

Neil Armstrong Autographs And An Art Forger

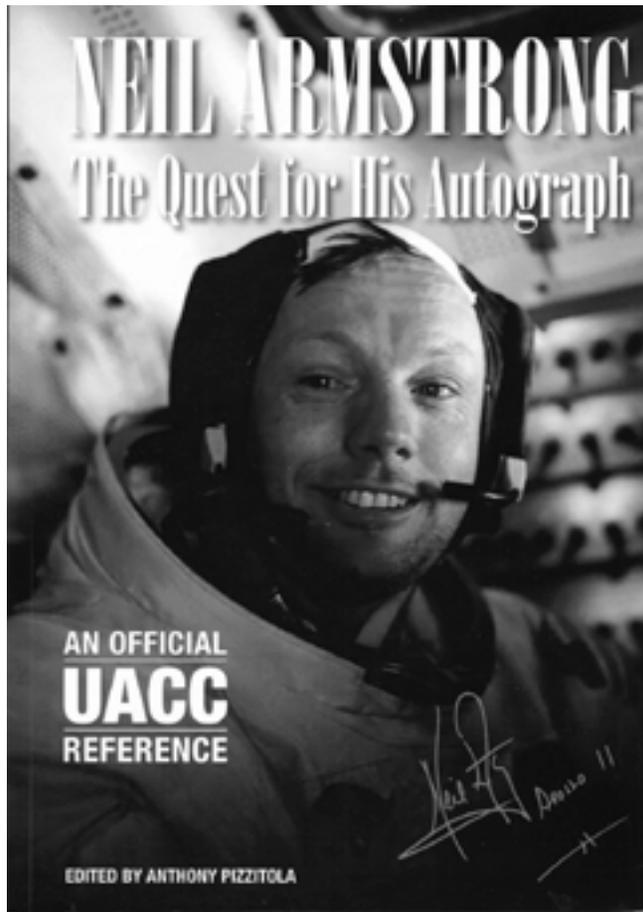
WILLIAM BUTTS

PIZZITOLA, Anthony (editor). *Neil Armstrong: The Quest for His Autograph*. N.p.: UACC, 2011. Small 4to. Softbound. 78pp. Numerous illustrations. **\$22.95.**

PERENYI, Ken. *Caveat Emptor: The Secret Life of an American Art Forger*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2012. Small 4to. Clothbound. 314pp. Illustrations. **\$27.95.**

Nothing against Neil Armstrong, who I admire as much as the next guy and whose place in history I respect, but the Marilyn- and Elvis-style deification seems to have begun. If you think Armstrong autograph material was expensive before his death last August, hold on to your hat: Either so much material will flood the market by those hoping to catch the wave of popularity that follows the death of a person of his stature that we'll see a leveling or even softening of those sky-high prices, or demand will actually outstrip supply and those sky-high prices will continue up into the stratosphere that Armstrong knew so well.

The Universal Autograph Collectors Club (UACC), under the able direction of president Michael Hecht, has taken the educational bull by the horns once again. Their latest effort to educate collectors by publishing useful and affordable reference works is



editor (and UACC vice president) Anthony Pizzitola's *Neil Armstrong: The Quest for His Autograph*. With astronaut material still very much a "growth field" in the hobby, this nicely produced study should find a ready market.

Pizzitola has compiled a number of articles by himself, UACC mainstay Al Wittnebert, dealers Ed Bomsey (former Manuscript Society president), Michael Minor, John Reznikoff and several others into a compact and useful guide that anyone interested in owning an Armstrong would be foolhardy not to acquire and study. One other study devoted exclusively to Armstrong does

exist, *The Neil A. Armstrong IACC/DA Concise Autograph Study* by David Frohman (published in 2000), but the strengths of the Pizzitola study far outweigh the many weaknesses of this slim collection of inferior-quality illustrations accompanied by almost no analysis.

