

Philatelic Conservation - A Basic Guide

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Introduction

Many philatelists understand that they are the guardians of the material in their collections for themselves and for future owners. It is unfortunate when some collectors show a disregard for looking after their collection and dismiss comment with a remark like "it will be OK in my life time". It is to show that looking after your collection is not a complicated affair that I have written this article. Having said that this is a brief or basic guide only and interested parties seeking more comprehensive information should consult a professional paper conservator preferably with some philatelic background.

The British Library is custodian of national collections of international importance some of which have been in its care for over 270 years. These collections include manuscripts, printed books, archives, sound recordings (in various formats), newspapers, maps, music, etc, estimated to be more than 150 million items in total; not to mention philatelic material, in all forms, being more than eight million items. These are in most languages and from all parts of the world. During the period, since its formation in 1753, the Library has developed, along with the library, museum, and archive community, policies and practises designed to protect such collections. The curators' job is to understand the issues (including ethical questions of philatelic importance) and work with the conservator, who will have specialist knowledge and practical experience. In 1989 the British

Library published the printed book *The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials*, written by the late T J Collings, a leading paper conservation expert, and the late R F Schoolley-West, FRPSL former Curator of the Philatelic Collections. This title appeared in two editions, one in collaboration with the American Philatelic Society. To break down the subject into manageable portions I have divided it into seven sections which are: Environment, Light, Paper, Gum, Plastics, Physical issues, and Treatments.

Environment

Philatelic Collections should be stored at a temperature **under 18 centigrade** and with relative humidity of between **55 to 60%**. Research has shown that gummed and perforated material is under less stress at these slightly more moist conditions than had previously been recommended. [A relative humidity of 50 to 55% is recommended for most printed books] Outside these conditions collections run the risk of the growth of fungi if too hot and too humid. Remember that one cause of foxing is believed to be dead fungal growth so by avoiding bad conditions you can help to avoid those unsightly stains. If too dry paper suffers stress and with an unused stamp with gum a tension will develop between the gum and the paper. This tension may be sufficient to split perforations. Dampness is probably one of the main dangers to paper and especially to gum. Ventilation of a room or storage container is likely to reduce the level of moisture; some mild and gradual heating may be of assistance in carrying moisture away. Never heat a damp room without adequate ventilation as this may promote fungal growth. Clean air and storage conditions are important too, as pollutants and any infestation of small harmful creatures and insects, that may eat paper, etc, may cause other damage. Smoking is incompatible with

philately because of damage from ash, staining and the transfer of smell.

Light

The best lighting conditions to keep your collection in is complete darkness. We do need to study our material and show it to fellow philatelists and for this we need light; but how much? In simple terms material on exhibition, to meet conservation standards, should be shown in no more than **50 lux**, which is 50 candles worth of light at a distance of one metre. Light contains ultra violet (UV) and a maximum of **10 microwatts per lumen** is advised. It is the duty of all philatelic exhibition organisers to arrange these conditions or get as close to them as may be possible in a temporary exhibition hall or venue. While most organisers will at least avoid direct sun light nearly all fail to come even close to the conservation standard of 50 lux. Clearly it is a difficult and expensive thing to achieve but measures should be taken to reduce levels and the resulting damage. That damage has taken place is clear from the examination of collections that are protected from excessive light and these include the British Library's Philatelic Collections and the Royal Philatelic Collection in London, where the bright and fresh colours of stamps are often remarked upon. One international exhibition held in Europe since 2000 under Federation Internationale de Philatelie (FIP) rules and supervision seemed to have no or little regard for the dangers of light. The exhibition halls had one third glass roofs resulting in high lux and UV levels: as much as 3,395 lux and 479 microwatts per lumen. Fading undoubtedly resulted. If FIP supervision of international exhibitions to is have any meaning for the protection of material on show, it must at least set standards that seek to avoid the worst of the bad conditions. I have previously challenged FIP, and

challenge them again now, to do so before it is too late! Old fashioned photocopying of material has had its hazards too in the form of not only light but heat too, the latter causing a stress in the paper. More modern machines and scanning may be much less harmful; further research work here is needed. At the Philatelic Collections office at the British Library all the lights have UV filters as do the windows and material is never exposed to light unnecessarily.

Paper

Papers are complicated in form and structure. For this basic guide it is perhaps sufficient to say that the best papers have a **pH of between 6.0 and 8.5**. pH is the measure of the extent to which material is acidic or alkaline. Paper which is acidic usually goes brown like modern newspapers and paperback books. Philatelic material may suffer from being acidic and the most obvious examples of this are postal stationery post cards. Many of these are so bad that they probably have a life of only a few years, perhaps in some cases ten to twenty years, after which they may crumple away! The problem can be addressed by deacidifying the item but it is recommended that this be undertaken by a professional conservator. Post cards that have been used with typewriting or manuscript addresses or messages and perhaps with additional adhesives, or labels, will need special care as the process is one where wetting is involved. The deacidification process will help arrest the acid attack at the time of treatment but it will not reverse the browning of the paper. Clearly album pages should be such that they cause no damage to the material mounted on them and so need to be "acid free" and comply to ISO 9706 a standard for permanent paper.

