

The Care and Feeding of Autograph Dealers

I REVIEWED A BOOK ABOUT THE autograph world and it prompted an interesting exchange with the author—let's call him "Joe." He'd had a disillusioning experience in acquiring a long-sought autograph which turned out to be a forgery. While he asked for and received a refund, his experience with the dealer from whom he bought it left a bad taste in his mouth. I turned our conversation into a dialogue to share with you. (And to allow myself to say a few things that didn't actually get said...)

Joe: How can collectors ever be 100 percent sure that what they buy is authentic?

Me: Your experience was unfortunate, but also, I think, exceedingly atypical. I'm not asking you who this dealer is, but his level of incompetence sounds staggering. Also his comment to you when he took back the item was shocking. I assume he's not a member of any serious by-election-only dealer organization.

Joe: This dealer's firm is well established, well known and I thought respected. That's why I bought from him in the first place!

Me: Stick with members of well respected dealer organizations whose members have proven their expertise and integrity and over 99 percent of these incidents can be avoided. I'm a member of PADA and ABAA [the Professional Autograph Dealer Association and the Antiquarian Book Sellers Association of America]. The circle of dealers I most associate with all operate on the same principle. They care deeply—no, *passionately*—about the authenticity of their material and about the future of our autograph collecting world. I see PADA as a beacon of light in these choppy and turbulent waters, guiding collectors toward safe harbor. This may sound self-serving, but I'd say the same thing if I weren't a member myself and if I weren't even a dealer. These people are scrupulosity personified.

Joe: No matter how many associations you belong to, greed is a powerful motivator—look at all the politicians and successful businessmen greed has brought down—like Bernie Madoff. When greed is

in the picture all bets are off.

Me: Whoa! That's a catchy line, but think about what it implies. To haze the

sleuthing that's critical to ferreting out bad material. They apply this attitude to their entire inventory, regardless of value.

Dishonest dealers lack this critical

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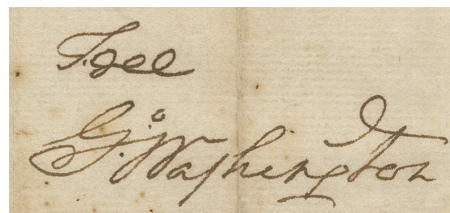
line between profit and greed is a huge mistake. As a dealer, I try to make a profit on everything I sell. Usually it's enough to help pay the electric bill, cover the mortgage, salaries, the usual. Would you expect anything less?

Joe: I'm not talking about profits. I'm talking about greed!

Me: Are you suggesting that when a dealer's profit margin exceeds such-and-such percent their integrity goes out the window? Any ethical dealer will tend to apply those same values to every transaction, large or small.

What you're talking about is dishonesty. The quality that separates stellar dealers from disreputable dealers is this: The best autograph dealers take real pride in both what they do and what they offer. They're proud of their ability to separate the good from the bad, and maintain an inventory that shows off the results of this ability. Such dealers take inauthentic autographs as a personal affront, an insult to their skill. This zealous hatred of all that's phony translates into their inventories. Such dealers love the

George Washington confessed to chopping down his father's cherry tree with the words "I cannot tell a lie." Would that all dealers maintained the same standard.



acumen and have a *sell, sell, sell* mindset—a 'get it in and get it out' attitude that clashes with the passion for authenticity. Serious autograph dealers focus on authenticity and let the selling take care of itself. It's just good business.

Joe: But you just made my point! Greed motivates dishonesty.

Me: Dealers are human and we all make mistakes. But a reputable dealer keeps those mistakes to an absolute minimum by knowing their business and doing their homework on each and every item. If a mistake occurs, the dealer confirms the error, apologizes and refunds the purchase price.

Joe: I agree that it's important to buy from a reputable source. And I think the definition of "reputable source" may bring some debate that is healthy. I hope that debate will help arm collectors with a heightened degree of skepticism.

Me: Well put.

So seek out those dealers whose colleagues trust them and show they care more for their material than a sale. Look for those who freely share their expertise with customers, who write for hobby publications to spread the word further. Build up a network of dealers whose expertise and honesty you trust. Enlarge your own knowledge through reading and study. Doing this can get you close to the 100 percent confidence in authenticity that my friend Joe was seeking. 