used to work as a commercial agent for a multinational information technology enterprise, but was made redundant during a company restructuring when he was fifty. During his working years, he had accumulated some philatelic material that did not fit in his own collection. He had been toying with the idea of opening a stamp shop with this material for a long time, and his forced dismissal provided him with this opportunity.

Gérard, my seventh case, studied law in Lyon and was afterward trained as an information technologist by a large company in Marseilles, where he continued working for ten years. He had been a philatelist since his early youth and had always had a dream to establish a shop. In his

regular job he had few prospects and he would have been obligated to move to another part of France to find work, which he did not want to do. He opted instead to establish himself as self-employed in philately and postal history in a small town in the south of France. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the dealers presented above.

## Early Introduction to Philately

According to Rubel and Rosman, "contemporary collecting may emphasize nostalgia for one's childhood, or for a different, earlier and simpler time" (2001: 313). In the domain of philately, this nostalgia is further emphasized by the fact that philatelists often start collecting stamps in their early childhood. Most dealers in my case studies report having started collecting stamps as children. Antoine, my first case, was eleven when he first went to the Amsterdam stamp market, where he exchanged and sold his double stamps on the trunks of parked cars. Initially his aim was to extend his collection; it was a purely monetary exchange. However, as an economy student at university, with a yearly turnover of (the equivalent of) some 750 Euros in his amateur trade, he was also able to pay for part of his studies, although he had no intention of becoming a professional in the philatelic trade.

Those who knew Bernard in his early youth remember him as a boy who was always busy with philately. Thus, for his birthdays he was often offered stamp packets. An uncle and an

NAME	AGE	LOCATION	JOB BEFORE OR BESIDES TRADE	IMMEDIATE CAUSE FOR FOCUS ON TRADE
Antoine	60	Western Netherlands	Business economist	Job loss
Bernard	44	Eastern Netherlands	High school teacher	Voluntary resignation
Charles	72	Eastern Netherlands	Representative of a wholesale tobacconist	Trade besides other job
Daniel	57	Eastern Netherlands	Insurance professional	Trade besides other job
Edwin	35	Eastern Netherlands	Soldier	Taking over father's shop
François	59	Southern France	Commercial agent	Job loss
Gérard	58	Southern France	Computer specialist	Resignation from job

*Table 1. Summary of philatelic dealers in case studies*

aunt taught him the basic principles of philately such as the arrangement of stock books and the proper use of a catalogue. Soon, he became a youth member of a stamp club. Many older workers in his father's production firm amused themselves by providing "the son of the boss" with stamps. At an early age, he collected stamps from Western Europe and Australia. Later, he narrowed his collection down, but he always collected stamps from about a dozen countries simultaneously: "I couldn't stand returning home from a fair with empty hands."<sup>8</sup> At the time, he obtained most pieces through swapping. The highest amount he ever spent on a single stamp, catalogue number three of the Netherlands (i.e., the highest value of the first series), was 50 Euros. He never interrupted his philatelic activities; only during his military service were his stamp books momentarily out of use. For him the pleasure of philately is in the completion and the aesthetic quality of his collection.

Charles, our third case, had a youth collection covering the entire world. At the age of twenty, he dusted off his collection and, some years later, started limiting his acquisitions to the Netherlands and Switzerland. Initially, Charles sold at fairs in order to be able to expand his own collection. He reinvested all profits in his collection and in the acquisition of trading stock, particularly during the two years preceding his first stamp shop. Here, we clearly recognize the economic motivation of investment, i.e., the third characteristic of the configurational model I presented in the introduction.

As a boy Daniel, too, collected stamps from all over the world. Later, on his birthday or when he had good marks on his report, he would accompany his father, a veterinary, to a stamp shop to choose one Dutch stamp for some tens of Euros. Thus his father taught him that it was better to buy one quality object for a high price than to invest in a large quantity of poor quality. At age fifteen, Daniel became a member of a philatelic association and attended the monthly meetings. As his philatelic knowledge grew, he decided to reduce the number of countries from which he collected to those of which he had most stamps: the Netherlands and Overseas Territories, the DDR, Indonesia, Israel and France. Around age 17, his collector's passion decreased, although he continued buying the latest issues. The interrup-

tion did not last long and he developed his first trading activities. They consisted of swapping and buying and, then, buying entire collections which he re-sold through his club exchange booklets. He filled hundreds of such booklets a year, which was time consuming but also resulted in considerable profit—this corresponds with the economic motivation implied in the configurational model. Often, Daniel swapped stamps, noting the exchange rate; and returning the equivalent monetary value in stamps later. For example, he would give all his doubles from the Netherlands which were of interest to his exchange partner and would receive his partner's doubles from Israel.

Edwin, Daniel's son, also started collecting at an early age. He aimed to acquire stamps with the most beautiful images. He chose stamps from his father's stock as a reward for good school presentations. As a small child, he accompanied his father to fairs, where he tried to do business in the exchange corner and got a taste of the trade. During his military service and later as a professional soldier, he would stay in his parents' home. His father received many exchange booklets and always passed them on to his son. From the age of twelve, Edwin collected stamps originating from England and the Netherlands. Later, he stopped collecting modern Dutch stamps and only kept a classic collection until 1924. Moreover, he collected postage due, safe and telegraph stamps. He completed a collection of stamps from the United States after 1940 within one year. Besides this, he also has a topical—or "thematic"—collection of cars on stamps.

