

Using Omeka To Publish a Stamp Collection Online

by Christopher D. Cook

In the 3rd Quarter 2013 issue of *Philatelic Literature Review*, APRL Librarian Tara Murray describes her impressions of the latest Special Libraries Association conference.¹ Among the session topics that piqued her interest was the collection publishing software called Omeka. This mention spurred me to take up the subject in order to bring to a wide philatelic audience my experiences using Omeka to catalog and publish a stamp collection.

In early August 2013, I set up an Omeka installation on the danteonstamps.com web domain that I own. I originally launched this site in March 2010 using MediaWiki software (the same software that powers Wikipedia) but, finding myself lacking the skills necessary to customize and update MediaWiki, I decided it was time to move to a new platform. Being a librarian, I was aware of Omeka from various conference presentations and my further investigation of the software's capabilities led me to adopt it for my online stamp repository. Below is a basic overview of Omeka and summaries of three stamp sites that are published with Omeka.

What Is Omeka?

Developed by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, Omeka is a “free, flexible, and open source web-publishing platform for the display of library, museum, archives, and scholarly collections and exhibitions.”² “Omeka” is the Swahili word meaning “to display” and this is a fitting name for software that emphasizes good design and exhibit building. Omeka organizes content (“items”) in collections and provides robust metadata (information about items in the collection such as description, country, date of issue, etc.) management. Omeka is being used

for a range of projects by a spectrum of entities from large institutions like the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library to individual collectors.³

Installation

If, after reading about the features of Omeka below, you decide to try it for publishing your philatelic collection online, there are two options for doing so:

- 1) the do-it-yourself installation, maintenance, and customization; or
- 2) the subscription service provided by Omeka.net.

Readers who are comfortable with web hosting and management and

have the technical know-how can find system requirements on Omeka's "Preparing to Install"⁴ page, while full installation instructions are located on the "Installation"⁵ page. (It is worth noting that Omeka is only "free" in the sense that one does not pay for the software; hosting and equipment, if needed, would not necessarily be free.)

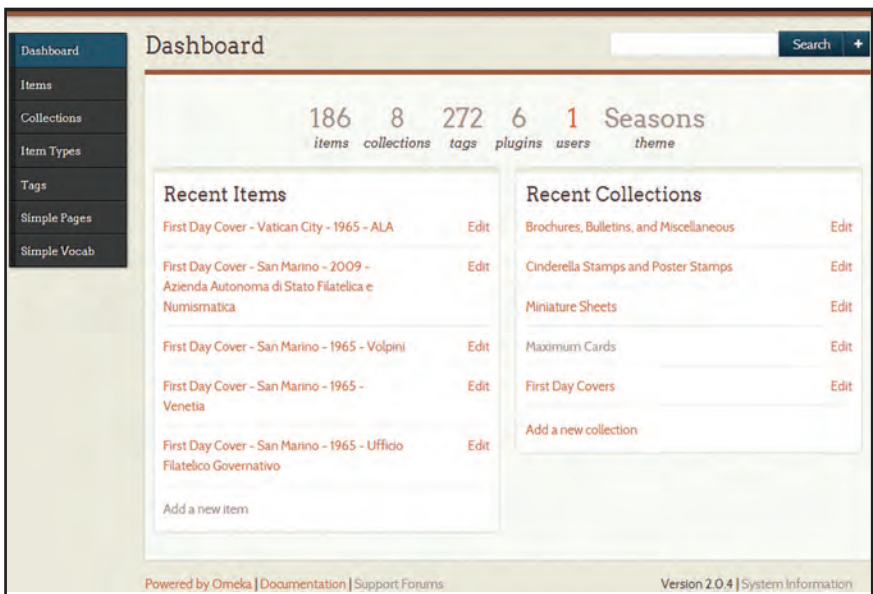
Most readers likely would be more comfortable using the Omeka.net service, which offers five plans based on site size, ranging from "Basic" (free, 500 MB) to "Platinum" (\$999 per year, 25 GB).⁶ After an account is created, Omeka.net users are able to start customizing their sites immediately from any computer with an Internet connection. Using the "Free" account on Omeka.net would be an excellent way to experiment with Omeka before fully committing.

