

# J. H E R B I N

## **Random Thoughts on Sealing Wax and Seals**

By Ward Dunham & Linnea Lundquist

The continued use of Sealing Wax in the age of the computer is whimsical, wonderful, archaic, anachronistic, atavistic, anarchistic, outrageous, preposterous, and FUN!

*'The time has come,' the Walrus said,  
'to talk of many things:  
Of shoes — and ships — and sealing-wax —  
Of cabbages — and kings —  
And why the sea is boiling hot —  
And whether pigs have wings.'*

— Lewis Carroll

Seals are art, craft, and history. They reflect history, and they are a celebration of living history. Seals and sealing wax have been in use on documents in Europe since about the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Sealing wax gave way to embossed blind seals in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Blind embossed seals gave way to rubber stamped seals not long after the copier machine became ubiquitous. Copier machines and laser printers don't like blind embossed seals. And every sort of personal touch to human correspondence seems to be giving way to the drudge and necessity of email. Email has its place, no question — it allows almost immediate delivery of messages to any place on the planet, and it's practically free. It is however, unlikely to be memorable. In our busy lives, we regularly hit the delete key and get rid of our email messages almost as quickly as we received or sent them. We might save a few email messages in our digital files, but how often do we go back and fondly dwell over them? And "spam" is a daily annoyance, a scourge, a blight, a persistent nasty rash. But a sealed letter, a note, or even a postcard, whether delivered by hand or by post, is unlikely to fall through the cracks or get accidentally tossed in the trash barrel. It is something quite special; we know this when it tumbles out of the mailbox and practically separates itself from the bills and the junk mail. Seals and sealing wax are an elegant and

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memorable way to connect with history, to leave your own mark, and to make an impact on your correspondents.

*And none will hear the postman's knock  
Without a quickening of the heart.  
For who can bear to feel himself forgotten?*

— W. H. Auden

A sealed letter conjures all sorts of romantic images. I think of dispatches and portable ink pots and 18<sup>th</sup> century periwigged “dandies” in London coffeehouses and old cafes in Paris. I think of perverse Roman emperors wearing enormous, dual-purpose seal rings (seal/poison rings) on index fingers in movies such as *Ben Hur*, *Gladiator* and *The Vikings*. I think also of the Raj in India when dashing young British officers who were traveling light with campaign furniture and bat boys would write long letters home upon their campaign desks with their portable boxes or “chandlers boxes” containing the tools of correspondence. They might use blocks or sticks of ink to be ground on an ink stone, or liquid ink in glass bottles that fit closely within a steel bottle of the same shape, or liquid ink in bottles made of horn. No plastic. In that chandlers box might also have been several sheets of elegant handmade writing papers, quills to be cut into quill pens with a special quill knife that was sharpened round on one side, flat on the other. There might also have been a small sack of pounce or sandarac, to make the writing surface more amenable to ink, and a few sheets of blotter paper. And of course, Seals and Sealing Wax!

Seals are great fun you can share with others! Consider investing in a unique family or personal seal. It is worthwhile to seek out an engraver to have your family arms carved into a ring or a desk hand seal. This is an elegant way to celebrate one’s heritage and family history. Or you might choose to have engraved a totem animal whose characteristic virtues you admire and perhaps even aspire to. What a great way to celebrate yourself! I’ve seen bears, lions, eagles, dogs, a giraffe, even a fire-breathing bear, carved as totem animals. Or you might choose some other monogram or personal logo or talisman: flowers, stars, the sun and moon, skulls, daggers and swords and chalices. There are any number of eclectic and whimsical delights that could create an old world ambiance and add a unique touch of style and dash and distinction to your

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life AND to your correspondence. The recipients of your correspondence will be astonished as though your letters had been scripted while you were seated before a Louis Quinze escritoire.

I have been an avid user, perhaps even an aficionado, of Sealing Wax since my high school days. I picked up a marvelous antique seal at a shop on Royal Street in New Orleans in 1956 when I was there on spring break with my family. At first I tried my seal with candle wax, but that proved unsatisfactory. Then I was given real sealing wax by my mother. That worked! I have used Sealing Wax on a daily basis for five decades, even while in Viet Nam. If I have ever experienced an epiphany in my life, it has been with tools; tools I have used every day, and tools that are clearly better than others of their type. These have included fountain pens with chisel-edged nibs as made by Osmiroid, Conway Stewart, Parker and Sailor; knives made by Randall in the 1960s and even better, by Chris Reeve since the 1980s; and SEALING WAXES made by J. Herbin in France since 1670.

The job of sealing wax is to duplicate the image carved into the seal with sharpness and accuracy, and this is affected by how the wax is melted. The fastest way to melt sealing wax is with a glue gun, but that rather sucks the romance and fun out of the process. Other methods include matches, candles, lighters, alcohol burners, and melting pots. Our two preferred methods for melting are: cigar lighters, which burn very hot and cleanly, and keep the colors true; and matches, which add a bit of carbon soot to the wax puddle, and darken the wax slightly and pleasingly. Note that it is important to “stir” the puddle of melted wax with the end of the wax stick before impressing the seal. Stirring does three things; shapes the puddle, brings air bubbles to the surface, and allows the user to monitor the “stiffness” of wax. A little practice will teach the hand and eye to know what works to make the best impression.

