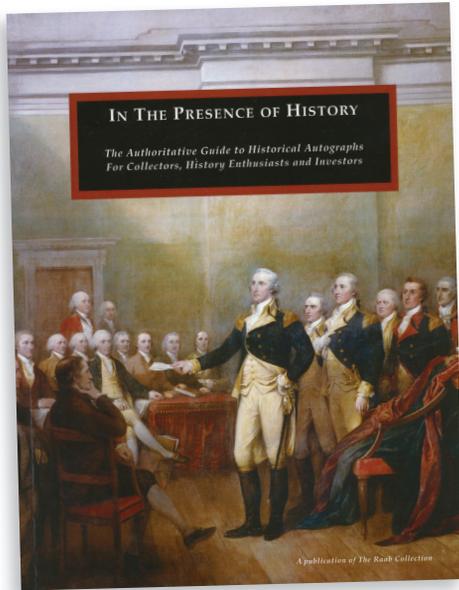


In the Presence of History

BOOKSHELF
BY WILLIAM L. BUTTS



RAAB, Steven S., and RAAB, Jonas. *In the Presence of History: The Authoritative Guide to Historical Autographs for Collectors, History Enthusiasts and Investors.* Philadelphia: The Diamond Press, 2009. Small 4to. Softbound. 178pp. Numerous color illustrations. \$33.50.

THE SMALL SHELF OF ENTRY-LEVEL general interest how-to volumes on autograph collecting can now boast a classy new addition: The father/son combination of Steve and Jonas Raab offer up a fine two-punch with their *In the Presence of History*.

In the Presence of History takes the reader through all the expected chapters: “An Introduction to Autographs,” “Assessing the Quality and Value of Autographs,” “Treasures We Have Hunted,” “Buying and Selling Autographs,” “Authenticating Autographs,” “Particular Issues in Buying Autographs,” “A Miscellany of Autograph Nuggets,” “Guide to Presidential Autographs” and “American Historical Autographs: Who to Collect.” Steve is a long-time Philadelphia dealer of sound reputation and inventory. Moreover, he’s savvy and articulate, and each of these sections contains pearls of hard-won wisdom too numerous to go into here.

What I most like about *In the Presence of History* is the authors’ willingness to take a stance – they have strong opinions and

high standards and don’t hesitate to express them. No wishy-washy pussy-footin’ around here. Too often general collecting books such as this are penned by collectors and commissioned writers whose immersion in the topic is that of an enthusiastic amateur and whose opinions aren’t tempered with hard experience. Such authors hedge in their judgments, and it shows in their text. Experienced full-time dealers, on the other hand, tend to be hardcore and no-nonsense. The Raabs are just that – plus they have attitude with an A. I like that.

Don’t expect any radical departures from the accepted conventions of autograph collecting. Buy the best examples you can afford... buy the best condition you can afford... buy from reputable sources... etcetera. No surprises here. But do expect a much different *tone* than that found in older autograph collecting tomes. Earlier how-to’s addressed a small audience whose suppliers were a cozy coterie of well-known dealers marketing through printed catalogues; the overall tone is genteel and scholarly. The Raabs address a larger, scattered audience whose suppliers are mainly online (well-known dealers jostling alongside oodles of slick no-name presences of questionable expertise) and who are jaded by autograph scandals, eBay scams and a dozen other distractions. So pay special attention to the Raabs’ more hard-nosed approach to buying from dealers and gauging their expertise – plus their in-depth comments on learning

how to authenticate autographs. Such content from experienced dealers goes a long way toward shortening the learning curve for novice collectors.

Physically, *In the Presence of History* is handsome: clean, classy, professional. It’s refreshingly free of the glaring snafus and embarrassing amateurishness that mar many of the self-published titles reviewed in this column. Would a trade publisher’s touch have improved it? Probably, in ways that would make it more user-friendly, a bit easier on the eyes. Type size is too, too small, and a larger type size and smaller margins would make the text more readable. Same, too, with the countless photo captions: Not only is the type size painfully small (I’m talking a minuscule 5 or 6 point), but captions appear within grey backgrounds, which further hampers legibility.

The lack of any acknowledgments or bibliography in *In the Presence of History* is a regrettable oversight. We stand on the shoulders of those before us, so to not list the many books it’s assumed any dealer would have studied and referenced is a slight that should be remedied. One important service of any great how-to book is to provide a blueprint to continue the reader’s further education.

So move over Mary Benjamin’s *Autographs: A Key to Collecting* (1946), move over Charles Hamilton’s *Collecting Autographs and Manuscripts* (1961), move over Kenneth Rendell’s *History Comes to Life: Collecting Historical Letters and Documents* (1995). Also note that these standard texts are all penned by dealers – I’ve long been a vocal proponent of dealers sharing their expertise. The Raabs’ *In the Presence of History* refines and updates its predecessors. *The more things change, the more they stay the same* is a maxim of which I’m fond – and in the world of historical autographs, its truth shines through again and again. Yet at the same time we do learn from the lessons of those who precede us. So too with autograph collecting how-to’s. *In the Presence of History* brings autograph collecting firmly into the internet age. Though not perfect, every serious or wannabee-serious collector is well advised to read and absorb its lessons. **A**

