

Philatelic Conservation – Restoration

David R Beech FRPSL

Carl Aage Moller in his article [3](#) rightly continues the long running debate within philately as to what is acceptable conservation and restoration. Most previous articles have ignored, or not taken into account, the professional paper conservator's views and experience. Good philatelic conservation is a question of what is good, in the long term, for the item under question; all other considerations are secondary. Many solutions are complex and are a balance of conservation best practice and philatelic ethics. It follows that any treatment will be a combination of conservation and philatelic expertise.

It is important to understand the differences 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 exhibition judge. Other actions include: the removal of surface grime, sometimes acceptable; closing of tears particularly if they pose a threat to an item, sometimes acceptable for postal history entires and. documents, but not usually acceptable for stamps. The reguming 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 added full margins to an imperforate stamp that did not have them before. It includes the removal of any manuscript marks from any stamp and cover. Improvement will become definite fraud when stamps are added or changed and where postal markings have added, etc.

Within philately it is understandable that from an owner's point of view it may be desirable that an item may be conserved for its value or value enhancement, or as an exhibition item. It seems rather sad if an item in exhibition is regarded for its looks, rather than its significance in the story that is being told. This tends to belittle philately as a pot hunting hobby, rather than a study in communication, history, geography, social conditions, economics, etc plus the philately! Restoration for purely cosmetic reasons is not always acceptable.

Many of the faults or defects in philatelic material may be caused by poor storage or exhibition conditions or materials; these can usually be avoided thus reducing the need for conservation in the first place. My article [1](#) sets out these conditions and includes: environment, light, paper, gum, plastics, and physical damage. Here I would mention light damage, especially that caused avoidably at exhibitions, almost all of which are much over lit for the good of material, and plastics, especially PVC which can ooze plasticisers and forms acid as it decomposes, and so should never be used. Top museums, archives and libraries only use polyester (*Mylar* and *Melinex* are commercial names). Keeping the relative humidity below 70% will help to avoid fungal growth and any resulting marks or perhaps foxing.

Professional paper conservators (preferably with knowledge of philately), who may be regarded as the medical doctors of paper and thus our philatelic items, should always be consulted and should usually, if not always, be the ones to carry out any work. An assessment of an item and its needs should be the first step. This may be a complicated question of philatelic ethics and conservation best practice based on science. The understanding of the science is the job of the Conservator and his or her profession, which for some time has ceased to be a purely craft based subject.

A great deal has been written about the removal of stains, foxing, etc by means of bleaching. This practice is regarded by top conservators as something that should not be done as it is likely that in time it will cause damage to the item that would not have occurred but for the bleaching and is unlikely to be reversible. The long term consequences must be paramount.

Any repairs to, say the paper of a cover or entire, again should be carried out by a professional. Such work must be with conservation materials, be reversible and should be complimentary to the paper of the item, but clearly different showing the repair if examined. The use of stamp hinges to close tears, while obvious to a collector, may be the cause of long term damage. One example of this is the "repair" of a thin paper cover with a stamp hinge that is in itself stronger and thicker. The hinge is liable, in its immediate area, to set up tension within the thin paper cover that will eventually cause damage. An example of this would be a New Zealand 1898 Great Barrier Island pigeon post "flimsy" which has been repaired with such a hinge or similar weight tape.

Points to be considered are: -

Will the item survive in the longer term if left alone?

Is leaving the item alone the best thing to do?

All repairs, or making good, should be reversible.

A record of any work or treatments should be kept with the item.

Perhaps in the near future an expert certificate should be: -

- 1) An opinion as to the genuineness, etc.
- 2) A record of its provenance.
- 3) A record of any treatments used in conservation.

With full photographic record, and a record of any special scientific analysis, such as examination by Raman spectroscopy, etc

As James Van der Linden has pointed out [4](#) the Italian practice of signing covers is detrimental to the long term interests of the cover and the signatures can be themselves be forged. Also the covers look so bad, as one leading philatelist put it "...a collection of signatures, with a cover attached!" Some dealers in writing with pencil on covers with a price, are adding to the destruction of the cover if this practise continues, for a hole will eventually appear, caused by the rubbing out of previous prices.

The key to this question is the long term interests of the item, not some short term gain, be it financial or exhibition award.

References

1 Beech, David R, *How to Look after your Collection - A Basic Guide*, The London Philatelist, volume 115, pp68-70, March, 2006; and in *Fakes, Forgeries, Experts*, number 9, pp98-100, 2006. Based on a Paper given at the 87th Philatelic Congress of Great Britain, Derby, 2005.

2 Collings, T J and Schoolley-West, R F, *The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials*, London, the British Library, 1989.

3 Moller, Carl Aage, *Opinions on Tolerable Restoration. Views on the Prof. John West Paper*, *Fakes, Forgeries, Experts*, number 10, pp168-171, 2007.

4 Van der Linden, James, *An Overview and Some Comments on the Professor John West Paper*, *Fakes, Forgeries, Experts*, number 10, pp96-97, 2007

5 West, Professor John C, *Restoration; How Far?* The Kay Goodman [Memorial] Lecture, Congress Handbook, 87th Philatelic Congress of Great Britain, Derby, 2005; and in *Fakes, Forgeries, Experts*, number 9, pp79-95, 2006.

Acknowledgements

Paul Skinner my fellow Curator at the British Library, Philatelic Collections.
Barry Knight, Head of Conservation Research and Mark Browne Conservation Officer at the British Library.