

Here a Doodle, There a Doodle, Everywhere a Doodle Doodle....

TAKE HEED, PRESIDENTIAL autograph collectors! The most delightfully off-the-wall (or should I say off-the-pad?) chronicle of presidential sketches has finally appeared. As specialized as David Greenberg's *Presidential Doodles* may be, this is a surprisingly accessible study that should appeal to the general public (for whom it's written) as much as the presidential autograph collector (a sliver

of the market whose existence likely never crossed Greenberg's mind).

Paul Collins' foreword explains what wouldn't occur to the typical intelligent reader, but what autograph collectors would already know: Doodles by the earliest presidents are practically unheard of for simple mechanical reasons. It was laborious enough to simply *write* with quill pens, much less to playfully and mindlessly scribble sketches.

The advent of steel-nibbed pens in the early 19th century increased availability of cheap paper and simpler handwriting systems made doodling more feasible.

Collins gathers together fun trivia about presidential doodling, much of which rarely appears in standard autograph lore:

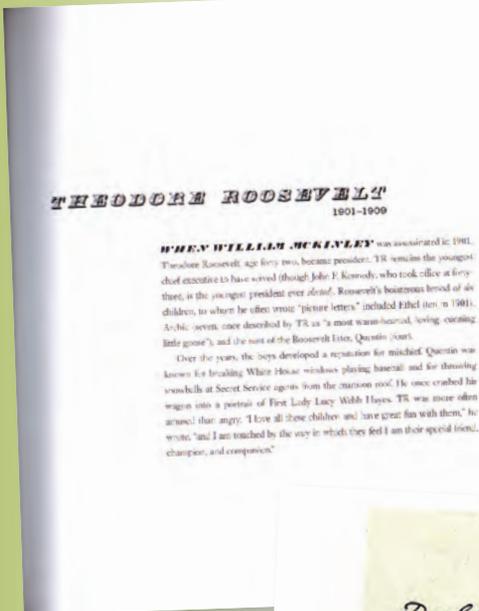
Reagan often handed out his correspondence-course-style drawings as prizes at meetings; the Eisenhower administration was so fond of paint-by-numbers kits that an aide prodded the Cabinet and

visitors into creating a de facto White House gallery of kitsch...And Herbert Hoover was so well-known for his ornate geometrical patterns that autograph dealers were already scooping them up while he was still in office...

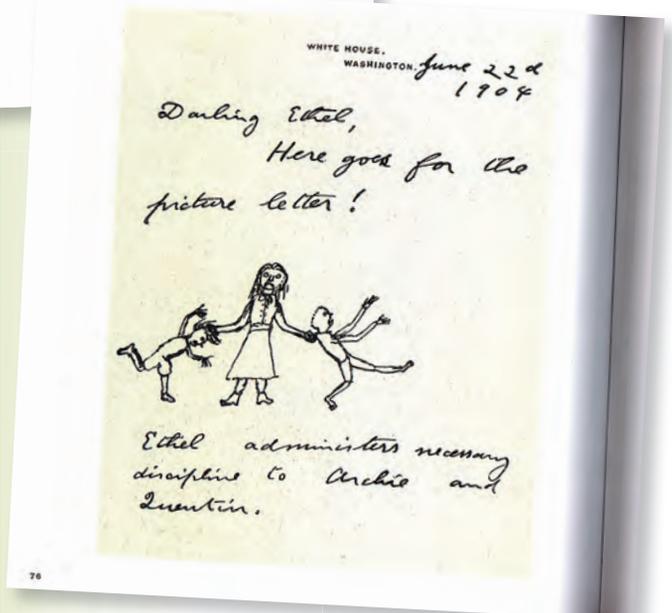
The profession of autograph dealing as we know it today was still in diapers during Hoover's administration (1929-33), with very few players. But keep an eye out for Hoover doodles in old catalogs from such late greats as Walter R. Benjamin, Thomas Madigan and Forest H. Sweet.

Collins questions whether doodles reveal anything meaningful about the doodler. He relates a few anecdotes that shed less-than-flattering light on graphology (which the graphology opponents among us will cheer) before ultimately concluding: "But what *do* doodles mean?...Doodles rarely reveal clear insight into a person beyond what is immediately on their mind...Perhaps this is why doodles are so compelling. If they are significant, it is not because they are great art or the products of great men. It is because they are ordinary..."

Greenberg's introduction provides an enjoyable and scholarly history of doodling. Briefly tracing the history of the term, he quickly moves on to the 20th century concept. He's fascinated with the tendency to interpret doodles psychologically: "The most popular prism of interpretation has been the psychoanalytic," he remarks, "as aficionados scrutinized doodles for the insights they may offer into the unconscious thoughts lurking in the recesses of the artist's psyche...It made sense, of course, to regard the doodle as a relative of the Freudian slip or the verbal free association—an articulation of repressed truth unleashed by the unconscious while the ego was looking the other way." U.N. Undersecretary General Ralph Bunche, whom I've never thought of as particularly amusing, gets the biggest laugh in the book. When Norman Uris, compiler of the 1970 *Doodle Book*, requested a doodle, Bunche replied: "To do a doodle to order would really be faking, because a doodle



Pages from *Presidential Doodles* showing biographical information about Teddy Roosevelt and his doodle, on which is written "Darling Ethel, Here goes for the wild picture letter! Ethel administers necessary discipline to Archie and Quentin."