François' grandfather sailed on the Mediterranean Sea and to more distant destinations such as China and Japan. As a child François was allowed to tear off the stamps from his grandfather's letters. These covers would be of great value today, but, unfortunately, François stuck them to an album with tape, damaging them beyond repair. At a later age he started more seriously with marcophily (collecting postal covers with cancellations) and the postal history of all countries from which he could obtain covers with postmarks.<sup>9</sup> Driven by the educational motivation, François also researched the historical events that triggered the issue of these stamps, thus developing his philatelic knowledge (the incoming dimension of the educational drive:



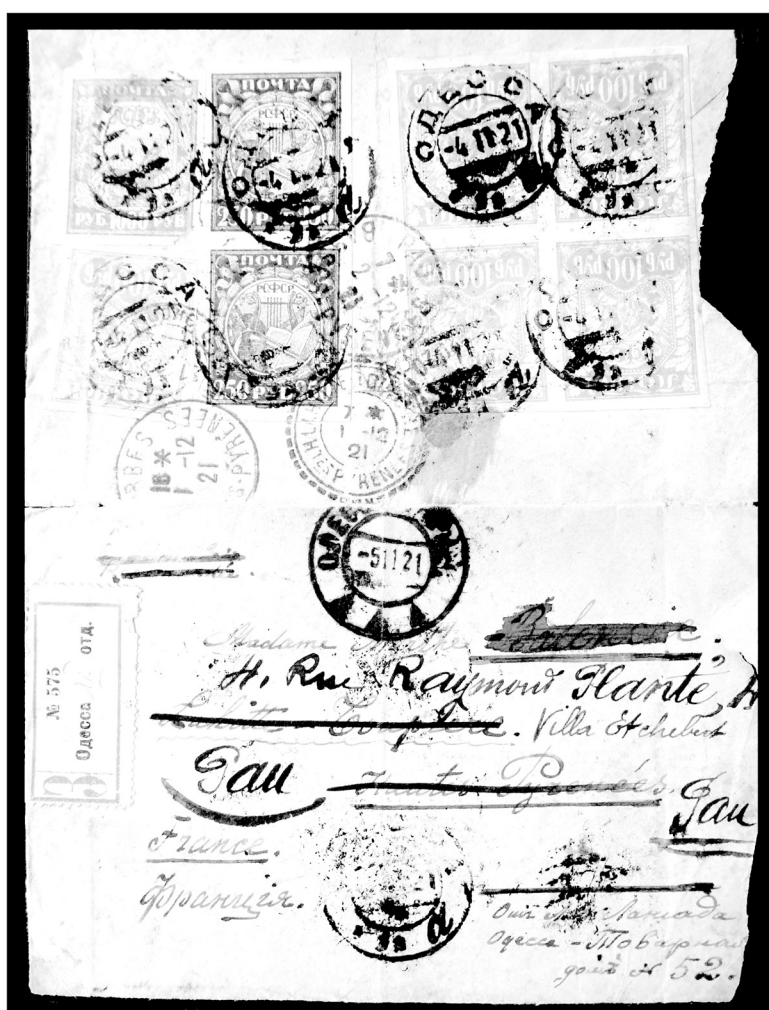
acquiring knowledge). During the bicentennial commemoration of the French Revolution, he exhibited 150 original covers from this time in the public library of his place of residence, and he later sold them.

As a child, Gérard had a “world collection” (i.e., every stamp he could lay his hands on) and, when he was older, specialized in the postal history of France, starting with the 18th century, when postmarks were still produced and decorated locally and by hand.

### The Transition from Personal Collection to Professional Trade

For some dealers, the transition to professional trade was abrupt; for others it was the logical step of a long process. Initially, Antoine did not accumulate material specifically for his trade. The most important element of his starting capital consisted of his specialized knowledge as a collector of local postal services worldwide. In the beginning, Antoine bought his trade goods principally from auction houses, but now an important part of what he acquires is at an Amsterdam stamp dealers’ café.

During the economic boom of the 1970s and 1980s, philatelic auction houses and shops flourished. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, this boom came to an end and many philatelic shops had to close down or were obliged to change their market strategy in order to survive. Initially, Antoine specialized in covers with postmarks, traditional and topical, and occasionally he made turnovers of 50,000 Euros at international fairs. At the time, custom formalities at the border were still a problem within the European context. At the end of the 1980s, both the interest in covers as well as the possibility of purchasing good material decreased. Even with a bigger volume of merchandise Antoine could not maintain his turnover. He increasingly shifted his trade in the direction of the exceptional extra-European material, or what he calls “the margins of the standard,” which other dealers cannot provide. He transformed his stock into 50 per cent covers and 50 per cent loose stamps, and he reduced his former stock of 150,000 covers to 30,000. Regarding the weight he had to transport every time to fairs he says: “Ten covers constitute



a small packet, but you can put ten stamps on a card with cellophane strips for the same price.”

Antoine says he spent about 60 hours per week on his trade. This could go up to 100 hours just before an important fair because of the manual work: “Then, the volume of my trade is crucial.” The total weight of his merchandise was about one tonne. He usually took about 600 kg to fairs, and he only took his entire stock to the largest fairs. Then, he employed someone for 75 Euros per day to keep a close watch on his booth. In 1998, in part because of the high table rent, he lacked sufficient stock to sell at the largest international fairs abroad: “There, moreover, my whole stock could be cut down within a week, and I would rather reserve that for my regular customers.” Because of his age, Antoine did not extend his trade stock any longer: “I don’t want to remain with large quantities of stamps at age 68.” He had come to a point where he wanted

**Fig. 2**  
Recommended letter  
(recto and verso) sent  
on November 5, 1921,  
from Odessa in Russia  
to Pau in France, with  
an arrival, including  
a change of address,  
on December 2, 1921.  
(Photo by author.)

to stabilize his revenues by offering his services to a philatelic auction house, where he would be in charge of the purchase and cataloguing two days per week.