Dashboard

In Omeka, most settings and uploaded files and their associated meta-data are managed centrally from an administrative dashboard. The dashboard has a simple, intuitive interface and allows users to see Omeka's basic items/collections structure. The dashboard shows statistics on number of items, collections, tags, plug-ins, users, theme, and exhibits and presents links to manage those features and more. Recently added items and collections are given prominence as well. Full documentation on the dashboard may be found at http://omeka.org/codex/Using_the_Omeka_Admin_2.0.

Adding Items

Manually adding items to an Omeka site is straightforward. From the "Items" area of the dashboard select "Add an Item." A form will appear



Screenshot of Dante on Stamps Omeka dashboard.

The screenshot shows the Omeka 'Add an Item' form. On the left is a navigation menu with 'Dashboard', 'Items', 'Collections', 'Item Types', 'Tags', 'Exhibits', and 'Simple Pages'. The main content area is titled 'Add an Item' and has a breadcrumb 'Dublin Core'. Below the breadcrumb are tabs for 'Dublin Core', 'Item Type Metadata', 'Files', and 'Tags'. The 'Dublin Core' tab is active. A green 'Add Item' button is at the top right. Below it are checkboxes for 'Public' and 'Featured'. The form has four main sections: 'Title' (A name given to the resource), 'Subject' (The topic of the resource), 'Description' (An account of the resource), and 'Creator' (An entity primarily responsible for making the resource). Each section has an 'Add Input' button, a text input field, and a 'Use HTML' checkbox. A 'Collection' dropdown menu is on the right side of the form.

Screenshot of Dante on Stamps “Add an Item” form.

where you can enter metadata, upload files, and add tags for a new item. You also can choose a collection in which to include the item and whether the item should show to the public and/or be a featured item on your site’s home page. After you have completed the form to your satisfaction, you select the large “Add Item” button to add the item to your site. Collections are created in the same way. Batch loading items is somewhat more complicated and is accomplished using CSV (Comma-Separated Values) spreadsheets and the “CSV Importer” plug-in (see <http://omeka.org/add-ons/plugins/csv-import/> and the summary of Justine’s Stamps below).

Themes and Plug-ins

Omeka site designs are driven by themes, while plug-ins power desired features such as exhibits. If you are installing Omeka on your own, the basic software comes with the **Berlin** and **Seasons** themes. Additional pre-designed themes — ranging from the extremely simplistic **Minimalist** to the boxy and colorful **Easy Colour** — also can be installed (see <http://omeka.org/add-ons/themes/> for the complete list of themes). Users may develop their own themes if they have the technical skills to do so.

Like themes, Omeka also comes with a selection of plug-ins including “COinS,” “Exhibit Builder,” and “Simple

Pages.” The **COinS** plug-in allows reference management software like Zotero to read the metadata from items in an Omeka site.⁷ As its name implies, the **Exhibit Builder** plug-in “allows you to develop online exhibits, or special web pages, that showcase a combination of digital objects in your Omeka archive with narrative text ... without any programming knowledge.”⁸ This plug-in would be particularly useful to a stamp collector who wants to put together an online exhibit of items from his or her collection. **Simple Pages** allows a user to create web pages on an Omeka site. For example, my site has an “About” page created using the Simple Pages plug-in; however, one could create almost any kind of page using the plug-in’s HTML editor.

The pre-packaged plug-ins provide a good start for an Omeka site but perhaps the most outstanding feature of Omeka is the array of other plug-ins available (see <http://omeka.org/codex/Plugins> for a full list). Some, such as “Neatline,” could lend themselves particularly well to use in a philatelic setting. **Neatline** “adds a digital map-making environment that makes it easy to represent geospatial information as a collection of ‘records’ plotted on a map, which can be bound together into interactive exhibits that tell stories and make arguments.”¹⁰ This could be used to show, for example, the development of a given country’s stamp issues over time or the geographic location of issuing countries from a topical collection or cancellation cities for first day covers. The **CSV Importer** plug-in, mentioned above, could prove useful to collectors who have pre-existing spread-

sheets or databases of their collections.

