Making A Good Impression: Medieval and Renaissance Wax Seals

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What is a seal?

A seal is an impression made by a distinctive identifiable item called a matrix into a malleable substance. In Classical times this substance may have been clay or bitumen. Seals used by popes and other figures and groups of import may have been made of lead or even gold. Wax, however, was a common material used for sealing documents throughout the Medieval and Renaissance eras.

What is the purpose of sealing?

Regardless of the time period or particular method used, the purpose of seals is to authenticate the thing that is sealed. If the seal has been broken or tampered with, then the contents become suspect. Since the original authenticating agent is the only one who has the correct seal, it becomes very difficult to circumvent a seal undetected.

Seal Matrices

A matrix is a typically metal object with an engraved design, used to make an impression in a seal. The design is engraved in reverse, so that the resulting seal is the right way around. The design on the matrix identifies the sigillant, through symbols or inscriptions or both. The matrix may be part of a ring, or a conical or flat matrix, usually with a lug or pierced terminal so it can be suspended from a cord or chain (Fig. 1). A few matrices used by royalty, municipalities, or large organizations may have a front and back face that impress the seal simultaneously (Fig. 2).

Fig. 1 - Common types of seal matrices: conical, ring, and flat.

Fig. 2 - A seal being attached using a two part matrix in the English Court of Chancery c. 1460

Fig. 3 - A two part seal matrix depicting Inchaffray Abbey in Scotland, c. 1260-1300

Sealing Wax

The wax used for seals is made from a combination of beeswax, resin, and usually a colorant of some sort, like vermillion (red), verdigris (green), or lampblack. This mixture is then formed into cylindrical logs or sticks. Over the course of the 16th century, shellac (a hard resinous substance sourced from Asia) became more widely available and was added to sealing wax. This created a harder, more brittle wax, and shellac based waxes became the standard going forward.

Modern sealing wax is formulated to be more flexible, so that it can withstand the rigors of mechanical postal sorting. "Traditional" sealing wax can also be found, and exhibits the brittleness of shellac seals. Both of these are designed more for melting than molding.

Types of seal application

Wax seals fall into two types: pendant seals and applied seals. Each has a different context and method of application.

Pendant seals

Legal documents during this period were written on parchment, even after the widespread availability of paper. Seals were applied to documents with the use of tongues, tags, or cords that hung from the bottom of the document.
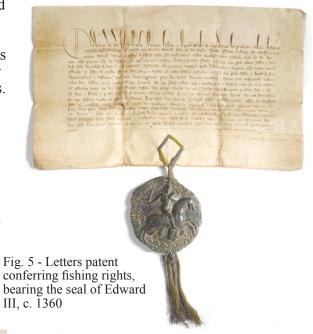
The simplest method of applying a seal to a document is the tongue. This is done by cutting a horizontal slit along the right half of the bottom edge of the document, creating a narrow strip. One or more seals may then be applied to the tongue. Multiple tongues may also be cut into the document, depending on how many people are involved. (Fig. 4)

Fig. 4 - A charter for the Bowyers' and Fletchers' guild in Chester, 1467

Seal tags are created by folding up the bottom edge of the document and cutting one or more slits through the turned up portion. A separate strip of parchment is then threaded through the slits and the two halves of the tag sealed together. Again, multiple tags may be applied to a given document if necessary. The turn-up defines the end of the document text, as it prevents any additions being made after the seal is applied. (Fig. 6) Twisted, plaited, or woven cords may be used in a similar fashion to parchment tags. (Fig. 5)

From the creases on the extant documents, we can see that they were often folded for storage, likely with the seal laid over the top of the folded packet. (Fig. 6) Pendant seals present a challenge when displaying in a frame as is typical with SCA award scrolls. Double matting or display case type frames can help give extra depth for the seal, and photo corners or invisible thread can be used to attach the document to the back of the frame.