Many of Bernard's colleagues had issues with the educational system and, although Bernard got along well with his students, he was confronted with spending cuts, restructurings and little promise of promotion. Initially, he wanted to complement his teaching job and became an amateur philatelic dealer. In 1995, when his turnover started to reach more than tens of thousands of Euros a year, in order to prevent problems with tax authorities, he registered as a dealer with the Chamber of Commerce. However, it was increasingly difficult to combine his philatelic trade with his teaching job. He voluntarily resigned and became a full-time dealer. Although his wife initially had doubts about his decision, her fears were eventually relieved. Compared to his former teaching job his revenues have declined slightly but, according to Bernard, it is easy to live with it: "I get so many things in return: pleasure in my work, freedom and independence." Bernard always purchases alone—he does not want to have problems with other dealers. He takes no financial risks, has no shop and no personnel other than his wife who assists him with bookkeeping. During the larger fairs, a collector, whom he pays in stamps, assists him. He has never invested much extra money in his trade and could increase his trading capital from within his own trade. Only on rare occasions does he spend extra money on an interesting batch. He does not purchase through auction houses either because he cannot view the items before purchasing, or because he loses a whole day by going there. He has had a trust-based relationship with a number of foreign suppliers for more than ten years now.

Bernard's first commodities consisted of two large ("mammoth") stock books. In the beginning, he frequented several fairs per month where he rented a one-metre booth. With the increase of the number of stock books, the number of metres of booth increased too. Today, his trade consists of forty mammoth stock books and he usually rents six metres of booth. Now, the monthly club fairs have become too small for him, while the large, international fairs will remain beyond reach until he increases his supply. Through advertisements

in a foreign dealers' journal he is also able to sell kiloware abroad and sees a growth potential for his trade in countries such as England, the United States and Canada. He actively participates in the exchange circuits of three clubs and fills some hundreds of stamp exchange booklets a year. Making up these booklets, as Sutton already remarked half a century ago, "takes up a great deal of time" (1959: 157). Bernard is even more explicit: "It's nasty work, but financially still interesting to do it besides." In the morning, he collects his parcels from the post office, and sorts out a small part for his own stock. He splits the largest part into quantities varying from 100 g to 5 kg (un-soaked). Most of this goes to amateur dealers, who soak the stamps off, put them on stock, and resell them to their customers.

Bernard says that he spends some 60 hours per week in his trade, and invests much time in soaking off stamps and in what he describes as "boringly sorting out": "If you can't stand that, you shouldn't do it; however, you simply can't live only from selling kiloware." He frequently drives to Germany to purchase merchandise and, about 10 times per year, to England, a total of 20,000 km per year. Incidentally, he buys one piece for 50 Euros, but he focuses rather on his turnover speed. His average selling price per stamp is between 20 cents and 2 Euros. He mainly sells packets, some 1,000 per year, which he sends by mail. Shop owners use his packets with stamps to lure customers into their shop. They also reach clients who are less aware of the regular trade and are thus ready to pay—for example—for a packet with 100 g German stamps, more than is current elsewhere. Moreover, Bernard participates in 10 medium-sized fairs per year, and receives dozens of customers at home. He either met them at a fair, or they noticed his trade through an advertisement.

Initially, Charles's shop was open in the evenings and on Saturdays, and on Sundays he had a stall at fairs. During this time he also started a quarterly auction. When the shop on the ground floor of his home became available, he moved his shop there. When his hours at work were reduced by half, he was able to open his shop in the afternoons and eventually, during his pre-retirement, for whole days. The philatelic trade has never been Charles's sole professional activity or source of income.<sup>10</sup> For Charles, trade

has always remained a hobby, and he says that he reinvests 90 per cent of his turnover in his trade.

Charles organized his first auction among the regular customers of his shop, but could only sell some of his 160 auction lots. A good client, a notary by profession and also the president of a stamp club, advised him: "You should do that differently, in a hotel for example." Charles followed this advice and took advantage of the opportunity to employ his advisor—for free—as a notary at his auctions. During his first hotel auction he sold almost 90 per cent of his lots, with a turnover of 750 Euros. At that time, his average turnover at fairs was still slightly more than 100 Euros per fair. During the first years, he was able to hold his auctions in the hotel of a friendly philatelist in the city centre without paying rent. After this friend's death, he moved his auction to a larger hotel with more parking places. He now pays rent for the space, but with a steeply rising turnover it remains profitable. Initially, Charles also auctioned much of his own material; now he mainly auctions the lots brought in by others. He still participates at fairs with his own letters, first-day-of-issue covers and philatelic accessories, but he no longer sells loose stamps, because other traders could offer them more cheaply. Holding a stand at fairs appears to be a good means to attract clients for his shop and auctions: "It's good that they see your face."<sup>11</sup> Charles is a member of three clubs because of his network and customer relations.

