

# Dr. R. Meets His Match and Mining the Archives of American Art

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**VINSON, Michael.** *Edward Eberstadt & Sons: Rare Booksellers of Western Americana*. Norman: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2016. Small 4to. Clothbound. 165pp. **\$29.95**.

**SAVIG, Mary (editor).** *Pen to Paper: Artists' Handwritten Letters from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2016. Small 4to. Clothbound, dust jacket. 207pp. Color frontispiece and numerous color illustrations. **\$27.50**.

If books about booksellers are to you as catnip to a feline, well, scratch my ears and collar me up, for Michael Vinson's *Edward Eberstadt & Sons: Rare Booksellers of Western Americana* is an enjoyable addition to this addictive genre. I'll resist the urge to call it *purr-fectly* anything, but I hope this slim company history makes the underrated Edward Eberstadt (1883-1958) as household a name in the rarified world of antiquarian books and manuscripts as Edwin Wolf II and John Fleming's beefy *Rosenbach: A Biography* did for A.S.W. Rosenbach in 1960.

It won't, I assure you. "Dr. R," as he was known, achieved a level of fame in the teens and '20s no bookseller had ever seen

before or will ever see again. He was bigger than life, bold, brassy, over-the-top in every statement, always good for a quotable quote, rubbing shoulders with every fatcat with a fat wallet; when he returned from an overseas buying trip, the press would greet him as he ambled down the gangplank of his ocean steamer. Eberstadt, though as hard drinking and hard living as Rosenbach, was never as flashy and flamboyant in his dress, never a colorful publicity hound like Rosenbach – plus he didn't have a catchy nickname. Edward Eberstadt & Sons was one of the all-time great Western Americana dealers of the twentieth century, but younger dealers today are often completely unfamiliar with him – which makes Vinson's *Edward Eberstadt & Sons* all the more welcome.

Americana specialist dealer William Reese sets the stage in his foreword as only a dealer of many years' experience can, describing the qualities of a pre-internet dealer:

*A successful antiquarian bookseller had to rely largely on memory and accumulated knowledge. The learning curve was steep, but the rewards for the active and attentive dealer were great; in time, few could match the depth and breadth of Eberstadt's knowledge of the literature in his chosen field. When it comes to assertions of rarity or bibliographical detail, few could gainsay him. His retentive memory was his capital. Although diminished somewhat by the reference sources now available to anyone, the same is still true in the rare book trade today.*

Reese elaborates a pair of other traits which place Eberstadt in the pantheon of best bibliopoles. “The first is an intuitive sense of value – how an item might be priced.... There is no harder talent to acquire in any antiques business.... Many people of great knowledge have failed as dealers because they did not understand this equation. The second quality...was an enthusiasm for his chosen area and a personality that conveyed it.”

Edward Eberstadt & Sons  
RARE BOOKSELLERS  
OF WESTERN AMERICANA

Michael Merson

I've always found it unfortunate when any bookseller is credited with singlehandedly establishing the market for any category – happens more often than you'd think – though I don't deny that individual efforts can prove critical and the "Eberstadt effect" was noticeable. It takes a village (o.k., a bookshop), and when a confluence of circumstances and dealers merge with interest in a topic a collecting genre is born. On the other hand, I agree wholeheartedly with Vinson's assertion that "Edward Eberstadt was a maverick who combined the passion of a treasure hunter with the instincts of a scholar" and that "Eberstadt's beginning in the book trade combined serendipity with a savvy intuition."

And how serendipitous he was! How serendipitous that as a young man this former South American gold miner with a bookish bent should use a New York restroom in which "the paper...was supplied by a stack of old books." How serendipitous that one of them should be in his newly-acquired language. And that this fellow should buy this book and show it to one of the few people in the country who could identify it: "...a slightly imperfect early Mexican imprint, printed in the sixteenth century and very rare." Sounds rather like a stretcher, as Mark Twain once wrote, but after all booksellers have been known to spin a tale or two.

