

# Scrawls and Stuff

WILLIAM BUTTS

**STRAUSS-SCHULSON, Caren, Claudia and Todd (compilers).** *Scrawl: An A-Z of Famous Doodles – Sketches, Jottings, and Notes from the Greatest Minds in History.* New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2019. Small 4to. Hardbound. 223pp. Extensive color illustrations. **\$39.95.**

**DOW, Elizabeth H. and COCKRELL, Lucinda P.** *How to Weed Your Attic: Getting Rid of the Junk without Destroying History.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. Small 4to. Hardbound. xv, 133pp. Illustrations. **\$32.00.**

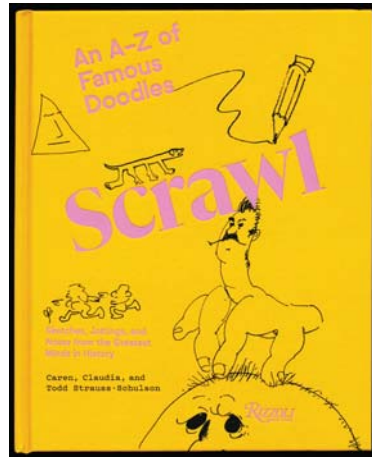
Doodles hold a special fascination for the autograph community, which is why published collections of them come under review in this column occasionally – Mary Savig’s *Pen to Paper: Artists’ Handwritten letters* (Fall 2016) and *Portrait of the Artist: The Burt Britton Collection* (Fall 2009) and others before that. There’s something magical about the unguarded, unself-conscious, spontaneous doodles of renowned writers, artists, actors, politicians, composers and other luminaries – scrawls never meant for public consumption – that make them feel like a secret window into the scribbler’s soul, a portal into their personality.

I never had the pleasure of meeting the late David Schulson, the New York (later New Jersey) based autograph dealer whose personal collection is the subject of *Scrawl: An A-Z of Famous*

*Doodles – Sketches, Jottings, and Notes from the Greatest Minds in History*, lovingly compiled by his wife Claudia and children Caren and Todd. David was a colleague I knew only through his catalogues, although this book’s touching preface by daughter Caren and foreword by son Todd gives me some sense of the man.

“His collection grounded him,” writes Todd, “connecting him to something larger than himself...” Of the doodles, he notes: “The illustrations in this book are an intimate window into the playful, almost childlike side of the artists, writers, scientists, and politicians who shaped the world and culture in live in.”

The one hundred-plus mostly full-page doodles that fill *Scrawl* (“which not a single person outside of our family has seen until now, after over 40 years hidden away in his safe,” writes Todd) are offered alphabetically and include postcards, quick sketches on odd scraps, and plenty of illustrated full letters both hand- and typewritten. It’s engrossing to observe the inventive varieties that doodles take, the level of finish ranging from a few basic lines that took a few seconds to lovely creations worth framing and hanging in an art exhibit. The notion of describing “representative examples” seems ludicrous faced with a collection so incredibly idiosyncratic and individualistic – so let me just point out several especially compelling examples.



- Poet E.E. Cummings shows he was an artist of no small talent with his deceptively-simple sketch of a tall female nude;
- Actor Peter Ustinov demonstrates his versatility in a letter extra-illustrated with quick sketches of himself chatting with half a dozen others;
- Not surprisingly, politicians Jerry Ford and George Wallace show their lack of artistic talent with their crude drawings of a football (Ford) and a U.S. Flag (Wallace);
- Poet Charles Bukowski demonstrates a knack for caricature with his chubby man chasing a nude woman;
- Actor Charlie Chaplin draws his Tramp character in a sketch strongly reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*;
- Filmmaker Federico Fellini reveals his background as illustrator with his outrageous X-rated color sketch;
- German novelist Hermann Hesse reminds me he was also a formidable painter with a letter from his wife that features a charming watercolor landscape;
- Poet/novelist Langston Hughes transforms a small typed rhyming Christmas greeting into something memorable with the addition of encircling squiggles in red and green colored pencil;
- Novelist Henry Miller executes a beautifully vibrant abstract watercolor in one corner of a letter....

I force myself to stop at this point lest these few random favorites grow into a full description of every doodle in *Scrawl*.

Scattered among them are six 2-page spreads highlighting themed groupings of doodles, too: "Animals" (eight scrawls –

Sergei Eisenstein's snuggling elephant and alligator is Disney worthy), "Boxers" (two scrawls – who knew Sugar Ray Leonard was a talented caricaturist), "Dollars" (two scrawls – German artist A.R. Penck livens a boring one-dollar bill with a few strokes), "Thumbs" (three scrawls – Ray Bradbury's "Illustrated Man" composed of 15 thumb prints is a delight, while animator Ward Kimball's single thumb print "James Q. Cricket" is ingenious), "Envelopes" (eight scrawls – Al Hirschfeld's self-portrait of himself trapped under the envelope flap is brilliant) and "Self-Portraits" (seventeen scrawls – Alistair Cooke's profile caricature is skillful and spot-on). Why these wacky subject montages aren't included in the table of contents is beyond me.