As a young man, Daniel held a stand twice per week with stock books on a regional fair. He says he had to do this because there was nothing left to swap. Over the course of time, he thus accumulated a lot of philatelic material. He had a good relationship with a local stamp dealer and when he was on holiday, Daniel looked after his shop. That dealer, however, had an extravagant lifestyle and later went bankrupt. Daniel and his brother negotiated with the trustee in bankruptcy about an eventual takeover purchase, but they could not agree on the terms, and the affair failed for the sake of 5,000 Euros. When they returned home, Daniel and his brother decided to stick to their project. In the city centre, they could take over a stamp shop from another owner with his stock, inventory and a file of 800 subscribers to the latest Netherlands stamp issues. Due to favourable circumstances such as the closure

of the biggest competing shop in town, their business ran smoothly from the start, and after several years they moved to larger premises in the same city centre. Prior to owning a shop, Daniel often sat waiting in front of a bathtub full of stamps to soak. Sometimes he threw entire album sheets in the tub in order to soak off mint, glued stamps. He invested some tens of thousands of Euros in his shop, though not in stamps, because he already had plenty of them. In the late 1940s, his older brother had purchased entire sheets with Dutch and German stamps, and Daniel had done so himself in the 1960s. At the time, purchasing entire sheets was still a form of investment: many people thought that they could earn money in the long run by buying ordinary stamps (the economic drive). Daniel always made his purchases with his own trading capital. Most purchases, usually from inheritances, happened over the counter. At auctions, he usually bid in writing.

Daniel sold the more expensive loose stamps, collections, covers, postal stationary and printing errors through three different auction houses.<sup>12</sup> The subscriptions to the latest stamp issues were also important and Daniel could provide stamps from almost all countries of the world and on all themes: "Those customers come at least four times a year in your shop, sometimes even every month." Together with the subscribers to first day covers he had some 1,000 subscribers: "Some clients collect so many countries that they spend 500 Euros per visit." The neighbouring post office sends him clients as well. He belonged to the very few dealers who still stocked the whole of stamps from western Europe, the Netherlands Antilles, Suriname, Indonesia and China. He had 30 mint and 30 cancelled copies of most Dutch stamps, and continually added to his stock. The most expensive stamp he ever sold yielded 1,500 Euros, but he also sold a complete national collection for 4,000 Euros once, which brings to mind Sutton's observation that "a good representative collection of *any* country will have a buyer waiting somewhere" (1959: 30; emphasis in original). For Daniel, the pleasure of trade was in meeting all sorts of people. There was also a dimension of adventure: "You think that you can resell something straight away, that you can do a favour for certain customers by providing them

something which they have been searching for, for a long time, and it's also great for your wallet.”

Initially, Daniel's wife ran the shop alone while her husband was busy with his regular job elsewhere. He only came in the shop in the evenings and on Saturdays. Their son Edwin, our fifth case, says,

I thought that my parents couldn't handle the shop and that I could do better. Five years ago, my contract in the army was finished, and my wife had a good income. Maybe I could have earned more elsewhere, but I didn't want to be motivated by money. I was not satisfied with the way my parents traded. When my father purchased a lot, he always wanted to go through it in detail, which often resulted in the lot remaining unsorted. I would rather sell it straight away.

In 1996, Edwin's takeover of the shop was definitive. The biggest competition (“false competition”) for Edwin comes from the privatized Netherlands postal service, which now also sells subscriptions on the latest foreign issues. The shop sales now consist of stamps, first-day covers, accessories (albums and catalogues), picture postcards, coins and archaeological artifacts. Edwin disposed of old watches and added Roman archaeological finds, which are good sellers. Picture postcards also sell well because they are now categorized. Most picture postcard collectors have a topographical focus; others are mainly interested in art reproductions or cards of certain printers. In a legal sense, Edwin is now his father's associate. His father's collecting behaviour

intertwined with his business behaviour and did not seem very rational in business terms. Edwin wants to develop a different attitude. He says his father is an amateur dealer with a shop, who constructed a good business for his children and thus created the precondition for them to become really professional. Edwin aims to become more professional by disposing of and adding certain sidelines and through his project to buy the regional auction.<sup>13</sup>

After being laid off from his former job, François had a weekly stand at regional fairs and at the Marseilles stamp market for a year. When he opened his shop, he was able to sell from his own supply, and he has had his shop for eight years and has worked in the stamp market for nine years. He does not sell through auctions any more. For him, auctions are not the best means for purchasing stock as he cannot view the pieces beforehand. He also criticizes mail auctions and Internet sales (eBay, Delcampe, etc.). The description “very beautiful,” he sighs, hardly ever corresponds with the reality of the material concerned.

Besides stamps, François sells old covers with cancellations (marcophily), postcards, numismatics and philatelic accessories. There are also dealers among his customers who come over to compliment them on their stock. He only takes a small part of his merchandise to the weekly stamp market in Marseilles. François' most important purchasing point is his own shop, with regular customers who, for example, shift

NAME	FIRST TRADE	STARTING CAPITAL	PURCHASE OF MERCHANDISE	SELLING POINTS
Antoine	As a child on the trunks of cars	Savings and a bank loan	Auctions and a stamp café	Fairs
Bernard	Amateur dealer at fairs	None	Dealers abroad	Fairs, dealers, at home, online
Charles	Amateur dealer at fairs	Other job	Other dealers	Shop, his own auction, fairs
Daniel	Amateur dealer at fairs	Other job	Inheritances and auctions	Shop, auctions
Edwin	As a child at fairs	Father's shop	Amateur and professional dealers	Shop
François	Amateur dealer at fairs	Accumulated material	Inheritances and amateur dealers	Shop, stamp market, fairs, online
Gérard	His own shop	Savings and accumulated material	Inheritances and auctions	Shop, auctions