The nuts-and-bolts chapters of *Neil Armstrong: The Quest for His Autograph* include "The Launch," Pizzitola's quick look at Armstrong's two signing styles, which he dubs the "Extended Early Armstrong" and the better known "Abbreviated Armstrong." Wittnebert's way-too-brief "Armstrong 101" runs through the basic questions a collector should ask himself when pursuing an Armstrong autograph item and the types of non-authentic items one might encounter. Steve Zarelli's must-read "Armstrong's Critical Strokes" is an excellent, detailed stroke-by-stroke study of Armstrong's signature. Astronaut autograph specialist Ken Havekotte's meaty "The Armstrong Decades" takes you decade by decade through Armstrong's general signing practices, featuring numerous examples from each period. All of the known Autopen matrices appear in several spots, of course, and the now-common knowledge that Armstrong appears to have never penned his signature on top of his U.S. flag shoulder patch when signing NASA space suit portraits is duly noted and illustrated. (The "appears to have" qualification is all mine, I must note, as I find it rash to claim what may have been Armstrong's consistent signing tendency into a hard and fast "rule"—impossible to verify no matter how many space suit signed photographs you examine.)

These nuts-and-bolts chapters are interspersed with what I consider fluff or filler material. Pizzitola's "Why Doesn't Armstrong Sign Anymore?" chapter typifies the kind of overanalysis that plagues Armstrong enthusiasts and annoys this reviewer no end, offering psychological interpretations about why Armstrong stopped signing most items in 1994 and even bringing in two graphoanalysts who offer their "opinions." (For those not familiar with graphoanalysis, it's the debated pseudo-science of interpreting personality traits through handwriting, a "sideshow science" that many of us try to distance from handwriting analysis, the study of handwriting characteristics for the sole purpose of determining authorship.) My view: A reserved, quiet man grows weary of signing many thousands of items for many thou-

sands of strangers in person and by mail for about a quarter of a century and finally says, *Enough is enough*. What's the mystery?

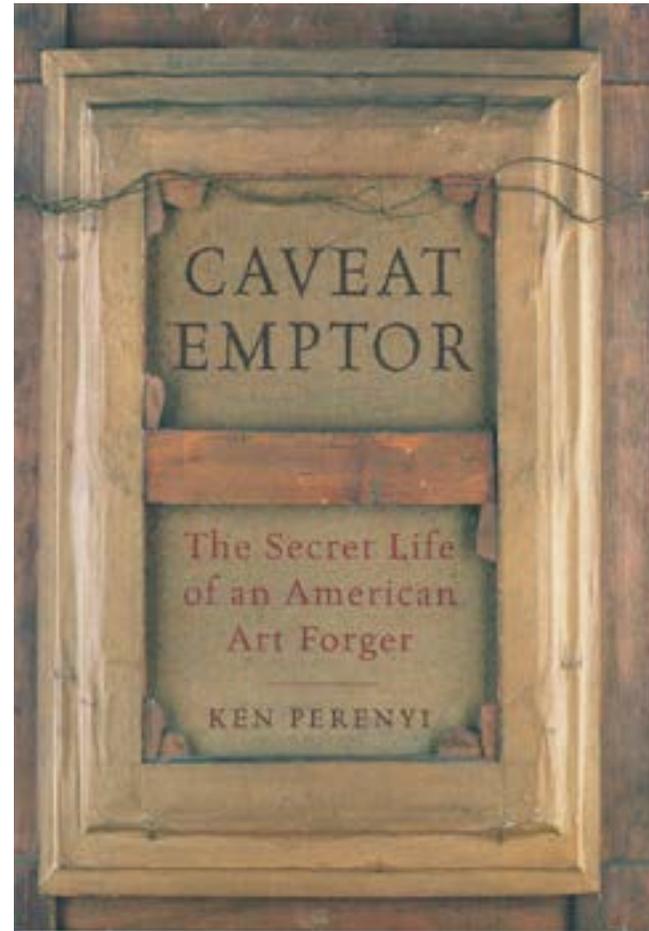
Another chapter is an interview with NASA Astronaut Office director Lynn Cross. Never have I read an interview with a subject less forthcoming, less informative, less cooperative. Have you ever watched a Senate hearing in which the person being questioned “pleads the Fifth” in reply to question after question? I yearned for that much excitement in reading Cross's interview.

