

Coming Unglued

Unmounting your stamps

By Diana Sample

When I moved from Connecticut to Arizona, I was appalled by the estimate from the moving company. "Why is this costing so much?" I asked the man the moving company had sent out to the house. "Lady, it's mostly because of *these things*," he answered, wiggling a finger at my huge rubber stamp collection.

For the past seven years, "these things" have lived happily in my Tucson stamp room and many, many more of "these things" have been added, thanks to numerous stamp conventions and the popularity of online ordering.

When I moved my elderly father to Tucson, I found

him an apartment in a charming retirement community. However my first thought on seeing the two tiny rooms was: If I had to move here, where would I put my stamps? It was then that I began to consider unmounting my stamp collection, and last summer I decided to take the plunge.

I didn't do this because of lack of space. My stamp room had lots of great storage, consisting of 132 Closet Maid drawers (17" x 22" each) in six towers, with two layers of stamps in each drawer. But the six towers reached the ceiling, and I had to access the top drawers on a ladder, lift out a very heavy drawer and carry it down over my head. Since

Animals (Birds, Bugs, Webs, Water Animals, Butterflies) Drawer 1

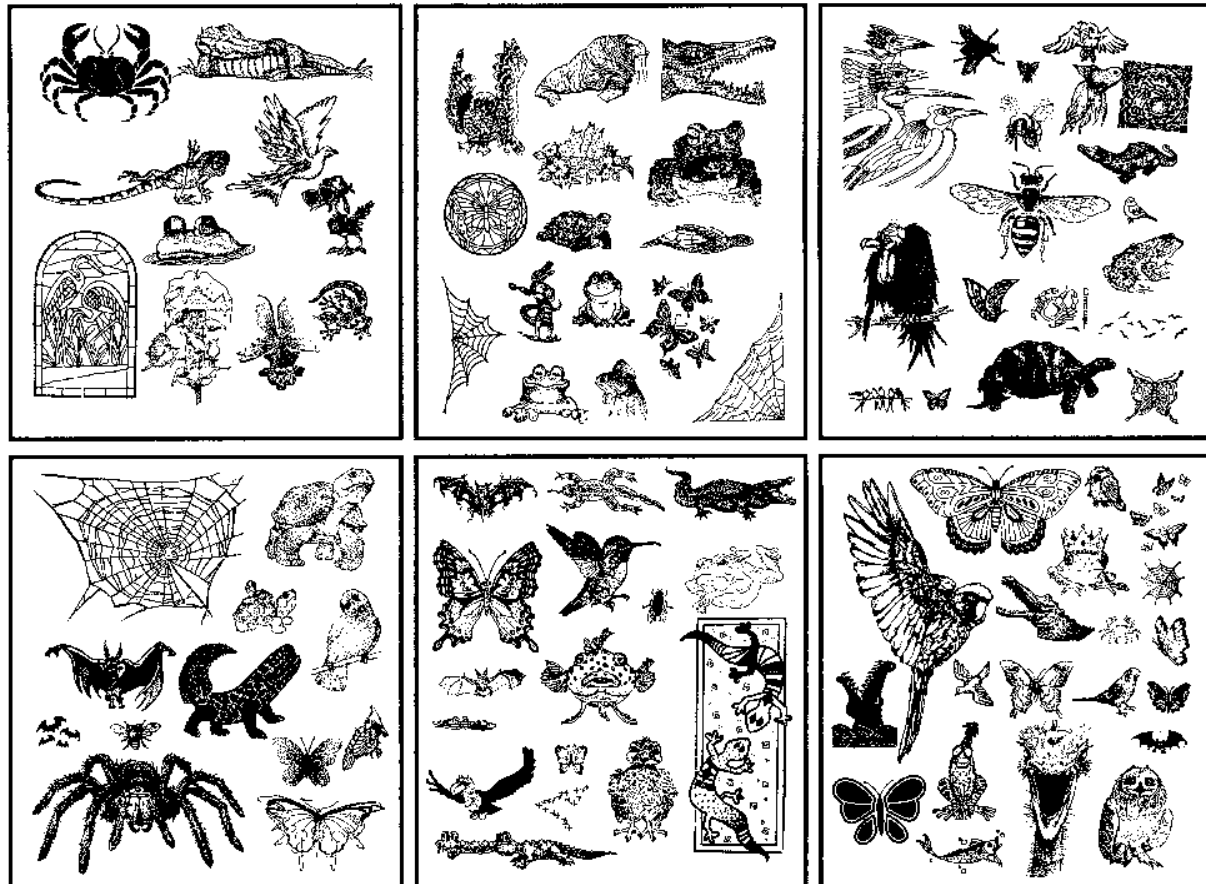


Figure 1: Binder pages make it easy to find the stamp you're looking for. In this case, Animals (Birds, Bugs, Webs, Water Animals, Butterflies) are stored in Drawer 1.