Table 2. *Circumstances of Trade*

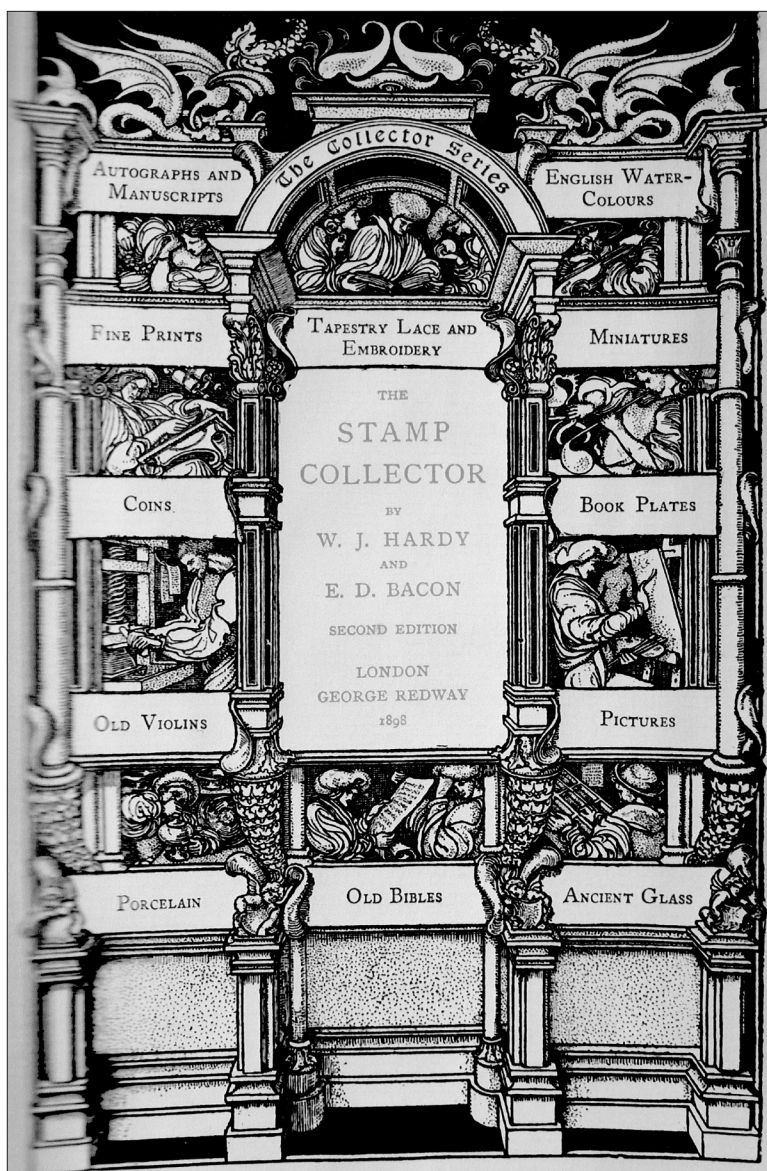


from one collection to another. Inheritances also occur, as Narbeth has observed: “It often happens that a [deceased] collector’s relatives have no idea of the real value because the collector dare not tell his wife how much he was spending on stamps” (1968: 116; see also Van der Grijp 2006: 246). If someone wants to know the value of a collection and applies for François’s help, he charges 2 per cent of the estimated value to that person. However, if someone wants to sell the collection, François makes a bid, “and, of course, that’s for free.” In the former case it concerns the catalogue value, in the latter the actual trade value for François in view of “a reasonable profit margin.” One can also sell one’s collection through an auction house, which charges 20 per cent of the selling price. A dealer who shows an interest in the problems, specialization and opinions of his customers is able to build a much more stable relationship with them than an uninterested dealer. François says, “I don’t sell just stamps, but solutions for problems. When a customer enters my shop, I first try to find out what problem that customer has in terms of his collection.”

Gérard opened his stamp shop in the 1970s, and identifies two kinds of customers: those who enter his shop and buy something immediately and those who come over to discuss, or show rare items and ask for advice, and thus increase their philatelic knowledge. Apart from working at his shop, Gérard also makes assessments for an auction house. He rarely holds a stand at fairs, and when he does he does not bring much merchandise—only the contents of one suitcase. He only attends fairs when his association co-organizes it, to represent the association of philatelic dealers of which he is the president. Table 2 summarizes some more characteristics of these seven dealers.

### What Remains of the Personal Collection after Becoming a Dealer

This article started with the following research question: What remains of a private collection when one makes a profession of it? Our case studies will now be reviewed in the light of this question and against the background of the theoretical assumption that “objects have a type of hold on [people]. In the end, objects cease to



be external to the individual: objects are their constitution, their subjectivity” (Woodward 2007: 174-75). In 1991, Antoine sold the largest part of his private collection in order to eliminate the shortages in his trade. This collection, of thousands of covers and postal stationery stocked in boxes, had become “too much” for him. Good care of such a collection requires much time, and Antoine preferred to make radical changes to his collection. The German local postal services yielded 50,000 Euros. He could sell a shoe box full of covers from Memel for 20,000 Euros to a friendly collector. He sold some 250,000 Euros in total, and invested part of the money in his business and another part in paying off his house.

**Fig. 3**  
Inside cover page of  
a classic book (1898)  
on stamp collecting,  
associating this collecting  
field with collecting  
autographs and  
manuscripts, fine prints,  
coins, old violins, etc.  
(Photo by author.)

He still owns a postal item of which there are only three known existing in the world. He demands 5,000 Euros for this item. He kept his research data on the German local postal services during the inflation period. He has never published on this subject, but continues to accumulate information from auction catalogues. He has also kept some doubles and less expensive pieces from an old collection, with a total value of 5,000 Euros.