It's fascinating to see the legend as a newcomer scrambling to find a niche. First Eberstadt floundered in the then-uncollected field of books in Spanish with his Latin-America Book Company in 1908 before honing in on Western Americana with the Hudson Book Company around 1912, only switching to his own name to operate under in 1921. Having landed a really big fish (marine insurance executive William Robertson Coe) on his first fishing trip, he struggled with the sticking point of his rare wares -- "The most important aspects of Eberstadt's business were ones that are important to all antiquarian booksellers: what to price your wares at, and how to describe and place them in a context that justifies the price."

Coe wasn't shy to complain about "the high percentage of

profit you are taking” and forced Eberstadt to realize that “Any bookseller acting as an agent for a wealthy collector must tread with care, particularly if the customer begins to feel that the bookseller is taking advantage of them.” Vinson brings out this rarely-seen side of the dealer-collector relationship – rare because high-level customers are often mute about jaw-dropping prices. Amongst each other, though, the likes of Coe, Thomas Streeter and Henry Wagner griped and joked frequently about Eberstadt’s prices, as their letters quoted by Vinson often reveal. Although Coe spent large sums with Eberstadt, he could be a penny-pinching bargain hunter, and it’s refreshing that Vinson cites many Coe missives taking the bookseller to task and “poking him plenty.” Charges of price-gouging would dog Eberstadt throughout his career and into the grave, when sons Lindley and Charles took control of the firm and continued his envelope-pushing tendency. But on the lighter side, loads of friendly-with-attitude banter, boasting and commiserating took place between him and many of his heavyweight clients, most of whom became friends of the collegial bookseller who liked to pepper his notes with down-home Western dialect and slang.

Vinson is himself a dealer in rare Western Americana and Texana, as his astute editorial asides about the bookselling profession occasionally betray. When Eberstadt repeatedly urged a Wisconsin customer to purchase the dry-as-dust *First Laws of Montana* – the first book published in that state – and met resistance, Vinson remarks, “Many booksellers have discovered since then that any attempt to sell law books to collectors of history will be met with almost universal lack of interest.” And when Eberstadt finally succeeds in unloading this “dandelion on an otherwise verdant lawn,” you can picture Vinson bowing as he intones, “If the tablet in Eberstadt’s honor was not erected...it certainly should be by every antiquarian bookseller who has ever tried to sell a law book to a customer.” All too often in recent years new titles about bookish topics, especially if they involve thievery or shenanigans, are authored by journalists expanding a magazine exposé into a full-

length book. Publishers know that true crime even of the bookish variety sells, so an article sometimes spurs publishers to action. These books are often entertaining, informative and well written if journalistic in tone – yet you can also tell when an author is a writer-for-hire addressing a topic new to them and not a seasoned professional in the book world. I had to chuckle in agreement when Mike quipped that “in the atmosphere of rare books... gossip seems to be a form of oxygen needed for survival” – an observation that would only be made by someone in the trade.

Vinson thus brings the expertise and appreciation that only a fellow antiquarian bookseller can bring to the vagaries of Eberstadt’s career as he navigates the ups and downs of the economy, of changing markets, of fickle customers. Those early salad days of the 1920s (when they thought the salad was yet to come) record many an astounding rarity rolling through Eberstadt’s shop for amounts which when adjusted for time and inflation still impress – when optimism and supply seemed boundless and no one realized they stood on the edge of a steep precipice. The Depression at least brought with it for Eberstadt the new blood of sons Lindley (“very personable... traveling book scout and salesman”) and Charles (“quiet and scholarly, brought his research skills to cataloguing and describing the rare books”).