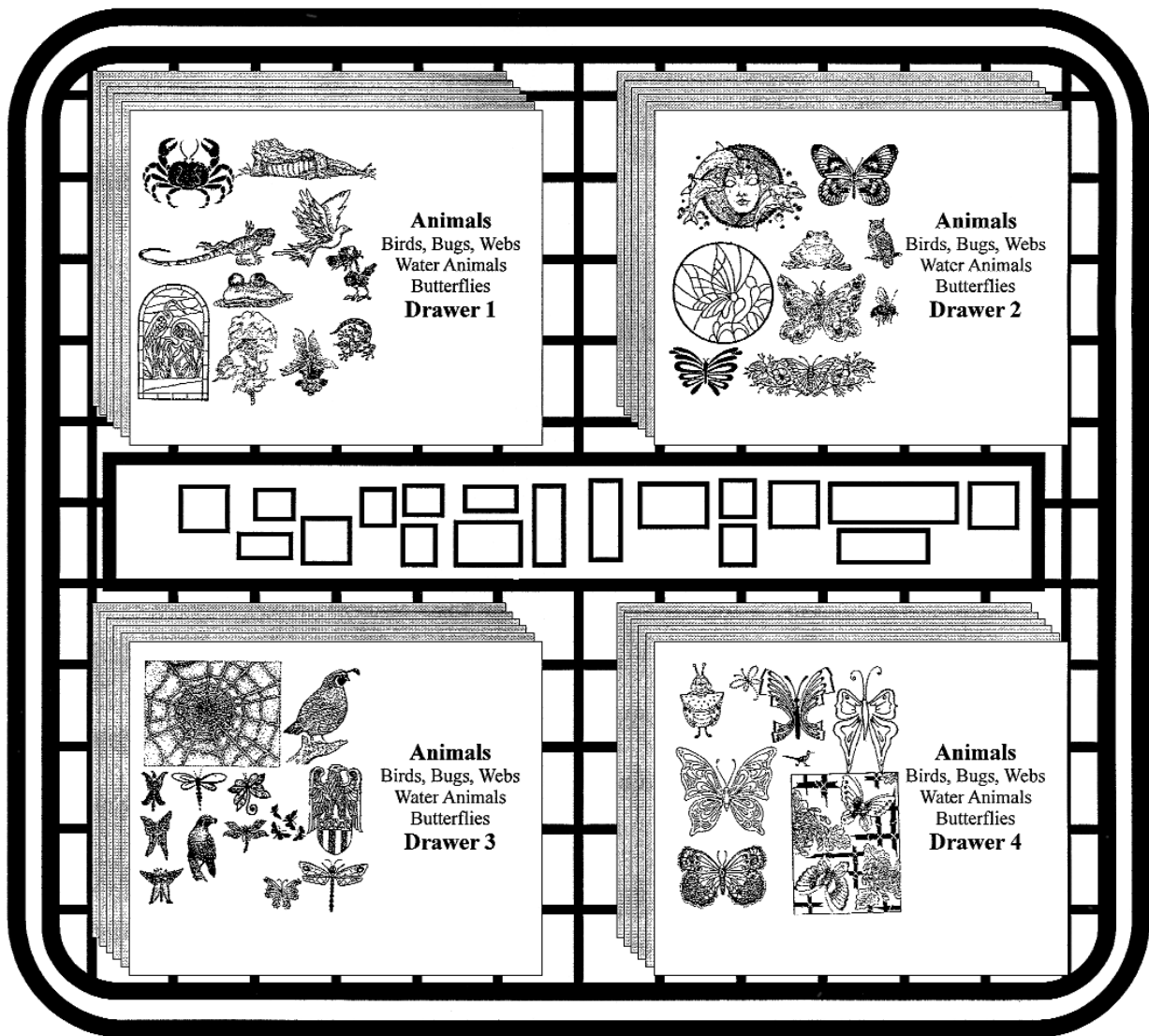


Figure 2: After unmounting, six envelopes will fit in each drawer. Each envelope contains the rubber dies shown on the front of the envelope. Each drawer is 22 inches across the top and 17 inches down the side. Smaller mounted stamps are stored in a long plastic silverware box between the envelopes.