Gum

As I have indicated gum is often in tension with the paper it is applied to and this can be reduced under the appropriate storage conditions that I give in the Environment section above. If the gum becomes too dry (and especially if it is thickly applied) it may crack and go on to crack or damage the paper of a stamp or cover, etc. The removal of gum is probably in the best interests of stamps in the long term, but further work need to be carried out as to how this may be achieved with the best results. Removal by water may not be the answer in many cases and inks may be affected. Pressure sensitive adhesives, that is self-adhesives on stamps, are emerging as a major conservation concern. Clear tapes, like *Sellotape* and other similar products, are pressure sensitive and as most of us know the adhesive turns brown and leaves a stain on just about anything that it has been stuck to. Will this be the case with self-adhesive stamps? Never repair any philatelic item with a pressure sensitive tape; it was never designed for this purpose.

Plastics

A great deal has been written about plastics in philately which are used as mounts and protectors. Here I am only going to say that top museums, libraries, and archives only use **polyester** (Mylar is a commercial name) without any anti-static coatings, with paper or similar materials. They never use PVC.

Physical Damage

That care should be taken in handling material should be taken for granted. One University library that lends books had or has a notice that said something like

"Books should be stored with care and should be kept away from rodents, silverfish, insects, children and other vermin". I have seen small photo corners cause much damage especially to covers. The act of using them may cause physical damage to the corners of a cover over time. Clearly material should be handled with clean hands, (good quality stamp tweezers should be used as much as possible) but even so the moisture, and any other contaminants, on human skin will transfer to the stamp or cover. This also applies to metal dies and plates and to metal handstamps, etc where the damage so caused may continue for many years and is almost impossible to arrest; special conservation gloves should be used at all times.

Peelable stamp hinges if applied correctly are safe to use. Many collectors are not good at using hinges and it would be a good idea if those with expertise in using them were to give lessons to new collectors on their use. In any event minimal moisture should be used and the hinge should only be applied to the very top of a stamp. Plastic mounts are a safe alternative if made of polyester. The writing in pencil on covers of a price by dealers and others should be avoided as every time it is removed by eraser it will damage the paper and if repeated will eventually cause a hole in the paper. It may be of interest to the reader to give the policy applied at British Library Philatelic Collections on the mounting and housing of its collections. Such arrangements must last one hundred years. Stamps or covers are mounted in polyester mounts on conservation quality album pages which are placed in a polyester protector. These album pages, about sixty at a time depending on the material, are stored in conservation quality boxes with a waterproof buckram covering, which are kept upright on the shelf.

Treatments

Philatelic material that needs any kind of treatment should be shown to a paper conservator. Not all treatments are advisable indeed some will cause damage. This many not at first be apparent but it may emerge in time. The bleaching of items is not recommended and many of the methods or techniques carried out in the past have ruined stamps and covers. Another point to remember is that repairs, cleaning, etc may be acceptable in some areas of paper object collecting, but not in philately as in some instances something close to fraud may result either in a sale or in exhibiting. Only in exceptional and rare instances will any repair work to stamps be acceptable. A good example of this is the first stamps of Hawaii, the Missionary stamps of 1851-52, which are printed on very thin and fragile paper. Many, or perhaps most, of the 200 or so copies of the four types that have survived are repaired. If they had not been they probably would not exist today!

It is important to understand the difference between conservation, restoration, and improvement.

Conservation is to stabilise or maintain what presently exists.

Restoration is to return an item to its original state, while making any such work complimentary to the item, but not such that it is particularly difficult to detect, which may be regarded as an attempt to deceive, perhaps a purchaser or an exhibition judge. Other actions include: the removal of surface grime or dirt/dust, sometimes acceptable; the closing of tears, particularly if these pose a threat to an item, sometimes acceptable for postal history entires, covers and documents, but not usually acceptable for stamps. The re-gumming of unused stamps is completely unacceptable, a practice

that has often been an attempt to cover up a thin in the paper.

Improvement is to add to an item something that was not present in its original state, for example by adding full margins to an imperforate stamp that did not have them before. It includes the removal of any manuscript marks from any stamp or cover. Improvement may become definite fraud when stamps are added or changed and where postal markings are being added, etc.

As I said at the beginning you are the custodian of your material for your life time or until you sell. Do look after it for future generations otherwise nothing will exist to collect, study, research and enjoy.

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