

Conserving Iron-Gall Ink on Paper Artifacts

ABSTRACT

Many of our dilemmas as conservators are typically objective: the nature of the artifact (archival or art on paper; a single item or a series, bound in a volume); the artifact's condition; its context and importance (an individual piece or a unit in a collection); and its intended use; the need for treatment; the risks involved; and the extent to which change in the artifact's appearance is acceptable. And yet it seems that the decisions we make are largely subjective.

Over the past eight years, my work as a paper conservator in Europe and the United States has brought me into contact with a variety of manuscripts and art-on-paper artifacts incorporating iron-gall ink. Examining, treating, and rehousing these materials has helped me to increase my understanding of some of the complexities associated with iron-gall ink degradation. During this time I have had the opportunity to develop opinions about when intervention

is appropriate, and to choose and perform treatments from a range of available options, such as washing, deacidification, iron (II) removal, localized repair, leafcasting, and paper splitting. I have found that, although there are many variables and unknowns involved in conserving iron-gall ink-inscribed paper artifacts, some patterns seem to exist. I have used these observations to formulate loose predictions and establish tentative protocols that I incorporate into treatments, specifically for wetting out an artifact, in the use of ethanol throughout aqueous processes, and the type of drying method employed. Some of the most difficult challenges I have faced arise from the gulf between expectation and reality, and my attempts to find a balance and reconcile the differences between them.

JULIE L. BIGGS
Senior Paper Conservator
Folger Shakespeare Library
Washington DC