Senior Citizen days are just around the corner for me, I knew this was eventually going to be a disaster. All I could think of was how absurd an obituary would be for a person who was killed by falling rubber stamps.

Unmounting my stamps (nearly 8,000 stamps collected over 20 years) took two months. When I finished, my thumbs were swollen to twice their size from peeling rubber off the cushion. I'd set fire to the microwave twice. My left hand was sliced and gouged from the X-Acto knife blade I kept shoving between the rubber and cushion, and while my husband was initially very supportive and kept carting away the wood blocks and bringing in more empty boxes, his enthusiasm quickly waned.

Was it worth it? Definitely. But it's a process like reading the Classics in high school. You're glad you did it, but you're glad it's over.

Planning phase

Because I knew nothing about using unmounted stamps and because there's a lot of information about the various temporary mounting systems available on the Internet, I decided to do some research and planning first. The simplest and cheapest method came from the ERA Graphics website. This consisted of sticking the bare rubber die to an acrylic block with double-sided tape. No cushion is used. I tried this with several unmounted dies and an acrylic block and it worked very well.

While I knew this was going to be a time-consuming project, I didn't want to go to a lot of expense or stray from what I've always considered to be a very useful cataloging system. The Closet Maid drawer system (available at Home Depot) I used for mounted stamps consisted of six frames

holding ten wire drawers each, and eighteen 4-drawer frames that I'd attached to the larger ones as the collection grew (the frames are available with 4, 7 or 10 drawer slots and you can use either single drawers or larger ones). I wanted to do away with all the smaller frames and just use the 10-drawer frames for stability.

I bought the following items:

- Acrylic mounting blocks in various sizes.
- Several rolls of Scotch Poster Tape, which is wide, double-sided and removable.
- Two boxes of 6" x 9" white catalog envelopes.
- Narrow plastic boxes that are normally used for holding silverware.
- A clear plastic sorter, like you might use for holding envelopes or stationery. This holds all my pre-taped acrylic mounting blocks.
- A box of laser printer business cards.
- Several packages of plastic clip-on name badges.

The incredible shrinking collection

Before I began unmounting, I decided on a storage plan for the rubber dies. For many years I've kept huge binders with the full-sized stamped images by category. Each page is labeled with the category and sub-category and drawer number they were stored in. For example: Animals—Birds, Bugs, Webs, Water Animals, Butterflies—Drawer 1.

When a drawer was full, which was usually six 8½ x 11 pages of images, I'd scan all of the image sheets for that drawer and reduce each sheet using a computer drawing program. I'd print all these smaller page images on a single 8½ x 11 landscape page with the same heading as the larger pages (see Figure 1). Since this binder, showing the full contents of each drawer on one page, is small and manageable, I often take it on trips or to conventions to prevent buying the same stamp twice.

I used these reduced individual page images to print 6" x 9" catalog envelopes and put the corresponding rubber dies in each envelope. (If my stamp collection had been smaller, I might have invested in something sturdier than paper

I slowed down and started judging each stamp before I took it apart. If it looked like the rubber was too delicate or dry, I left it mounted.

envelopes). When I was done, I'd gone from 132 very heavy drawers to 60 light ones. (14 of them are still empty, but in 20 years the passion for stamping has never waned and these drawers will fill up.) The room was full of sunshine again and there

was actually room to move around. Each drawer now holds the contents of what were formerly four drawers of mounted stamps (see Figure 2).

During the unmounting process, I lost several stamps that can't be replaced because the company went out of business years ago. The rubber was old and dry and the die literally disintegrated. Eventually I slowed down and started judging each stamp before I took it apart. If it looked like the rubber was too delicate or dry, I left it mounted.

For storing smaller stamps that remained mounted, I placed a long plastic silverware box between the rows of envelopes. These boxes not only hold mounted stamps, but they keep the stacks of envelopes separated. I left very large stamps on the mounts and dedicated an entire row of drawers to them.

I used clip-on badges (like people might wear at a convention or a meeting to display their name) for labeling each drawer. Since the drawers are open wire, these badges clip to them very easily. I printed the contents of each drawer on laser printer business cards and then inserted these cards into the plastic badges.