Successful antiquarian booksellers and historical document dealers tend to wear a great many hats, often simultaneously. Buying and selling are merely those aspects the public sees, but in reality any enterprising dealer is also forever researching, writing, getting involved in publishing (not only their own catalogues, but books published by themselves and/or publishers), being all things to all people; their whole world revolves around paper, paper and more paper. Vinson bring out many of these eclectic threads that filled Eberstadt’s life. Starting in the early 1920s, for instance, Eberstadt himself published a string of serious, substantial hardbound western adventure and travel books – one of them 39 volumes! Even during the Depression he managed to

bring out a few such scholarly volumes. Remarks Vinson, “All these publications today are considered valuable contributions to historical research, and many still command premiums in the antiquarian book market.” Of books published by others, Vinson relates that “One of the most important aspects of cataloguing is the contributions to bibliography it affords, and one of the landmark bibliographies for western Americana is the guide to overland narratives published between 1800 and 1865 compiled by Henry R. Wagner, *The Plains and the Rockies....*” – a copy of which rests behind me as I write this – and which could hardly exist without the many overland narratives Wagner acquired from Eberstadt. Hard feelings arose when Eberstadt felt that Wagner published numerous points about issues without acknowledging his pivotal role, and later Wagner dismissed the notion of Eberstadt’s son Charles editing a much-needed revised third edition in the 1950s (Wagner’s co-author “made some substantial changes that only made the third edition even more of a hodge-podge of inconsistent information”) – but this internal drama is beside the point that Eberstadt and his wonderfully-researched catalogues played a large role in the scholarship of Western Americana bibliographies.

No bookseller history would be complete without inevitable tales of great finds and near misses, and *Edward Eberstadt & Sons* has its share. One of the former occurred when Eberstadt discovered a “previously unknown overland narrative” of a Chicago bookseller for the 1930s-serious sum of \$950. He couldn’t dial the phone fast enough and had to pay full retail, but the treasure was his. Not content with this ultra-rare Riley Root narrative, Eberstadt spent time and money researching until he “located Root’s granddaughter – a venerable old lady in Michigan,” hopped a train there and succeeded in purchasing the family’s last remaining copies, which found happy homes among his best customers. Now that’s what separates a good bookseller from a master. One of the latter occurred when a copy of John L. Campbell’s rare *Idaho and Montana Gold Regions* (Chicago, 1865) appeared in “a one-page

mimeograph list entitled ‘Lowest Priced Book List That You Ever Received in Your Life’ from an Alabama bookseller in 1932. Eberstadt described the mailing as “a list of trash.” Notes Vinson, “In spite of Edward’s considerable experience, even he occasionally missed a highly desirable and underpriced book in a catalogue.” This \$12.50 bargain slipped past, but he declined buying it from the just-mentioned Chicago dealer who snapped it up and offered it for \$300 because it was a flawed copy.

The title *Edward Eberstadt & Sons: Rare Booksellers of Western Americana* sounds like a company history, but to my mind reads like biography – which brings up my only disappointment with it. “He was the business and the business was him,” writes Vinson. The history of a largely one-person firm whose name is the business name is really a biography of that person, I maintain. *Edward Eberstadt & Sons* reads like biography and the reader wants to know more – a *LOT* more – about this intriguingly strange man. In this respect it is sorely lacking. When and where was Eberstadt born? We assume he was married, for his sons become part of the picture in the 1930s, but who was this wife? Where did they live? The death of his long-time customer and friend Coe in 1955 is noted – but not a word about Eberstadt’s reaction? If “Besides being an antiquarian bookseller extraordinaire, Edward had the unusual ability to cultivate sincere friendships, and he took seriously those obligations,” wouldn’t you expect at least some speculation about this? I could go on and on with unanswered questions about Eberstadt’s personal life – the point only being that Vinson’s would simply be a far better-rounded portrait were the bookseller’s life explored. I may be way off-base with this criticism – but I’m sure that most readers of *Edward Eberstadt & Sons: Rare Booksellers of Western Americana* will share my reaction.

Likewise with illustrations. Sure, the book’s frontispiece is a snapshot of a reclining Eberstadt in later years clutching a stogey – but that’s it. When you read about unusual persons such as this and the unusual treasures they handled, it’s only natural to want to

see photographs of them at different points of their life and of their home, business premises, children, spouse, customers, famous finds....

These two criticisms aside, *Edward Eberstadt & Sons: Rare Booksellers of Western Americana* is a wonderful addition to the practically non-existent literature about this pioneering Western Americana dealer. Scanning my reference library, I find little of consequence other than a one-page entry in Donald C. Dickinson's essential *Dictionary of American Antiquarian Booksellers* (1998) and passing references here and there. Michael Vinson does a great service to Western Americana in illuminating this great bookseller's contribution.