Apart from these exasperating exceptions, though, *Neil Armstrong: The Quest for His Autograph* truly is an absolute requisite for anyone interested in astronaut autographs. The abundance of high-quality, all-color illustrations make it a pleasure to peruse. No one dare pursue Armstrong material without first absorbing Pizzitola's enjoyable study.

Art Forger Tells All

Every few years a forger of some sort pens a tell-all confession or a book or paper thief is the subject of an expose. In 2010 it was book thief John Gilkey (*The Man Who Loved Books Too Much* by Allison Hoover Bartlett), in 2008 it was literary forger Lee Israel (*Can You Ever Forgive Me?*), in 2000 it was map thief Gilbert Bland (*The Island of Lost Maps* by Miles Harvey) and in 1997 it was art forger Eric Hebborn (*The Art Forger's Handbook*)—all reviewed in this column.

The latest inductee into this Hall of Shame is art forger Ken Perenyi, whose *Caveat Emptor: The Secret Life of an American Art Forger* has been causing many an art collector to quake. What *Caveat Emptor* shares with the Israel and Hebborn memoirs above is the complete lack of remorse shown, despite Israel's laughably insincere claims. Perenyi continues this tradition, oblivious to the damage he caused art lovers and collectors. Not once is there mention of the innocent people he harms, the collectors who simply want to own an original by an artist they admire. To him, the only injured parties are those who he felt deserved it: Greedy, unscrupulous art dealers and auctioneers. Admittedly, he dealt with a great many less-than-stellar representatives of these professions. As a cautionary tale, *Caveat Emptor* offers lessons from which any collector can learn—not only specific tricks of the trade that apply equally well to historical documents, but general lessons on just how cunning a good forger



can be in recreating every appearance of age and legitimacy down to the finest detail.

Born in blue collar New Jersey in 1949, Perenyi was a poor student who wanted nothing more than to escape his humdrum existence. A chance meeting with a wildly successful and flamboyant psychedelic artist and a free-spending small-time criminal awakened him to New York's excitement and seem to have set his path. Booze, pot, fast women and even faster cars followed. Almost by accident, Perenyi discovered he had artistic talent. When he happened upon a biography of Dutch art forger

Han van Meegeren, who forged 17th century Vermeer paintings, it was an epiphany: A forger was born. Before long Perenyi had forged a 16th century Flemish portrait on a thin wood panel “scavenged from a third-rate piece of early European furniture.” He nervously sold it to a Renaissance art dealer in New York for \$800 plus a badly damaged Flemish portrait in antique frame—fodder for his next forgery.

Caveat Emptor reads like a rags to riches tale penned by Tony Soprano—someone incapable of experiencing empathy with another human being. Perenyi seems to be a talented copyist who enjoys the creative aspects of producing fakes but couldn’t face the prospect of being a starving artist working his way up and building a reputation based on hard work and merit. He needed the instant gratification of wads of cash for relatively little work. Since this fast money hailed from some fairly unsavory criminals willing to fence forged or stolen art, art dealers eager to grossly underpay innocent sellers (which role Perenyi played to perfection), auction houses happy to play all kinds of shenanigans with consignors, all manner of shady “wheeler dealers,” it became easy for Perenyi to enjoy swindling all of the supposed experts—who in turn often thought they were fooling him and getting sought-after artwork at bargain basement prices.

“I was still a long way from regarding forgery as a career,” Perenyi maintains—“at this point I viewed it as something to temporarily keep me going. For now it was the only thing between me and starvation, and I determined never to be without fakes again.” His fortunes rose fast, for his forgeries were first rate and he was smart and discreet in placing them at different locations. It wasn’t long before he was, to quote the sitcom, “movin’ on up to the east side”—literally, to New York’s tony Upper East Side, “the neighborhood where I felt I belonged.” Soon an eccentric connoisseur friend indoctrinated Perenyi to the delights of 19th century American paintings, and “a school of art that I’d once thought boring [became] fascinating, even exciting.” Ships by James E. Buttersworth, still lifes by John F. Peto, ex-slaves by William Aiken Walker, hummingbirds by Martin Johnson Heade and Native Americans by Charles Bird King flew off his talented brush, each fetching tidy sums. One of the high points of his career came when two of his Buttersworths were given full treatment in a Parke-Bernet auction catalogue.