Metadata and Tags

“Metadata” is a technical term for “data about data.” In the context of this article, metadata is descriptive information about particular philatelic items such as country of issue, date of issue, or denomination of stamps or descriptive information about collections of items. Each of these pieces of metadata is called an “element” or “field.” Omeka uses a metadata standard called **Dublin Core** that provides for a number of fields that are useful for cataloging stamps such as title, description, date, language, type, coverage, identifier, and others. When a user adds an item to an Omeka installation, he or she may add information into any, all, or none of the Dublin Core fields. For more on Dublin Core in Omeka, see http://omeka.org/codex/Working_with_Dublin_Core.

Tags are a specific type of metadata that can be used similarly to show subjects are used in library catalogs. Tags in Omeka display as links to other items that have been assigned the same tag. For example, on danteonstamps.com I have assigned a “Hand-painted Cachet” tag to all first day covers that have hand-painted cachets. When viewing an item with a hand-painted cachet, readers can easily click on the tag and see a list of all other FDCs in the collection with hand-painted cachets. I have found the tagging feature to be a useful method for highlighting and collocating both interesting and mundane attributes of items in my collection. For more on managing tags in Omeka, see http://omeka.org/codex/Managing_Tags_2.0.

Support

The ready availability of help for using Omeka is another benefit to recommend the software. The official documentation is comprehensive and easily accessible (<http://omeka.org/codex/Documentation>) as is the documentation for Omeka.net (<http://info.omeka.net/>), and dozens of videos explaining various features of Omeka are available online (<http://omeka.org/codex/Screencasts>). There is a large community of Omeka users willing to offer advice on the Omeka Forums (<http://omeka.org/forums/>) and queries there often are answered by members of the Omeka development team. Additionally, there is a growing set of

articles and case studies about real-life applications of Omeka (<https://www.zotero.org/groups/omeka/items>). In building danteonstamps.com, I have not had a question go unanswered by the Omeka community.

Stamp Sites Using Omeka

A few stamp related sites use Omeka and they are all good examples of what can be accomplished with the software. Besides the three described below, I was unable to find other philatelic sites that make use of Omeka software:

- **Blacks on Stamp: Africana Postage Stamps Worldwide** (<http://blacksonstamp.omeka.net/>) is an example of a site that



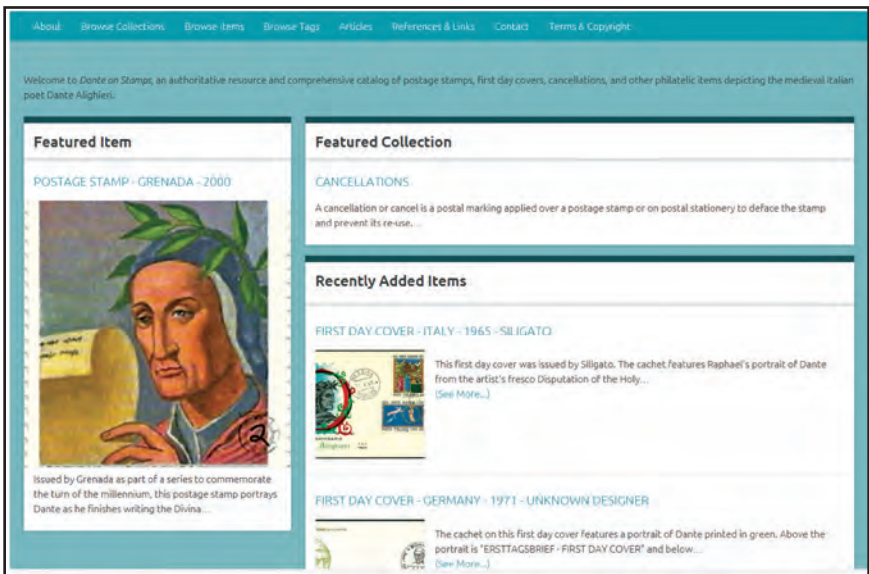
Screenshot of Blacks on Stamp home page.

uses the Omeka.net subscription service. The site is an online version of a philatelic exhibit curated by Akin Ogundiran, chair of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Africana Studies Department.¹¹ As of this writing, the site contains eighty-six items in four collections.^{12,13} The site uses the "Simple Pages" plug-in to build an "About" page with links to a print catalog and embedded video. The "Emiglio" theme is employed for the site's design with the addition of a custom banner that is displayed at the top of each page. Blacks on Stamp shows how simple, yet attractive, an Omeka-published stamp collection can be.

