

Preservation and Care of Philatelic Materials

Subsidiary Page 9 Wet Cleaning of Stamps and Covers

Stained stampless covers can be conserved by washing in water. First, however, check the ink in order to make certain that it will not run. Usually, the old inks were insoluble and therefore will remain stable. The cover should be clamped to a screen and then lowered into the water. A non-metallic screen and non-metallic clamps should be used so as to avoid the risk of rust stains on the cover.

Not only does the water bath remove a water stain but it also lowers the paper's acidity. Several water baths may be necessary, depending on the cover's dirt and water stained condition. After washing, the cover should have the water carefully pressed out by the use of a blotter. When the excess moisture has been removed from the cover, carefully transfer the cover between two new pieces of white blotting paper, and leave the cover to dry under a medium weight. This will allow the cover to dry flat.

If a cover has adhesive stamps tied to it by a cancellation, the stamps will wash off in the wet cleaning process. For this reason, the owner may wish to avoid wet cleaning, or the owner may decide that the stamp(s) can be re-affixed in their exact same location(s) after washing and drying.

Stamps can be cleaned satisfactorily by using a soap solution to remove the dirt. The soap solution is made by adding 3 or 4 drops of pure uncolored liquid soap to a pint of water. Any stronger solution will bleach many stamps. Remember that the use of any liquid, including water, will remove some freshness from the stamp. Some stamps will tolerate no liquid at all, and therefore it is wise to determine if this is the case before cleaning.

Some pencil marks, blemishes and smudges that cannot be removed by dry cleaning can be removed by the wet cleaning process. For these, as well as for ink stains, powdered pumice is taken up on a cotton-tipped swab and rubbed over the pencil or ink marking. When the paper is well sized the ink stains will yield to this treatment. If the paper is thin, considerable care must be taken not to rub too hard. If the surface of the paper is soft the ink will have penetrated too deeply to be removed this way.

A fresh grease stain can sometimes be removed by sprinkling powdered chalk over the area. Leave for half an hour and then cover both sides with a soft paper. Unprinted newspaper is ideal. Then iron the sheet with an iron in order to draw the grease into the chalk. Do not have the iron too hot or you will scorch the paper.

For removing old grease stains a solvent is used. With adequate ventilation assured, carefully saturate the paper with white benzine. Put blotting paper on each side of the item being cleaned,

and apply heat over the blotting paper with a safe heat source such as a hand-held hair dryer. If the paper is "art mat," it is practically impossible to clean. This type of paper will mark when rubbed, and it stains when a wetting agent is used.

Many stains can be removed from paper by washing the paper in a bath of hot water with a little alum added. Some stains and ink stains need drastic action to remove.

Campbell (1994c) gives the following method for the removal of stains requiring "drastic action." The chemicals mentioned are particularly dangerous and are to be used with the utmost care. It would undoubtedly be safer to have a professional conservator remove stains requiring this kind of treatment. Having said that, here is the method Campbell (1994c) recommends. Make a solution of one ounce of permanganate of potash crystals dissolved in a quart of water. Warm the solution to a tepid temperature. Put the paper sheet or sheets into the solution for two hours or until the paper turns a deep brown, which is due to the formation of manganese dioxide, which is not water soluble. Then remove the paper from the solution and wash in running water.

Continue the washing method until the wash water no longer contains a purple tint. Then put the sheets into a solution of one pint of water to which has been added one ounce of sulphuric acid. Leave the paper in this solution until the stains disappear and then remove immediately. This usually takes only a few seconds. Then wash in clear running water. The paper should then be placed in a third solution made up of one-half ounce of hyposulphate of soda to one-half gallon of water. Be certain all the soda has been dissolved before putting the paper into this bath. Soak the paper sheets in this solution for one-half hour, then put under running water for one hour.

If some stains remain, repeat the process. All sheets of paper put through this process must be sized. See Section 12 "Sizing, Toning Paper, and Determination of Paper Grain" for more discussion of "Sizing."

"Tropical stain" is really a fungus caused by high humidity. It appears as light brown spots on stamps and covers. To treat "tropical stain," the author has used regular household Chlorox bleach in tepid water in the ratio of one part bleach to 10 parts water. Use stamp tongs and dip the stamps in the solution for one minute. Remove and rinse in clear fresh water. Dry the stamp and then mount it in your collection in the usual manner. Note that if the pre-treated stamp is in mint condition, this method will cause loss of the gum.