This “validated my work in a way unlike anything before,” he writes. “This wasn’t just fooling a dealer in a gallery. This was subjecting my work to the scrutiny of an entire body of dealers, collectors, and experts. It had a profound effect on me.”

At this point Perenyi really began to live large. He purchased a building complex in St. Petersburg, Florida, where he opened a restoration shop (“an ideal cover trade for my real business”) and an antique shop (“any extra cash we made could be put into antiques for the second shop”). When he realized he had saturated the New York market with his phonies and got skittish, it was off to England and a new subject matter: Among others, equestrians by John F. Fleming and James Seymour and John Nast Sartorius, maritime scenes by Thomas Whitcombe and Charles Brookings. These Perenyi scattered methodically across British auction houses and galleries—until he realized that he could safely sell these in the United States market just as easily. “Thus began the domestic distribution of my British paintings,” he quips. The pinnacle of his forging career was his creation of an addition to Martin Johnson Heade’s famed and ultra-rare passionflower series. Perenyi chronicles the creation of his opus and his placing it at Sotheby’s New York facility with relish—especially its far-above-estimate final hammer price of \$717,500. “Everything I owned was paid for,” he practically cackles, “and I hadn’t a nickel of debt. Between my last score and savings, I had around a million, all cash, and that didn’t include my stock portfolio.”

That’s the Cliff’s Notes version of *Caveat Emptor*, but it’s a whirlwind of capers and escapades, including cameo appearances by some noted art historians and characters as varied as famed attorney Roy Cohn and pop artist Andy Warhol. But what should interest collectors just as much as Perenyi’s adventures is his delving into the techniques he developed to help pass off his forgeries. Some are old hat in the forged painting business: Aging and distressing the painting, smearing with dust (he used “rotten stone,” powdered volcanic rock), spending almost as much time on the back side as the front, adding fake dealer markings and labels, using correct surfaces and placing in appropriate antique frames.

Other advances he pioneered. Rather than painstakingly engraving the fine network of hairline cracks that cover the sur-

face of most old paintings (craquelure), he evolved a far faster and more convincing method. He replicated the pinprick-sized fly droppings sometimes found on antique paintings. Perhaps most interesting, he devised an incredibly clever technique for achieving the telltale green glow of authentic antique varnish under ultraviolet examination by saving actual dissolved antique varnish from old paintings he was restoring and mixing it with new varnish. Perenyi left few stones unturned in making his deceptions undetectable.

And therein lies the greatest lesson of *Caveat Emptor* for collectors of historical documents. Studying the techniques and careers of master forgers underscores that you must never underestimate the craftiness of forgers. Sure, forgers often slip up in obvious and detectable ways, but the better ones such as Perenyi or, say, Mark Hofmann in the autograph world, continue to devise ever-new and clever methods of masking their deceptions. *Caveat Emptor* thus aids collectors in developing the critical eye necessary to avoid falling under the seductive spell that a great item—be it oil painting or handwritten document—can cast. Know thy enemy, indeed!

Caveat Emptor comes to no *mea maxima culpa* finale. It hardly comes to any end at all; it just stops. There's no satisfying *click* of the jail cell as Perenyi is locked up for his crimes. *Caveat Emptor* ends as abruptly as if you'd pointed the remote at the t.v. and clicked it off just before the end of a two-hour crime drama. Expect no comeuppance, no soul searching, no repentance. This litany of crimes isn't an unburdening—far from it. It's a boast. The FBI appear to have put the fear of God into him, but for reasons not even he understands no charges were ever filed against him and he has never served a day in prison. Perenyi still plies his trade in Florida, now selling his forgeries as copies for decorative purposes only, which is not illegal.

Caveat Emptor is written in a light, fast-paced style that won't win awards for style but which suit Perenyi's breezy lifestyle and get the job done. While it's frustrating to read what promises to be a confessional that includes no remorse and no punishment, collectors can benefit from such memoirs and perhaps thwart future forgers at their game.