Since I already had six tops for the Closet Maid frames, I now had a row of six frames with ten drawers each, all with tops. Lined up against one wall, they gave me a terrific work surface for my paper cutter, Xyron Machine, and cutting mats (see Figure 3). On the wall above the drawers I printed out a guide so I can find the categories easily.

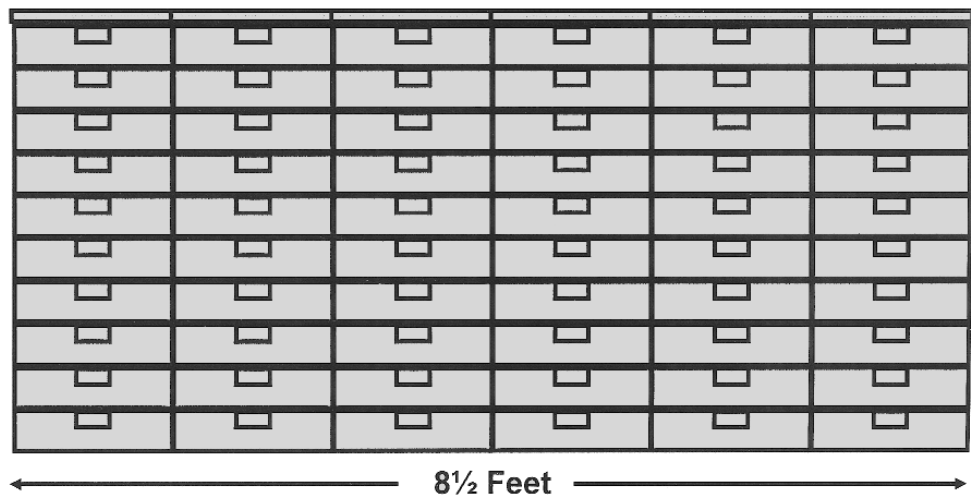


Figure 3: A storage system that once went floor to ceiling is now a row of six frames with ten drawers each, all with tops. Lined up against one wall, they provide a terrific work surface for paper cutter, Xyron Machine, and cutting mats.

Microwave madness

I unmounted the stamps according to the catalog pages of the large binders with the full-sized images. If the company name was on the mount, I wrote it under the image. If I was going to leave the stamp mounted, I indicated that, too. Some of the dies peeled off easily and others still have cushion stuck to them to avoid damaging the die; although as time goes by, I find the remaining cushion comes off without a problem.

I tried putting several of the difficult stamps in the microwave because I'd heard it would soften the glue. When the recommended few seconds didn't work, I kept trying for longer periods until the wood finally caught fire . . . and the dies were still firmly attached.

I had a huge accumulation of wood blocks. Since they all had indexing and cushion stuck to them, selling them wasn't an option. I kept several of the colored ones for future reference, and announced to my husband that I'd need to use his truck for a run to the dump. He was horrified. I listened to a long lecture about the quality of the wood and how he couldn't possibly let me throw them away because they might be useful for projects when he retires. So I bought a stack of moving boxes and piled them up in the garage. A week later, my husband had a shed built so he could save the wood mounts. If I had to guess, they'll still be here long after we are.

Multiplication

Twenty years ago, my daughter took a picture of me posed in front of a wall-mounted printer's box holding nine rubber stamps. I suspect they multiplied during the night in my family room in Connecticut because I can't imagine how the collection has grown so large.

Looking at these stamps closely for two months also made me wonder why I'd bought many of them—but taste, as well as circumstances, change in two decades. I find that I'm stamping a lot more (and better) than I used to because trying to find a mounted stamp in a large, heavy drawer often made me substitute another I could access more easily.

I like the see-through mounts, and when the Scotch Poster Tape gets dirty or doesn't stick anymore, it's easy to just peel it off and apply new tape. Ordering unmounted stamps is cheaper—they arrive quickly, and I save time at stamp conventions because I no longer have to hunt obsessively for the right wood block for an unmounted stamp.

Cleaning up at the end of a night of stamping is a breeze . . . I just lay out the dies on a plastic plate, spray them with Simple Green and rinse.

I think of my stamps more as art tools now, rather than possessions, and if I ever have to move again, I'm ready!



Diana Sample lives and stamps and came unglued in Tucson, Arizona.
