

Thumbnails and Toenails; Perkies and Jousis – Mal Southwood – February 25, 2009

“Thumbnails” are an ideal collectable size for mineral specimens; small enough for convenient storage, yet large enough to allow naked-eye appreciation and to have aesthetics comparable with pieces in the “miniature” and cabinet size ranges.

Unlike my more artistic peers, my collection is arranged in drawers. I have experimented with display cabinets in the past but been unable to produce arrangements that I’ve been happy with. As a scientist I like labels with some degree of detail to accompany my specimens, and I find that this preference is not well suited to the display cabinet option. (I’m also far too lazy, by the way, to maintain a display cabinet free of dust!)

However, a drawer full of thumbnails, each carefully mounted in standard boxes, is a very pleasing sight. The collection can very readily be arranged by species, by locality, or by any other convenient grouping. Each specimen is encased in its own dust-free cocoon, and the bottom of each box (or even the top, should one wish) is an ideal place to paste a label which, with modern computer fonts, can include a useful amount of information. Another distinct advantage for collectors wishing to exchange minerals by post, is that a good number of these smaller specimens can be mailed very easily and inexpensively in a small parcel.

Over almost thirty years of collecting, almost half of my specimens are listed in my catalogue as “TN” – thumbnails! I like thumbnails for all of the above reasons, and that is why I responded immediately to Larry Rush’s call to reactivate the ITMCA.



But then, on further consideration, I realised that my use of the term “thumbnail” deviates just a little from the official line. The one-by-one-inch size criterion works well in the USA, and the “Perky” box has become the standard for mounting “thumbnails”. Yet having lived in South Africa during the 1980s, back in the UK through the 1990s, and now in Australia, the “Perky” has not been my box of choice. Instead I use the European “Jousi” boxes (pictured), which (and I’m reaching for a ruler as I write) measure precisely 36mm long, by 30mm wide, and have a depth of 29mm; all dimensions somewhat bigger than the regulatory “one inch cube”.

So what to do? I rather like the Jousi boxes! The transparent dome allows for better visibility of the specimen than the Perkies. Depending on the appearance of the specimen, I line the bottom of the box with either black or white card, and then mount the specimen with “mineral tack” on the card. I find the result more pleasing than the Styrofoam base to which many collectors glue their Perky-sized specimens. So I’m sticking with my Jousis!

And the specimens themselves? Many of them, of course, do fit the official one-inch size requirement, but then again, quite a few don’t! I will certainly continue to think of all my specimens in this (Jousi-box) size range as thumbnails, but purists will dispute this and understandably so. A collector of Perky-sized minerals would be peeved to receive my Jousi-sized specimens in an exchange because they wouldn’t fit in the Perky boxes. By contrast, my only concern with Perky-sized specimens is the common requirement of detaching them from the mix of glue and Styrofoam on which they are invariably mounted.

I notice that several dealers have coined the term “toenail” for these slightly larger specimens, and perhaps that is a good term for describing my “thumbnails” that don’t quite fit in a “thumbnail” box.

In the event that I am exchanging “thumbnails” with fellow-collectors, I will always specify the size of each mineral specimen, rather than assuming that we all work with exactly the official size criteria, and with the same stock of boxes!

Malcolm Southwood, Melbourne, February 2009