How to look after your Collection – 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.

The British Library is custodian of national collections of international importance some of which have been in its care for over 250 years. During this period it has developed, along with the library and archive community, policies and practices designed to protect those collections. The curators' job is to understand the issues and work with the conservator, who will have specialist knowledge and practical experience. In 1989 the British Library published the book *The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials*, written by the late T J Collings, a leading paper conservation expert, and R F Schoolley-West, FRPSL former Head 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 and 60%. Recent research has shown that gummed and perforated material is under less stress at these slightly more moist conditions than had previously been recommended. Outside these conditions collectors 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 the growth of fungus.

Clean air is important too as pollutants may cause 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 should be shown in no more than 50 lux, which is 50 candles worth at a distance of one metre. Light contains ultra violet (UV) and a maximum of 10 micro watts per lumen is advised. It is the duty of all philatelic exhibition organisers to arrange these conditions. This is the same standard as is used by art galleries for exhibitions of prints and drawings, so it is not impossible to achieve. 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 may be 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 protected from light and these include the British Library's Philatelic Collections and the Royal Philatelic Collection where the bright and fresh colours 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. These were measured on a cloudy day randomly around the halls. The minimum was 91 lux and 165 micro watts per lumen and the maximum was a horrifying 3,395 lux and 479 micro watts per lumen. Over half of the frames, where the levels were measured, exceeded 1,000 lux!

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 challenge FIP to do so before it is too late!

Photocopying of material has its hazards too in the form of not only of light but heat too, the latter causing a stress in the paper. Some more modern machines may be less harmful and further research work here is needed.

At the Philatelic Collections office at the British Library all of our lights have UV filters as do the windows and we never leave material 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. The problem can be addressed by de acidifying 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 will need special care as the process is one where wetting is involved. The deacidification process will 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 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. This is controversial and further work needs 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? By the way 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* and *Melinex* are commercial names) without any anti static coatings, with paper or similar materials. They never use PVC which can ooze plasticisers and forms acid as it decomposes.

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, but even so the moisture on all skin will transfer to the stamp or cover. This is why in libraries and archives rare materials are often handled with special gloves.

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 philatelic societies gave 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 we apply at British Library Philatelic Collections on the mounting and housing of its collections. Such arrangements have to 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, 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. Do not be tempted to do it yourself!

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 fraud may result either in a sale or in exhibiting. Only in exceptional and rare instances will any repair work 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 of the 199 copies that exist are repaired. If they had not been they probably would not exist today!

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!

I should like to thank Barry Knight, Head of Conservation Research at the British Library, for checking aspects of this paper.