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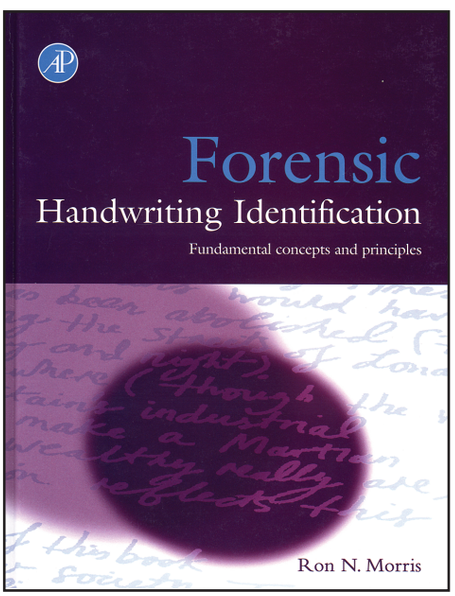
BY WILLIAM L. BUTTS

Forensics for Freshmen—or a Forensics Refresher?

LET THE AUTOGRAPH COLLECTOR'S continuing education resume with this review of a semi-technical forensic handwriting study—not a specialist textbook intended strictly for Forensic Document Examiners, but a work readable to the intelligent layperson that you would expect to find on the reference shelves of any FDE.

Forensic Handwriting Identification: Fundamental Concepts and Principles, by Ron Morris, was written "for the investigator who must rely on handwriting comparison to assist him in his investigations, the attorney who retains the services of an FDE or has to use his services during a trial. It can also be used by trainees of the profession to further understand the basic principles behind the movement of the writer's hand and how the dynamics of the act of writing influence the resultant pattern left on the paper by the writer." Although Morris doesn't mention it, another prime audience could be serious historical autograph collectors seeking to gain a deeper understanding of handwriting analysis or historical autograph dealers who want to hone their skills.

Some collectors may feel disconcerted that Morris doesn't immediately dive into techniques for separating the good from the bad—the main problem autograph collectors face when confronting forensic handwriting identification—and want the answers, not the process. But forensics is a scientific discipline, and like any formal science has a large body of fundamental principles on which it's based. This book offers in-depth sections on how we learn to write, the concept of graphic maturity, minutiae on how individual letters are formed, the influence of handwriting systems, class versus individual characteristics—a lot critical details. This may try the patience of some, but try to adopt a whole new mindset and think like a scientist. This is what forensic handwriting examination is all about: an objective, disciplined, systematic and thorough approach.



MORRIS, Ron N. *Forensic Handwriting Identification: Fundamental Concepts and Principles.* San Diego: Academic Press, 2000. Small 4to. Hardbound. xvi, 238pp. Illustrations. $88.

Chapter 12, "Some General Observations About Handwriting Identification," discusses the debate over whether handwriting identification is art or science. Morris makes a persuasive case for his belief that the field "is both art and science." This same chapter spells out five major principles of handwriting identification that form the backbone of all such study. Slightly condensed:

1. *No two people write exactly alike.*
2. *No one person writes exactly the same way twice.*
3. *The significance of any feature...and the problem of comparison, becomes one of considering a features rarity, the relative speed and naturalness with which it is written.*
4. *A writer is not able to imitate all the features of another person's handwriting or hand printing while simultaneously writing at the same relative speed and skill level as the writer he is seeking to imitate...the simulator will try to imitate those features that are most striking to his eye. He frequently either disregards those features that are less conspicuous to him or...fails to imitate them successfully.*
5. *For those writings where the writer successfully disguises his normal handwriting habits...it is virtually impossible to identify the imitator.*

Of course Morris explores each of these principles in detail.

Morris devotes chapters to many handwriting facets that knowledgeable collectors expect like "Line Quality," "Relative Speed of Writing," "Beginning, Connecting and Ending Strokes," "Writing Instruments and Their Influence," "Abnormal/Disguised Writing" and others—but be aware that his approach is not lightweight or superficial. This is handwriting study at the professional level, not the hobby level.

Autograph collectors need to develop the habit of reading forensic document examination literature whenever possible. The learning curve will be steep, the going sometimes rough. But become a student of the craft, study the literature and the field will begin to demystify itself. Eventually, you'll find it helps you to move beyond the simple pattern recognition skill level that defines many autograph collectors. "Typically," Morris notes, the layperson "arbitrarily selects features, regardless of whether they are easy or difficult to produce, their rarity, conspicuousness, etc., and makes a decision based on the pictorial appearance of the writing rather than on the application of established principles."

Forensic Handwriting Identification will assist collectors in moving beyond this basic shoot-from-the-hip level to a higher level of autograph authentication sophistication. Always a good thing!

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