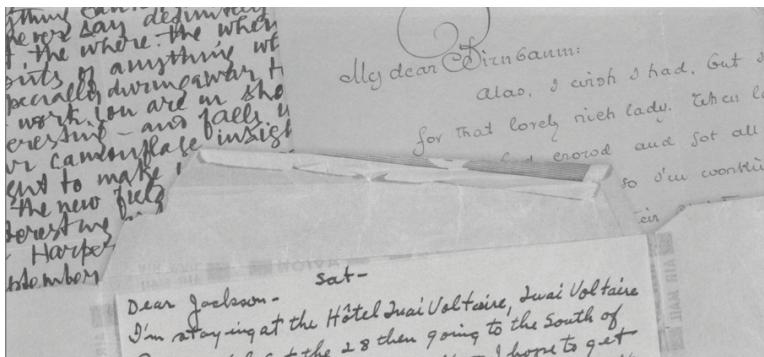
Books of artists' letters remain among the best reference sources for collectors of autograph material within this realm. Those illustrated with sketches by the artists tend to be those collected in books, such as Ayala and Gueno's *Illustrated Letters: Artists and Writers Correspond* reviewed in this column in the Winter 2002 issue.

Mary Savig's *Pen to Paper: Artists' Handwritten Letters from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art* is the latest contribution to this specialized field. A worthy addition, not to mention a physically handsome production, it does not require that the letters included be illustrated as a criteria, though a small number of them are. It also does not organize the letters chronologically, as is often done, but rather a simple A to Z ordering regardless of the artists' time period – a refreshing change.

"The letters in this book have been gathered to highlight the many ways in which handwriting animates paper," writes Savig in her introduction. The intent of this particular grouping of 56 letters from artists is to "offer examples of how writing a letter can be an artistic act. A glimpse at the handwritten letters at the Archives of American Art reveals how artists have disrupted convention in inventive ways. With each letter, artists choose

the penmanship style, utensils, and paper that will convey their creative inclinations. They construct a system of writing with attention to formal properties of line and form. With this in mind, an artist's handwriting often begs comparison with his or her work." Elsewhere she notes, "The complexity of handwriting opens it to assumptions and interpretation" – a point she elaborates by illustrating a number of artist letters (not among the book's 56) and commenting on how the form of ink on paper conveys a message beyond what the words state. I have philosophical differences with this approach, but more on that later.

Each of these 56 full page (or more) color letter illustrations make superb exemplars for serious collectors in this field, and each is accompanied by a brief text from an appropriate art historian, archivist or curator giving context to the letter, its background, recipient, and so on. Keep in mind that many reference books of artist signatures illustrate the signature *only*, and how it usually appears on the artwork (that is, as accomplished in oil paint, watercolor and other mediums, usually not ink), which sometimes differs from their everyday signature in ink. These volumes also pay no attention whatsoever to the artist's regular handwriting, and thus have limited use when applied to writings in ink or pencil on paper. The signature of Grandma Moses actually appears the same on her paintings as in her letters, and any autograph collector worth his salt knows that upright, carefully formed signature. But a signature sometimes only vaguely resembles a person's handwriting, so it's quite useful for collectors to realize that, as *Pen and Paper*'s essayist points out, "The writing style in her letters to friends and family... defaults quickly from elegant flourishes into a pleasant and practical...forward-leaning script. Legibility falls increasingly by the wayside as Moses attempts to negotiate a demanding schedule, a high volume of family news, and a limited amount of space on which to write." Such insights and exemplars – well beyond the ken of signature examples that appear in countless autograph collecting guides -- are worth their weight in gold, and



# pen to paper

## ARTISTS' HANDWRITTEN LETTERS

from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art

EDITED BY MARY SAVIG



*Pen and Paper* offers up many of them.