In doing this, Antoine wants to be able to continue doing research on real material: "Certain collectors conduct philatelic research based on photocopies, but that isn't my way." This stance exemplifies Rogan's observation that "many collectors do regular research and their erudition—within limited fields—often surpasses that of museum curators and other specialists" (1998: 51). The most advanced philatelic collectors conceive of their hobby indeed as serious study, following a scientific model, and may become super connoisseurs within their particular—and indeed usually rather limited—subject of specialization. At the time, Antoine constructed a private collection for his pleasure. Later, this pleasure shifted its focus to having a good commercial stock: "It's unsatisfactory to have to say 'No' to a customer." At fairs, he wants to have a large supply of stamps from various countries and themes. He is still happy to deal in stamps ("I wouldn't like to deal in cubic meters of sand"), but, after having been a professional dealer for so many years, his enthusiasm is declining: "I've seen so much of that stuff go through my hands." Intellectually, trade is hardly a challenge any longer. Conducting philatelic research and publishing about it (the educational drive) could be a challenge, but he does not have the time left for it. Antoine does not see philatelic research as a pleasurable hobby: "Now I'm so busy with philately as work, I don't want to spend my free time on it too. For me philately is a profession with a pleasant dimension, but it's not a hobby."

For Bernard as well, it seems to be difficult to combine trade with collecting. In the late 1980s, he transformed all of his collections into trade stock. Initially, he kept stamps from several small countries for himself, such as Greenland and the Faroe Islands, but, as he explains: "at a certain point, as a dealer you get entire albums in your hands which took you years to complete as a collector." Everything becomes relative then:

"The transition to trade was not dramatic; what did my own collections amount to after all?" At present, he still keeps one private collection: 1,500 recommended letters from Austria. He has one item from every post office in Austria: "I'm still collecting it passively. When I see missing numbers, I keep them for myself." He says he has "no idea" why he continues to do so:

My real collection is my trading stock. I have, for example, a unique stock of used stamps from Liechtenstein, a country with some 40,000 inhabitants. It's a kind of semi-collecting. I spend more on it than what is reasonable in business terms, but they do remain trading goods. I don't want to make a habit of it, because I actually paid too much for it. It doesn't matter because it's only one country. It's a kind of collecting for trade, working back until the 1960s. Usually, these items are hard to obtain, but if you succeed in getting them, it's as satisfying as regular collecting. It's nice to sell rare items.

Bernard is a member of three philatelic clubs, but has never been on any committee board because of his lack of time and the incompatibility with his trade. As a wholesale dealer he also has shop owners who are also customers. He sticks to non-philatelic hobby activities intentionally and has more personal contacts there than within philately.

When Charles started his shop, he stopped collecting and sold his collections: "I had to do that; otherwise I wouldn't have any shop supply." He sees his shop as a run-away hobby. He no longer collects and he thinks that his trade has become his hobby. He wanted to meet a lot of people and explains that he does not know exactly why he became a dealer in philatelic material: "Maybe it's because you don't need any diplomas for that." The revenue is certainly not the biggest motivation: "If it would have been because of that, I'd stop immediately." Actually, he says, he seems to have fallen into it. He enjoys being an auctioneer. Usually, the suppliers of his auctions are not his regular customers. He works now with his third notary, who attends every auction for four hours. When the first notary's health declined, he referred the second and third notaries to Charles. They are also collectors.

At the age of forty-one, Daniel sold his collections from Israel, Indonesia and East Germany in his shop. This was not only due

to the opening of the shop, but also because he had almost completed these collections. He wanted to be able to continue collecting. I call this the “shifter principle”: when real collectors for whatever reason experience severe limitations in the continuation of their collection, they may open up—and thus shift to—another collection. Over the years, other countries and areas replaced his former collections: French and Spanish Andorra, the Baltic States, Slovakia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, his favourite country is Germany:

There is no other country whose history you can follow so clearly through stamps: the old German states, the German Empire in 1874, the colonies, the extended German Empire and, during its decline, the emission of stamps on non wood-free paper, to mention only some major markers. It’s a challenge to try to complete all of this.

This quotation marks Daniel’s degree of enthusiasm for philately, an “overdose” of enthusiasm criticized as “unprofessional” by his son, although the latter also continues his private collection in addition to his professional trade. Daniel mainly collects via auctions and exchange booklets of two local clubs. Although these purchases are usually more expensive than those from his regular trade circuit, he prefers purchasing from them to distinguish his own

collector’s activity from his shop: “I could take the good stamps from the shop but, then, I wouldn’t really collect any longer.” The most expensive items in his collection cost him about 500 Euros. In general, he does not buy loose stamps, but rather entire collections, which he then offers for sale. He explains that he tries to keep his professional trade circuit and his private collecting (and corresponding semi-dealing) activities strictly separated, and even has distinct bank accounts for them. This behaviour confirms Belk’s thesis that dealers tend to “keep their collection distinct and separate from the collectibles that they sell” (1998: 13). In the past, Daniel filled hundreds of club exchange booklets per year. They brought in some hundreds of Euros yearly, allowing him to finance his private collection entirely. He is a member of three clubs, but since he opened his shop, he does not attend the club meetings any more. He continues his membership mainly for the exchange booklets and philatelic press. For Daniel, the pleasure of philately is in the combination of recreation and creativity in, for example, composing his own album pages and adding new pieces. There is also the excitement in discovering stamp printing errors. Through philately he develops his personal knowledge about culture, art and history—in other words, his drive is educational.