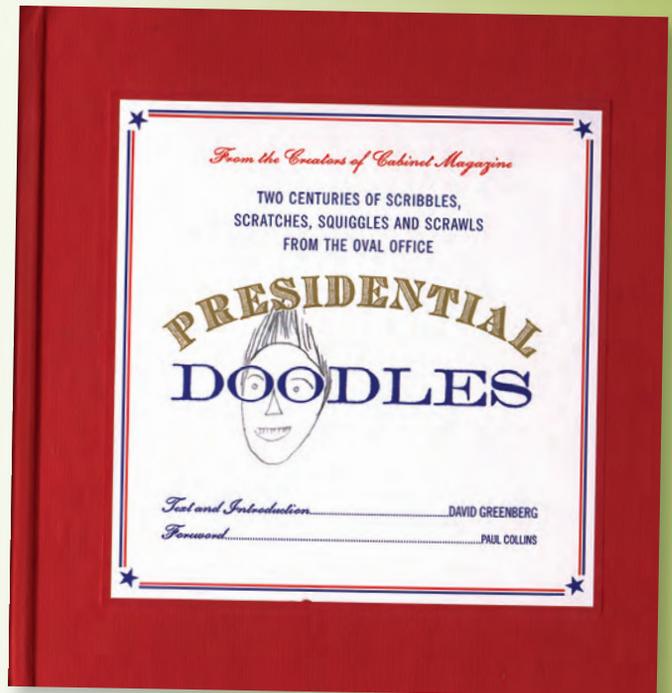
ought to be spontaneous and subconscious. In fact, since receiving your letter, I have found that my doodling is spoiled because the letter has made me self-conscious about it." Bunche raises an intriguing philosophical point: Is a doodle only truly a doodle if created *unintentionally*?

Ronald Reagan's "doodling policy" highlights the issue. According to Greenberg, "Reagan doodled deliberately for an admirer who wrote to him at the White House. His drawings were designed to promote the impression...of a light-hearted president, youthful in spirit, freely and earnestly dashing off drawings for his fans. Reagan was aware of the PR value of these aggressively cute pictures...For Reagan, the knowledge that the press and the historical record were looming over his every move presented a political opportunity." *Wow!* Doodles as political opportunity.

Greenberg's comments accompanying the plentiful illustrations are perceptive and as memorable as the doodles they elaborate. Sometimes he includes tidbits about the presidents' handwriting habits. Regarding some decorative flourishes of George Washington, for instance, Greenberg notes, "So anxious was he to appear neat and correct in his letters," said the Philadelphia doctor and revolutionary Benjamin Rush, that Washington would copy long letters he had already written simply 'because there were a few erasures on it.'"

Moving chronologically, we see a crude geometric sketch by John Adams: "his rough, cantankerous personality reveals itself just as Washington's smooth, cursive curls reveal

Greenberg, David. *Presidential Doodles: Two Centuries of Scribbles, Scratches, Squiggles & Scrawls from the Oval Office*. Foreword by Paul Collins. New York: Basic Books, 2006. 8vo. Cloth-bound. 220pp. Numerous illustrations. \$24.95



as something of a star." Theodore Roosevelt's picture letters to his children evoke images of Mark Twain, a man brimming with "unbridled exuberance and slapstick sensibility."

Surprisingly, the most interesting of 20th century Doodlers-in-Chief is one whose lackluster reputation is matched by few presidents: Herbert Hoover, who is given more pages (16) in *Presidential Doodles* than all other chief executives except Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Reagan (22 pages each). "One of the most prolific presidential doodlers," Greenberg enthuses, "Hoover drew pictures that are consistently geo-

metric and military accoutrements. His sketch of what appears to be chief of staff Sherman Adams with a missile striking his head is hostile enough—but in Eisenhower's case even his doodles of household items—a broken pencil, a zipper, the corner of a table, an umbrella—I find disturbingly, creepily cold and calculating. Greenberg reacts the same: "...in his sketches, even the most quotidian objects sometimes take on a vaguely menacing tone..."

Kennedy's quickly scribbled sailboats and simple geometric shapes evoke the Camelot image, though I don't find them especially interesting or revealing. He received much press coverage as a doodler in the wake of the assassination, though 1964 even saw an exhibition of them take place. Such is the demand for

JFK autograph material that even forgeries of his doodles have turned up on the autograph market.

Presidential Doodles represents one of the more unusual reference works for the presidential autograph collector. While meant for a general readership, it's quite informative for the autograph collector and a superb source for a miscellany of presidential autograph history. ⚠

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his suavity and calm." Apparently "Andrew Jackson seems to be the first president to leave behind full-fledged doodles from his time in office"—how refreshing and humanizing that this stern visage was capable of doodling the military hat, alligator and tortoises shown in the book.

Some presidents surprise readers with the humorousness of their doodles. James A. Garfield, in an affectionate 1875 letter to a family member, pens "the puckered mouths of all his family members making kisses." Benjamin Harrison "made little impact as president," but created "one of the greatest doodles in presidential history" and "emerges

metric, intricate and clever in the way they link disparate parts into a larger whole...his doodles hint at elaborate and expansive visions. Alas, the same could not be said for his presidency." Hoover's doodling came to light when autograph dealer Thomas Madigan acquired a Hoover doodle that received much press coverage. "He proceeded to sell it for a substantial sum—a fair portion of the President's annual salary," according to one source."

The most surprising presidential doodles come from the hand of Dwight Eisenhower. Ike's affable media image contrasts sharply with these skillful renderings of nuclear bombs,