

Unlocking the Secrets of Letterlocking to Reseal the Letters of John Donne and Other Early Modern Letter Writers

What is letterlocking, and how can a better understanding of it benefit conservators and other scholars? These presentations focus on historical practices of letterlocking, asking how men and women folded and sealed their letters before (and after) the invention of the envelope. Why have there been so many letterlocking formats throughout history, and what did they mean? This session brings together a conservator, a curator, and a literary historian interested in the historic practices of sealing and locking letters. The first presentation, by Jana Dambrogio, will sketch the history of letterlocking and explain its significance to conservators. Dambrogio will demonstrate ways that letters have been folded to become their own envelopes, drawing on various formats employed by regents, professional secretaries and everyday people. She will discuss the conservation of originals and how making models of them helps encourage information exchange between scholars and the general public; the engaging tactility of the “locked giveaway” helps demonstrate the important work that conservation and the humanities do to preserve our past for access and interpretation. Daniel Starza Smith will then explain the relevance of this knowledge to an understanding of the letters of John Donne—one of seventeenth-century England’s most prominent literary and religious figures—as well as to literary and historical methodologies more broadly. Heather Wolfe will widen the scope of these observations and arguments based on her extensive work on early modern letters, particularly those at the Folger Shakespeare Library. Together, we will argue that a more thorough understanding of this technique should influence conservatorial best practice with regard to letters. Furthermore, we also aim to demonstrate the benefits of collaboration between conservators and scholars in other disciplines such as literature and history, and will show how this conservation-based practice is leading to new theoretical advances in the humanities.

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