Of the crafts (which stray into the rarefied strata of “art” when done at the highest level and long enough ago), the two I appreciate and admire most are Calligraphy and the Engraving of Seals. Each can take years, even decades, to master.

*The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.*

— Chaucer

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Calligraphy, I understand well, having done it for decades, even taught it here in the U.S. and abroad.

Heraldic engraving, or seal engraving, amazes me, boggles the mind. The extraordinary complex detail, carved in reverse on multiple planes, in three dimensions, and so tiny! And the best seal engraving I've encountered, and I've encountered more of it than most, was done entirely by hand and using hand made tools to do it. It was done before electricity, before power tools, before photo-engraving, before laser-engraving. Even today, the very best engraving is still done by hand. With a marvelously crafted seal, you realize its sole purpose, its *raison d'être*, is to reproduce in wax the image which has been carved so masterfully into its surface.

A well-engraved Seal is a work of art that deserves to be imprinted and impressed into the very finest sealing waxes such as those made for more than 300 years by J. Herbin. Why Herbin? Because J. Herbin sealing waxes perform! They deliver the goods. They do what they are designed to do, and they do it *better* than most, and J. Herbin have been making sealing waxes longer than any other firm I know of.

Color: I was first attracted to J. Herbin sealing waxes because I liked their vivid colors. Over years of use I have discovered that these colors tend not to fade.

Sharpness of impression: J. Herbin sealing waxes take razor-sharp impressions and hold their sharpness through the years.

History. J. Herbin sealing waxes have a long and venerable history which is rather beyond the scope of this short article. Let us say only that, if J. Herbin sealing waxes were found to be entirely satisfactory by the following people, then J. Herbin sealing waxes ought to fulfill our needs admirably.

Louis XIV, the Sun King of France,

Thomas Jefferson,

Benjamin Franklin,

John Hancock,

Napoleon Bonaparte,

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George Sand,  
George Patton,  
Victor Hugo,  
August Rodin,  
Coco Channel,  
Charles de Gaulle,  
and Oscar Wilde, who said: *My tastes are simple; I am always satisfied with the best.*

I didn't begin testing sealing waxes until I began to use sealing wax on art projects and on works of art well beyond ephemera. At that point, it became important to know how long and how well seals and sealing waxes might hold up over time. J. Herbin waxes performed superbly.

I test sealing waxes by putting seal impressions on three sheets of archival mat board (as is used to mat prints for framing). I melt the waxes I'm testing on the mat board, and carefully note in pencil the brand and color. Then I tack one board to the outside of building where the seals will remain out in the elements: direct sunlight, rain, wind and cold. The second is taped to the inside of a window, so the seal impressions get direct sunlight but will be protected from rain and wind. And the third goes into a dark cabinet that gets no light or handling. After about 6 months, I compare the seal impressions side by side. Of the waxes tested in this manner, J Herbin Cire Banque (Regular Sealing Wax) and Cire Favorite (Favorite Sealing Wax) held up better than other sealing waxes. Specifically, they faded less, deteriorated least, and lost less detail from the impressed seals. Not surprisingly, the seal impressions on the mat board tacked to the outside fared worst. Some of the sealing waxes lost nearly all their detail, and were in effect, mere blobs of wax that had lost color, and some were broken and missing. The Herbin waxes had lost some detail, but were still there and had hardly faded. Measured against the sample placed in the cabinet and thus protected against the elements, these deteriorations and changes were quite dramatic, though less so with the J. Herbin waxes.

No traditional formula sealing waxes fare well when subjected to the tender mercies of the world's postal services, being purposely designed to be fragile and show signs of tampering.

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In sum, I prefer J. Herbin Sealing Waxes to others for their vivid colors, the sharpness of the impressions they take, that they tend not to lose their color and sharpness over time, and as a citizen of a relatively young country I love it that J. Herbin Sealing Waxes hold so colorful a place in history. And finally, it gives me great pleasure to know that J. Herbin Sealing Waxes have added style and panache to my correspondence for decades.

FIN.

FURTHER INFO about ATELIER GARGOYLE & US:

*Ward Dunham & Linnea Lundquist have merged their love of writing instruments and writing paraphernalia to form Atelier Gargoyle, a small business in San Francisco, California that specializes in designing, producing, and selling seals and sealing wax. They are proud to use and sell J. Herbin sealing waxes. Ward is a Master Calligrapher who has been practicing calligraphy and design for over 40 years. He has studied, exhibited, and taught internationally. He is also a fountain pen aficionado who uses his pens daily, and at any given time he's carrying about six fountain pens in the specially-designed pockets of his custom-made shirts. Rather than the cell phone or e-mail, Ward prefers handwritten letters and postcards as his primary means of communication. Ward writes at least three postcards every day (and sometimes 10), using his fountain pens and adorning these communiqués with sealing wax. He applies sealing wax to all correspondence. He sends postcards and letters (with seal impressions) to his children, wife, friends, colleagues, and even to himself. In addition to being Atelier Gargoyle's chief product designer and visionary, Ward enjoys holding court from behind the bar at a famous and historic San Francisco saloon called Enrico's Sidewalk Café. Linnea is Ward's boss at Atelier Gargoyle (and his wife and editor). She is also a type designer and calligrapher. She worked for 12 years designing & producing fonts at a Silicon Valley hi-tech firm, and now does freelance custom type design work, in addition to running Atelier Gargoyle. She also loves seals, fountain pens, and history.*