NAME	YOUTH COLLECTION	ADULT COLLECTION	COLLECTION WHILE BEING A DEALER
Antoine	Germany	German local postal services during the Depression	Some less expensive samples from former collection
Bernard	Western Europe and Australia	Twelve country collections	1,500 recommended covers from Austria
Charles	World collection	The Netherlands and Switzerland	None
Daniel	World collection	The Netherlands and overseas territories, East Germany, Indonesia, Israel, France	Germany, France and overseas territories until 1945, Andorra, Baltic states, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Edwin	England and the Netherlands	The Netherlands until 1924; surcharge, safe and telegraph stamps; U.S.; cars on stamps	U.K. and U.S.
François	France, Switzerland and Germany	Marcophily of Paris before 1900, postal history of Bouche-du-Rhône	Fifty samples of most expensive French stamps on covers
Gérard	World collection	18th-century French postal history	French postal history; collections of books, antiques and art

*Table 3. Past and present collecting activities of professional dealers*



His son Edwin buys the items for his own collection mainly through specialized club exchange booklets. Since 1993, he has been the section head of two sections of such booklets. This allows him to be one of the first viewers of the stamps offered for sale, and thus have first choice. However, he is not a member of the clubs specializing in his collecting areas of Great Britain and the U.S. for fear of buying too many stamps. In the past, he often looked at his father's collection and thought: "I want that too." He now collects classic English and American stamps and focuses on perforations, colour variations and watermarks. Modern English issues contain many worthwhile subjects in his view, in contrast to the modern American ones, which "look too much like children's stamps." He thinks the modern Dutch issues "too modern-art-like." In England and France, he says, they make "something classical" out of them, especially the reproduction of artworks. Thus, Edwin's stamp collection seems to be a means of looking for authenticity in art (Van der Grijp 2009).

From the start, for François, philately was linked to stamps' and covers' monetary value and ability to generate revenue. When he was still young, François collected "anything." He never completed his collection mint, nor his collections of Swiss and Germany and, after having sold these collections through auctions, specialized in Parisian cancellations from the beginning of the 18th century until 1900. Another collection concerned the cancellations of the French department Bouches-du-Rhône. He also specialized in surcharges on covers with the first stamp issue. Meanwhile, François sold all these collections through his trade. The only collection he maintains includes some fifty covers with one of the most expensive French stamps. In principle, he does not sell anything from that collection. Although, on one occasion he felt obligated to sell one piece from it, as a favour for a customer. He keeps his most expensive pieces as a financial reserve in a safe.

Gérard's philatelic hobby is compatible with his trade, as long as he has the financial means to keep his items of interest. If he did not have the means, he says, he would have to sell his own collection. His passion for old books, art and antiques complements his philatelic passion. He takes pleasure in the possession of a well-filled

library and emphasizes the importance of books on postal history. This major branch of philately studies postage as a means of communication through research on postal covers combined with political history. Gérard has some hundreds of books on these topics and made a catalogue consisting of one one-page description per book. He also writes detailed comments beside the covers in his philatelic collection; he is clearly motivated by the educational drive. He values the beauty of a cover while appreciating the postmark and finding the postal trajectory "interesting." Thus, he analyzes the cover, its particular aesthetics and the technical and socio-cultural realities behind it. Table 3 summarizes some data, focusing on the collecting activities of the seven dealers of our case studies.

## Conclusions

This article aimed at providing detailed insight into the European philatelic business culture and the actual strategies of dealers from an economic anthropological perspective and by means of extended case studies, the biographical method and discourse analysis. The second question I stated at the beginning of this article was: how professional are philatelic professional dealers after all? In answering this question, it becomes clear that currently, for most professional dealers, it is very hard if not impossible to generate a "reasonable" income—let alone an ample one—exclusively through philatelic trade. They have a second source of income, such as a part-time or even a full-time job or a working partner, or, behind the façade of a stamp shop, they deal in closely related merchandise such as picture postcards, numismatics, archaeological finds, framed engravings of cityscapes, second-hand jewellery or other goods that have nothing to do with philately. Moreover, many shops are closing down due to competition from online sales. The present-day market for this particular form of material culture is becoming increasingly multi-sited. Its focal point shifts from the traditional philatelic shops to the internet. However, there still seems to be a market segment reserved for at least some regular shops as well as for localized auction houses, the latter in particular dealing in the highest philatelic values.



As we have seen in this article, many philatelic dealers make the choice to become a professional dealer only halfway through their professional life. Some quit their regular job for it; others lose their job due to company reconstruction or bankruptcy and see in their philatelic trade the possibility of getting out of a dead-end career. We can speak here of dealers' positive and negative choices: either they give up another career for it or they create a new professional perspective via trade when their career stagnates. The transition from amateur to professional always includes people—mostly men—who have previously been passionate collectors and have therefore accumulated the necessary experience as amateur dealers. In almost all cases it involves former collectors who acquired a taste for dealing at fairs and started amateur trading parallel to their regular job. They did what other passionate collectors might wish to do too: they transformed their hobby into a profession. In this article, we have been able to see what remains of a private collection when one turns it into a profession: in one case nothing at all; in other cases the trade seems to strengthen the collecting activities. In most cases, professional philatelic dealers continue collecting in a limited way, a private activity that remains at odds with their professional trade.

In the introduction, I sketched the configurational model of collectors' motives that I already developed in earlier publications. In view of the subject matter of the present article, professional philatelic trade, it is no surprise that in these biographical case studies the economic motivation of investment for profit dominates. The motivations of ego-enlargement and augmentation of social status through collecting (respectively, the psychological and sociological drives) have to be seen in the light of professional careers that often stagnated in the past and that for many, although for different reasons (see below), are still problematic today. Apart from Charles, all professional dealers continue col-

lecting, usually in a limited way, although several (Daniel, Edwin and Gérard) define these limits in a rather large way. The second most important set of motivations seems to be of the educational order, the pleasures of learning and transmitting knowledge, with a strong component of nostalgia: continuing a passion they already developed in their youth, but now with both adult and professional means—i.e., (more) money and market knowledge.