- **Dante on Stamps**

(<http://www.danteonstamps.com>) is my own site and serves as a catalog of my personal collection — with the exception of a few items

of interest that I do not own — of philatelic items relating to the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri. Currently, there are 178 items in eight collections.^{14,15} I installed the Omeka software on a server provided by a web hosting service to which I subscribe. The site makes use of the "Dublin Core Extended," "SimpleContactForm," "Simple Pages," and "Simple Vocab" plug-ins: **Dublin Core Extended** allows me to employ additional metadata fields like "Bibliographic Citation" for Scott, Mellone, and other catalog numbers; **SimpleContactForm** creates a secure e-mail contact form that site visitors can use to contact me; **Simple Pages** is described elsewhere in this article; and **Simple Vocab** is useful for pre-populating metadata fields with drop-down menus. Like Blacks on Stamp, I use a pre-pack-



Screenshot of Dante on Stamps home page.

aged design theme, the “Winter” version of “Seasons,” with a custom banner that I created. Dante on Stamps is a work in progress as I continually add items and experiment with Omeka features.

• Justine’s Stamps

(<http://www.justinestamps.org>) is another catalog of a personal collection and was developed as a collaboration between a collector and a librarian, a fitting partnership given the topic of the collection is books and libraries on stamps.¹⁶ The site contains 166 items in two collections with the promise of “more collections coming soon.”^{17,18} Justine’s Stamps has a detailed page explaining technical points of the site’s creation and this information is well worth reading as it describes a procedure for importing items using a CSV spreadsheet batch load.¹⁹ The site appears to utilize a well-executed

customization of the “Berlin” design theme. Not only is Justine’s Stamps an interesting stamp site to explore, it is useful for learning about some of the technical issues involved in setting up an online stamp collection.

Omeka arrived on the scene in the library and cultural heritage world at an auspicious time as institutions sought (and still seek) to move collections online on a budget. This software also should find a welcome place in the philatelic world as collectors seek inexpensive methods to organize their collections and share their research and knowledge with a wider community. I hope this article will inspire at least some readers to try Omeka as a platform for publishing their philatelic collections online.

Endnotes

1. Tara Murray, “Special Libraries Association 2013 Annual Conference,” *Philatelic Literature Review* 62 (2013): 238–40.
2. “Project,” Omeka, accessed October 27, 2013, <http://omeka.org/about/>.



Screenshot of Justine’s Stamps home page.

3. "Sites Using Omeka," Omeka, accessed October 27, 2013, http://omeka.org/codex/View_Sites_Powered_by_Omeka.
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5. "Installation," Omeka, accessed October 27, 2013, <http://omeka.org/codex/Installation>.
6. "Sign Up and Choose a Plan," Omeka.net, accessed October 27, 2013, <http://info.omeka.net/sign-up-for-account/>.
7. "Plugins / COinS," Omeka, accessed October 27, 2013, http://omeka.org/codex/Plugins/Coins_2.0.
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11. "About," Blacks on Stamp, accessed October 22, 2013, <http://blacksonstamp.omeka.net/>
12. "Browse Items," Blacks on Stamp, accessed October 22, 2013, <http://blacksonstamp.omeka.net/items>.
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14. "Browse Items," Dante on Stamps, accessed October 22, 2013, <http://www.danteonstamps.com/ds/items/browse>.
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18. "Browse Collections," Justine's Stamps, accessed October 24, 2013, <http://justinestamps.org/collections>.
19. "Technical Notes," Justine's Stamps, accessed October 24, 2013, <http://justinestamps.org/technical-notes>.