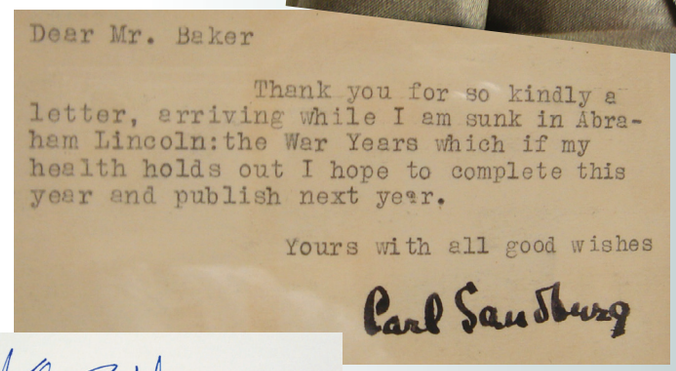
BY WILLIAM L. BUTTS

# Cultural Relevancy

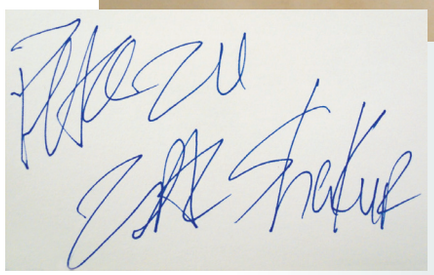
## "Look, Dad: Abraham Lincoln!" "No, son—that's George Burns."


Dear Mr. Baker

Thank you for so kindly a letter, arriving while I am sunk in Abraham Lincoln: the War Years which if my health holds out I hope to complete this year and publish next year.

Yours with all good wishes

Carl Sandburg



Signatures of George Burns, Carl Sandburg and Tupac Shakur courtesy of PSA/DNA

**THIS EXTRAORDINARY DIALOGUE** took place at my shop a few weeks ago in front of a display case showing a signed photograph of George Burns alongside a foot-tall realistic doll figure of the late comedian (1896-1996). I think Burns would have chuckled. I laughed, though it was a bittersweet kind of laughter, the way I laugh when Jay Leno questions people on the street about basic historical data that should be part of our common knowledge.

I overhear countless astonishing tidbits of conversations in our open shop in a high foot-traffic location. Many times, our head-and-shoulders mourning bust of Ulysses S. Grant—in full uniform, by the way—has been mistaken for Abraham Lincoln. Or, while looking at a Franz Liszt letter on display, a woman read our thumbnail biography of the composer alongside the document and pronounced, "Hmm... the Hungarian Rhapsody. I've heard of the *Bohemian* Rhapsody." Or, in an interesting role reversal, the grade school child who patiently explained to his parents who Carl Sandburg was as they viewed an original typewritten draft of one of his poems.

Do I really expect an eight-year-old to recognize George Burns? Heavens, no. Reruns of *The George Burns & Gracie Allen* show are nowhere to be found, and Burns' few films are rarely found on television—not that they'd interest children anyhow.

But it reminds us of the fleeting nature of fame in America—which is a factor to keep in mind when collecting autographs. It's all about cultural literacy, or rather the changing nature of cultural literacy. It's also about what I call generational literacy.

Even autograph dealers, who deal in names for a living, and tend to have Rolodex-like memories for famous persons major and minor, are far from immune to this. Recently we exhibited at a well-known antiquarian book show in San Francisco, and the single item creating "buzz" among the dealers was a handwritten notebook from someone named Tupac Shakur. Finally I overcame my embarrassment and asked one of these dealers, "*Who on Earth is...*" and coughed my way through the name I couldn't pronounce. Turns out he was a famous American rapper (1971-96) murdered in Las Vegas. A British dealer in high-end English antiquarian books was offering this item, priced in the low five digits. We observed this item get blank stares for much of the show from the older, well-heeled crowd in attendance, although a couple in their 20s drooled over it—until they saw the asking price.

The point is that if, as autograph collectors, pop culture figures are of interest, be aware that to some extent you're gambling that these figures will be remembered and valued in years to come. If the future potential value of your collection is not of the slightest concern, fine and well. Enjoy your collecting, knowing full well that this material may not be have much resale value in the future. If you enjoy pop culture but also like to know there's a good chance your collection will increase in value... well, there's the rub! The challenge is to complement your enthusiasm for pop culture with faith in the *staying power* of those figures. Is So-and-So a flash in the pan, or will he or she be remembered twenty years from now? Ask yourself these questions every time you pursue a new acquisition.

Even if you collect historical material, apply the same criteria. Historical figures too have their ups and downs. Novelist Thomas Wolfe (1900-38) was red hot some years ago; less so today. Many literary figures have their temporary ups and downs in popularity (and hence to some extent in autographic value)—Faulkner and Hemingway come immediately to mind—but overall they remain major literary figures who weather these faddish fluctuations and remain desirable.

Learning to think of autograph values in terms of each figure's long-term, lasting contribution to society is a start to avoiding some of the worse devaluations that occur in the autograph market.



AM0910_Curiosa.indd 24 9/13/09 5:35 PM