

Removal of Toning/Foxing From Older Stamps

by Dave Parsons

Occasionally we see a brown or rust colored smudge around the edge of older stamps. This article discusses a procedure that may be used to remove this toning. However, there is a caveat; this method has varying degrees of success depending on the nature of the mark and the composition of the stamp. As a caution, users should experiment with this technique on inexpensive or damaged stamps. It has been tested with engraved stamps and other printing processes, however, the user should satisfy themselves on its safety prior to using this on more valuable stamps. At the end of this discussion, the ethics of this technique will be addressed.

The basic procedure is fairly simple. It requires some simple clear household ammonia (very cheap) and a covered cup or tray, although an open dish likely will work fine. Simply immerse the stamp (don't do 2 at once) into the ammonia so that the stamp is covered. If the dish has a lid, you can swirl the liquid around the stamp. Leave the stamp in the solution for 30 (or up to 60) seconds then remove and rinse or soak for a bit before drying. More intense toning may require a longer time in the ammonia, however, there is a risk of the stamp-dye bleeding or fading. As mentioned earlier, experimentation is a good idea. And be careful not to inhale too much of the ammonia fumes!



The examples above and on the left, are the before and after scans of two U.S. 231's and a Wilding. All three were swirled in ammonia for about 60 seconds. Most of the toning disappeared and the underlying paper seems whiter and closer to original condition. For stamps that are oil-stained, this process does not appear to remove oil stains.

In most cases the toning reduces the value of the stamp, so there is not too much to be lost if the process fails. By reducing the toning, the collector is in effect negating the mold which is causing the discoloration. This mold could spread to other stamps in the collection, reducing their value. So the question asked- "Is this procedure unethical as it is not a natural process?" The author's opinion is that it is not counter to proper stamp treatment as it is akin to soaking hinges off stamps. It does not add anything to the stamp, such as the practice of re-gumming a stamp or repairing tears or removing postmarks. But the decision to reduce toning is one that can only be made by the collector. The author thanks Michael Generali of Texas for introducing this method. Good luck if you try it out!

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