

A Crash Course on Rubber Stamps

RUBBER STAMPED SIGNATURES are to autograph collecting what wooden nickels are to numismatics, what S & H green stamps are to philately, what paint-by-numbers are to Old Masters: relatively harmless nuisances, plentiful and easily dismissed.

Or so it should be. So it used to be. The Internet has been a double-edged sword for the hobby. On the plus side, hordes of people who would like to collect autographs but couldn't because of geographical location or lack of resources, now find it fast and easy to locate desirable items with a few clicks of the mouse.

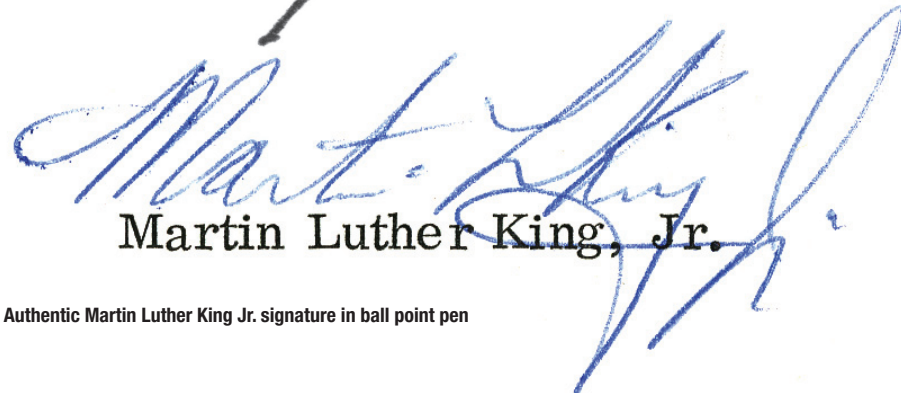
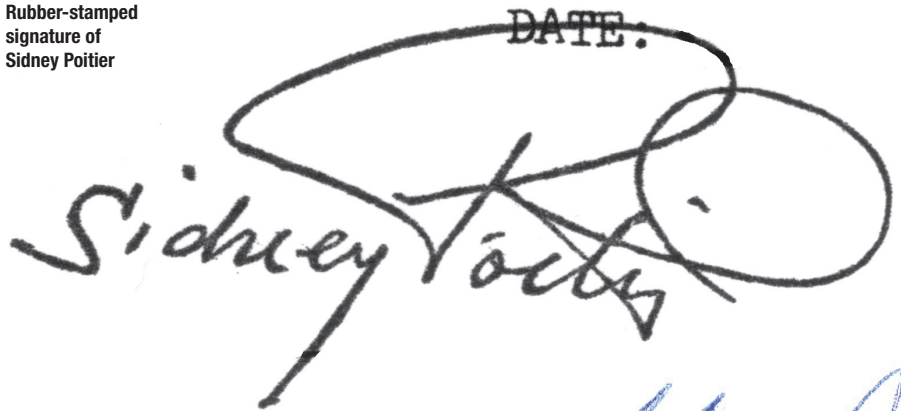
Here's the part that gives a nasty paper cut: These instant Internet collectors often enter the field cold turkey, without the experience and knowledge to separate the good from the bad — even when that bad is excruciatingly bad. Significant numbers of people are collecting without a clue what they're doing — a sure recipe for disaster.

Enter Forrest R. Smith III of Reading, Pa. This ne'er-do-well had rubber stamps made of the signatures of major authors. He purchased inexpensive copies of their books, applied rubber stamps to flyleaves and *Voila!* You can guess what venue this scammer chose to market his bogus wares. If you guessed eBay, you got it — Forgery Central.

Ingenious? Quite the contrary. The only interesting facet of this unclever and disingenuous scam is that more than 400 people bought these books, shelling out more than \$300,000 over a half-dozen years. The hoax might have gone undetected for many more years if a few people hadn't realized something was amiss and contacted postal inspectors. (Smith has been found guilty and faces up to 80 years in prison and one million dollars in fines.)

The irony is that a simple five-minute tutorial on rubber stamps could have given these victims the know-how to detect their rubber-stamped rip-offs. A side-by-side examination of an authentic signature alongside a rubber-stamped signature quickly reveals worlds of differences. All that's needed is a decent magnifying glass and any ex-

Rubber-stamped signature of Sidney Poitier



Authentic Martin Luther King Jr. signature in ball point pen

ample of a rubber-stamped signature.

Sign your name as you normally would using any kind of pen on a slip of paper. Think about what happens during the writing process: Ink is forcibly pushed and pulled in specific directions across the writing surface, the ink deposited in the channels created by the pen nib. At this magnified level, it's a surprisingly crude and violent endeavor.

Study your sample closely — under strong light and with the highest power magnification you can — you may be surprised to find that normal-looking signature filled with tiny stops and starts, light and dark patches, miniscule blotches of ink not visible without magnification.

Now examine a rubber-stamped signature. Whereas pen writing bites and digs into the paper with specific direction, planting ink as it goes, a rubber stamp has no furrows — it impresses relatively lightly and *straight downward*, with only enough pressure to transfer ink from the rubber stamp to the paper. The stamp is then lifted *straight up*, leaving behind small ink bubbles in the process. These bubbles pop, leaving

tiny circular voids in which there is no ink.

If the ink has been evenly applied to the rubber stamp, the *ink density* is perfectly consistent throughout the rubber-stamped signature — you know from studying authentic handwriting that ink density varies with pen pressure. Varying pen pressure also creates some lines that are thick and heavy with ink and others that are thin and faintly inked. Rubber-stamped lines may vary in thickness, but the ink itself doesn't vary in density. In authentic writing, when one line crosses on top of another, you can usually distinguish which line was penned first — the furrows have differing depths. With rubber stamps, no line has precedence over any other line. One can tell it's not the product of pen applied to paper.

If you study up close what happens when you write by hand versus when you apply a rubber stamp, the distinctions become clearer and more obvious with experience. Collecting is a slow process, one with a long learning curve. One of the easiest, most basic ways to learn, though, is to constantly examine authentic handwriting under magnification. ⚠