

Preservation and Care of Philatelic Materials

Subsidiary Page 8 Dry Cleaning of Stamps and Covers

One of the favorite methods for surface cleaning old covers is to use an eraser and brush. There is no type of eraser which does not, to some extent, damage the paper surface from which dirt or markings are removed. One of the chief concerns in cleaning is the removal of pencilled notations on the reverse of a stamp. These are usually perforation notes, catalogue numbers, and sometimes even catalogue prices. Many misguided collectors pencil these marks on the back of stamps as well as on covers. Such marks are even occasionally seen in ink, which very likely means that the philatelic item is permanently damaged and, often, dramatically reduced in value. There is no method of removing pencilled notes and markings that is completely harmless to the philatelic item.

While most stamps are printed on high quality paper which will stand up fairly well to the abrasion that results from the erasure of markings, there is still some fragmentation of the surface. On poor quality papers the abrasion is much more pronounced. Old stamps and covers, often brittle or flimsy, are easily torn or creased in the effort to remove pencil marks. Even when some pencil marks are erased, a groove or indentation from a hard pencil will remain. A candidate for the removal of a pencil notation is the cover shown in **Figure 11**.



Figure 11. Example of a cover whose appearance would be improved by careful cleaning and removal of pencil notation at upper left.

The 1898 postal history item shown in Figure 11 is of a size that it could be attractively mounted on an album or an exhibit page. The appearance of the cover, however, would be greatly benefitted by the removal of the pencil notation at upper left, a notation which is probably the catalogue number of the stamp and possibly the valuation of the stamp when the notation was added. In this case, careful erasing of the pencil notation would be in order. The surface dirt on the cover also needs attention.

Covers sometimes require a light brushing with a dry soft shaving brush to remove loose dirt or dust. General surface dirt that is more difficult to remove can often be dislodged by using a draughtsman's cleaning powder. One of the powders recommended is "SKUM X" by Dietzgen. Sprinkle the granulated erasing powder over the area to be cleaned. Work over the surface with a gentle circular motion, moving the center towards the edge. Use a small ball of absorbent cotton. Do not use your fingers because the oils, moisture, acids and salts present in the skin might be transferred to the paper. To remove the powder, use a soft brush, working from the center out, brushing in one direction.

To remove graphite or soft pencil markings, you may have to use an eraser, even though a minimal slight surface damage will result. It is very important that you select the proper type of eraser in order to minimize surface damage. Most erasers are made from rubber or polyvinyl chloride. Some erasers contain very harsh abrasives. We should select a soft eraser in order to minimize surface damage and abrasion. Two of the more effective vinyl erasers are "MARS-PLASTIC" by Staedtler and "MAGIC-RUB" by Faber-Castell. **Figure 12** illustrates the low amount of damage caused to a cover by a "MAGIC-RUB" eraser.



Figure 12. Eraser residue from a MAGIC-RUB block eraser magnified 100 times. Residue and fiber damage are relatively low.

When an eraser is applied to a stamp or cover, support the philatelic item by placing it on blotting paper. When the eraser becomes rounded from use, cut it to a clean edge. Remember that several gentle rubbings are far better than a single vigorous one. An old plastic eraser shield may be very helpful. Avoid using colored erasers because colored residue often becomes trapped on the surface being cleaned. Do not use the eraser too vigorously since it will tend to smooth and burnish some papers.

Special care should be taken when working with proofs. Proofs are usually engraved on very thin fine India paper, often called "chin applique" or "chine calle." After printing, the India paper is pressed onto a heavier piece of paper. They are held together by the compression of the fibers. No adhesive is employed. An eraser can be used on the support paper but not on the delicate thin India paper. Careful testing will indicate whether a light application of cleaning powder can be used for cleaning purposes.

A 1981 research report prepared by the Analytical Research Service of the National Museums of Canada indicates that a block eraser works best. This report notes that soft rubber erasers harden with age, and polyvinyl chloride (PVC) erasers slowly degrade. The study further determined that Pink Pearl, Opaline, Kneaded Rubber, and Magic-Rub erasers left detectable amounts of eraser material on the paper. A good brand of eraser to use is Faber-Castell Magic-Rub #M-196, which is a white pencil-type of eraser.

Faber-Castell Magic-Rub #M-196 leaves an exceptionally low amount of residue on the paper. The residue is low in chlorine, intermediate in amount of silver tarnishing, and does not contain silica (finely ground sand) as an abrasive. Photomicrographs show that the complete removal of eraser particles by brushing is unsuccessful. The Magic-Rub eraser was found to be the most suitable for use in cleaning paper.