Although, for certain philatelists, the transition from being only a collector to the professional trade can be a means of saving their declining career in another job which is linked to a personal crisis, not many of them become rich, to say the least. Someone who wants to become a professional dealer at present should, according to the professionals I interviewed, build this up carefully, and not be too eager to invest immediately. "A too large leap in the deep end," as one of them expresses it, "makes it difficult to get hold of a good position on the market." For this kind of trade a solid philatelic knowledge is required. A personal background as an advanced collector appears to be a *sine qua non*. The decreasing number of young collectors may become a future problem. Moreover, private companies and other organizations are using fewer real stamps for sending mail, if they are not using email instead, due to efficiency becoming increasingly important in the business world. Staff at companies is also banned from investing time in non-business linked activities such as tearing off stamps from business letters. Companies tend to destroy covers through paper shredders to protect privacy, as required by the law. Self-adhesive stamps and an excessive quantity of different emissions per country flood the market, including all sorts of so-called "philatelic" side products.<sup>14</sup> This excessive commercial emission policy of the privatized postal services in the Netherlands and in France—as well as elsewhere in the world—is a thorn in the flesh of many dealers and serious collectors.

## Notes

1. For a selection of literature on the cultural phenomenon of collecting in general see: Belk (1995); Blom (2002); Elsner and Cardinal (1994); Macleod (2008); Pearce (1995, 1997); Pomian (1987, 2003); Rheims (2002); Rogan (2005); and Vincent (2011).
2. Political representations on stamps, including idealized portraits of heads of state and other national symbols of “imagined communities” (Anderson 2006 [1983]), constitute a relevant object of study. See, for example, Child (2008); Deans (2005); Deans and Dobson (2005); Dobson (2005); Evans (1992); Frewer (2002); Jeffery (2006); Jonsson (2005); Nuessel (1992); Raento and Brunn (2005); Van den Muijzenberg (2000); and Zei (1997).
3. The most expensive cover is the so-called Bordeaux letter with the (catalogue) numbers 1 and 2 of Mauritius, including the incorrect inscription “POST OFFICE” (Morgan 2006). In 1993, when this cover was auctioned for the last time, it was sold for 6.5 million German marks (more than 3 million Euros). Its present value is estimated at 5 million Euros.
4. Exchange booklets (also called circular booklets and club books) are small notebooks of about sixteen pages. Each page has ten printed squares on which stamps are attached and under each a price is displayed—for example, 40 per cent of the catalogue value. These booklets circulate among the members of philatelic associations, and they may select stamps and transfer the asking price to the bank account of the treasurer. The latter will retain 5 per cent for the association and transfer the balance to the owners of the respective stamps.
5. The difference between men and women is also striking, as one dealer, who says he has many women among his clients and who is outspoken about their collecting behaviour, observes: “Women are mainly preoccupied with thematic philately. You’ll hardly find women among specialized collectors who spend more than average. Women don’t have the same feeling towards collecting. I don’t know any woman who would spend much money on stamps. A woman may buy hundred stamps for 100 Euros, but a man is able to spend the same amount on one stamp. A woman would never do that.” See also on this topic: “A Gendered Collecting Field,” chapter eleven in Van der Grijp (2006) and Rogan (1999, 2012).
6. The names of the principal people in the case studies, in alphabetical order, are pseudonyms. For the same reason of privacy protection, the names of most towns are not revealed. On January 1, 2002, the Euro replaced the guilder in the Netherlands and the franc in France. All monetary figures in the case studies have been converted to Euros.
7. Belk speaks here erroneously of “pre-philatelic postal material” (1995: 86) because it dates from long before the existence of the first postage stamps. For me, this material, however exceptional it may be, is also philatelic.
8. All translations mine.
9. This reminds us of a philatelic observation made long ago: “The album which would give us the most vivid historical lesson would be that in which the collector had retained his postage stamps on the covers of the letters they originally franked; for post-marks have their share in recording history” (Hardy and Bacon 1898: 145).
10. Because his philatelic trade was not his primary source of income, he was not allowed to become a member of the Netherlands Association of Philatelic Dealers, the NVPH, at the time. However, he could become a member of a dealers’ association in Amsterdam. When this association fused with the NVPH later, he was accepted there—five other candidates were refused because they did not have a shop.
11. Charles mails some 1,000 auction catalogues. A client who doesn’t make a bid in two years is eliminated from the mailing list. Two per cent from his total turnover comes from fairs, 35 per cent from his auctions and 63 per cent from the shop. Ten per cent of the turnover in the shop consists of stamps and 90 per cent of philatelic and other (numismatic, for example) accessories.
12. Twenty-five per cent of the turnover in Daniel’s shop consisted of stamps, 25 per cent of first-day-covers, 25 per cent of coins, and 25 per cent of a mixture of engravings, picture postcards, telephone cards, old watches and philatelic and numismatic accessories (albums, catalogues and the like).
13. During my last visit to him, in 2012, Edwin informed me that his colleague Charles had recently died, and that he (Edwin) took over Charles’s trading stock. Edwin was thus able to establish a monopoly, since the only other philatelic shop owner in town had retired. Edwin, however, did not in the end continue Charles’ auction house due to increasing competition by the large internet auction sites.
14. Since the introduction of the (adhesive) stamp in 1840, according to a recent Stanley Gibbons world catalogue, 485,000 different stamps have been issued, and 11,000 of these in the previous year (Gibbons 2009).

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