Fig. 5 - Letters patent conferring fishing rights, bearing the seal of Edward III, c. 1360

Fig. 6 - A land lease bearing the Seal of the Court of Common Pleas - England, 1587

For pendant seals, small cakes can be cut from the wax stick. These cakes are then placed in hot water or held over a flame to soften them, formed or sandwiched around the tongue, tag, or cord, and impressed with the matrix. The two ends of a tag may sometimes be twisted together before the wax is applied. If cords are used, the individual cords are usually braided together below the edge of the document. These techniques further secure the tag or cord inside the wax.

For large royal or municipal seals with a two part matrix, the softened wax is placed between the two halves of the matrix and pressed into place. (Fig. 1)

In the more common case of a single seal matrix, extant seals and depictions in paintings and illuminations show a number of ways that the wax may be applied. The wax may be laid on a flat surface and impressed. (Fig. 7) It may also be set into a small cup or dish before the impression is made. (Fig. 8) A study of wax seals in Wales focusing on the finger and palm prints left in extant seals reveals that the seals may be made with the wax held in one hand and the matrix in the other. (Fig. 9) These examples also include several where there is a second impression of a different seal on the back side of the wax.
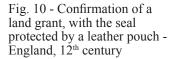
In some cases, especially for large seals, the seal may be protected by a leather or parchment pouch. (Fig. 10)

Fig. 7 - *Parable of the Unjust Steward* (detail) - Marinus van Reymerswaele, c. 1540

Fig. 9 - Seal on a 13th century land grant in Wales

Fig. 8 - *Two Tax Collectors* - (detail) Marinus van Reymerswaele,, first half 16th century

Fig. 10 - Confirmation of a land grant, with the seal protected by a leather pouch - England, 12th century

Applied seals

As paper became more widely available, methods of sealing developed that would work with this new material. Paper is not as strong as parchment, so pendant seals are more likely to tear away. Instead, the seal is applied directly to the surface of the paper.

This method of sealing is most often seen on the outside of folded letters. The seal must be broken to open and read the letter, so complete seals are not as common. However, fragments of seals and the residue they left behind show us where those seals were placed. We can also see intact seals on letters in paintings, primarily in the 16th century. In the 17th century and onward, signatures became more important as a method of authentication, and applied seals are often found next to signatures in treaties and other documents.

The method for applying the wax is not entirely clear. Modern sealing wax can be found with an integral wick, which allows the melting wax to be easily dripped into place, but that is a very recent invention. Melting wax in a spoon and pouring it in place is also convenient, but no such implement is seen on the desks of Renaissance writers. Sticks of wax are in evidence among the writing implements in paintings (Figs. 11, 12). The ends of the sticks may have been heated over a candle flame to soften them, and then the softened wax applied directly to the paper. The shape of the wax in the portrait of Jan Snoeck seems to indicate this sort of use. The wax may also have been prepared as individual slices that could be softened over a flame and them applied (Fig. 13).

To seal a letter, there are various methods that were employed, including applying the wax across the edge of a folded flap (Fig. 15) or over silk floss wrapped around a folded letter packet (Fig. 14).

Fig. 11 - *Portrait of a Man, possibly Jan Snoeck*, (detail) - Jan Gossaert, c. 1530

Fig. 13 - Portrait of Pieter Bicker Gerritsz (detail) - Maerten van Heemskerck, 1529

Fig. 12 - *The Merchant Georg Gisze* (detail) - Hans Holbein the Younger, 1532

Fig. 14 - Bess of Hardwick's Letters, ID 041, From Elizabeth Stuart, countess of Lennox to Bess of Hardwick, c. 1574

Fig. 15 - Bess of Hardwick's Letters, ID 079, From George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury to Bess of Hardwick, 1580

Figures

1. Portable Antiquities Scheme - https://finds.org.uk (various items)

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Sources

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4. The Imprint Project - https://imprintproject.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/2016/10/31/on-making-wax-seals/

5. The Imprint Project - https://www.imprintseals.org/A_History_of_Sealing

6. Digital Sigillography Resource - https://www.digisig.org/

Scan this QR code to see my recipe for sealing wax, which includes a link to a PDF of this handout.