What makes *Pen to Paper* great fun is that artists are not confined to a particular time period or location or art form and inclusion is entirely eclectic. Call it a hodgepodge. Traditional painters are of course well represented – 19<sup>th</sup> century heavyweights such as Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, James McNeill Whistler, George Catlin – as are 20<sup>th</sup> century classics such as Grant Wood, Jackson Pollack, Maxfield Parrish, John Singer Sargent, Grandma Moses. There are those known mainly for their sculptures (Joseph Cornell, Harriet Hosmer, Alexander Calder, Claes Oldenburg), photographers (Edward Weston, Berenice Abbott, Alfred Stieglitz), architects (Eero Saarinen, Isamu Noguchi) and others. It's easy enough for collectors to find exemplars of the handwriting of better-known artists, but where do you turn for reliable handwriting examples for Jim Nutt, Lenore Tawney, Louis Lozowick, Abraham Rattner and the many other artists in *Pen and Paper* of acknowledged greatness but not of the household name variety?

I do take issue with many of the individual essayists tendency to move beyond background and context for each letter and veer into the dangerous and discredited pseudo-science of graphology – inferring personality based on specific physical handwriting traits. It's human nature to read someone's handwriting – not the content, but letter formation, spacing, ink pressure and so on – and see how the script fits one's image of the writer. Some reading of personality via their handwriting seems natural, reasonable and unavoidable – as when Alexander Calder's commentator remarks, "His pragmatic virtuosity is pronounced in his handwriting. With spontaneous yet deliberate pen strokes, Calder's script sweeps across the page in a manner that broadly reflects his personality – by turns responsive, direct, and swelling with energy." Calder's script is indeed simple, unornamented and appears swiftly penned. Straightforward observations about a person's script are interesting and useful, as when Mary Cassatt's commentator writes, "The

handwriting in the first letter is firm and confident. In the second, almost two decades later, it is still forceful – but cramped by her failing eyesight.” This is placing the handwriting within a logical biographical background.

But when those comments move beyond biographical elaboration and look into the hazy world of graphology, watch out. And having studied art history intensely myself long ago, I’m all too familiar with the bizarre maze of terminology and turns of phrase especially associated with analyzing modern art that I call *artspeak* (a la Orwell). Call me unsympathetic and impatient about contemporary art – often guilty as charged – but I bristle at the thick veil of academic artspeak in which some commentaries are smothered such as this description of German-born modernist painter Oscar Bluemner’s letter:

*The warm tone and informal format of Bluemner’s return note are underscored by the fact that it is written in pencil. This soft pencil employed on slightly textured paper imparts to each line a painterly chiaroscuro that reinforces Bluemner’s praise of ideas that come “from your eye and mind through the brush.” The orderly script becomes looser as the ideas unfurl. The rightward flow of the letters is repeatedly countered by backward-looping curves, notably in the stems of the letter d and in the emphatic reverse arc of the word I. These calligraphic loops punctuate the pages of the letter like notes on a staff, evoking the “musical employ of paint & tones” that Bluemner sees as the most profound like between his own art and Dove’s.*

My clincher in this missive against a graphological view of handwriting is this: Adolf Hitler’s handwriting, especially his later life signature, has come to represent the epitome of evil handwriting: A short, choppy, illegible up-and-down zigzag that’s

easy to transfer into personality traits such as brutal, domineering, uncaring, rigid, etc. But if a graphologist who had never seen Hitler's handwriting before were shown the simple but legible script of Abraham Lincoln, told it was Hitler's handwriting and asked to interpret his personality based on this script, it's likely this person would still find whatever traits he associates with Hitler in Lincoln's handwriting. I'll step down from my soapbox now, with the simple caution that the goal of handwriting commentary in a book such as *Pen to Paper: Artists' Handwritten Letters from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art* should be solely to give the letter biographical context.

With large and plentiful color illustrations that include many whose handwriting is seldom found depicted in reference works, *Pen to Paper: Artists' Handwritten Letters from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art* makes a no-brainer addition to the reference shelf of anyone serious about collecting artist autograph material. It's well made, reasonably priced, and with informative text that might just spark your own debate about the role of graphology in autograph collecting.