Rizzoli has crafted a handsome volume of this collection. A dust jacket would have been welcome; a new hardcover lacking jacket feels like—well, like a new suit without a jacket. The "*from the Greatest Minds in History*" from the subtitle rings of overblown sales pitch -- just doesn't feel 100% accurate. Nothing against Gerald Ford, George Wallace, Jerry Lewis and Sugar Ray Leonard, but would you really place them in this rarified atmosphere?

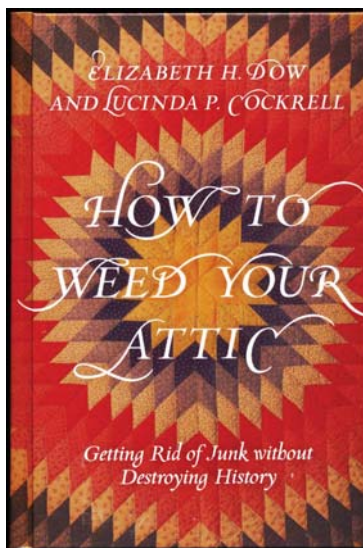
*Scrawl: An A-Z of Famous Doodles* is a first-rate tribute to a notable figure in the world of autographs. It's a worthwhile reference for any serious autograph person who enjoys building up a collection of superb exemplars. It's also simply a simple good read for anyone -- autograph persons and general readers alike – interested in the insights you can draw from the doodles and writings of notables from all walks of life.

Stuff. (Naw, not emphatic enough.) *Stuff!* (Better -- not quite there.) *Stuff!* (Almost...)

***STUFF!!*** That's the stuff – the things that most Americans have too much of, whether you call it junk, dross, jetsam, detritus or whatever. It fills our attics, clutters our basements, sometimes overflows our living space.

If watching trendy reality shows on downsizing a McMansion, decluttering your house and reorganizing what remains aren't your idea of *seeking your joy* (to borrow *Tidying Up* host Marie Kondo's kitschy tagline), consider Dow and Cockrell's concise, focused *How to Weed Your Attic: Getting Rid of the Junk without Destroying History*.

Television pablum on organizing clutter may be fine for households overrun by self-collected mounds of modern clothing and disposable plastic *stuff* – that seems to be the niche of these shows – but with nothing with any real age to it. *How to Weed Your Attic*, on the other hand, “addresses the historical value of the things families leave behind.” Dow and Cockrell write that



*The book addresses what you should keep for the sake of history in its argest sense... we aim at defining what materials contribute to our understanding of history and what to do if you don't want to or can't keep them. We focus on how family artifacts and documents can contribute to a larger understanding of the world – especially if they become part of a historical repository's collection.*

To keep their task on target and keep filthy lucre out of the equation, they note that “We do not comment on collectible value... Nor do we comment on monetary value” – wise

decision this, though one that may disappoint some readers.

Dow and Cockrell's first task is to instill in readers who likely own old stuff but may not have much appreciation for it "Why Things in Your Attic Matter to History," their first chapter. It's a pep talk for history, pure and simple – no small task. For those of us handling historical items and writing about them and thinking about them all day every day this comes as natural as breathing; for those whose lives don't revolve around history it's an acquired taste that needs to be nurtured. "Family collections enlighten our understanding of the past," the authors coach, "they have important lessons to impart to the wider world. Every family has items that tell the story of what is important to and about a family...." Etcetera. Only readers with some appreciation of history can develop some sense of what part of their family history may be worth preserving and handing down, either within the family or in an institution.

So what about all this material no one knows what to do with – you know, *the stuff*? Well, more than 75 of *How to Weed Your Attic*'s 133 pages devotes itself to just that: A category by category discussion of different types of artifacts and whether they're worth keeping and whether an institution might be interested. Dow and Cockrell divide the stuff into four chapters – "Mass-Produced Material," "Individualized Material," "Corporate Material" and "Commemorative Material." The first of these tackles the mass that overwhelms and vexes homeowners most. A slew of brief paragraphs covering a wide range of objects (to name but a few: books, china, clothing, furniture, holiday decorations, jewelry, knickknacks, quilts, toys) "give a one-word evaluation for the historical value of them. We use the scale 'Always, Usually, Maybe, Rarely, Never' to evaluate historical significance" and a sentence or three why institutions may or may not be interested in each. (Can't help but point out a factual slip: Under "Postcards" they remark that "Commercially printed postcards became available by the mid-

nineteenth century....” Not quite – it was the *later* nineteenth century before these were available.)

Paper and documents do come up in *How to Weed Your Attic*, though perhaps not of the type that autograph collectors pursue – mainly family correspondence, diaries and journals, business documents and such, which do have an important place in archives but seldom fall within the realm of famous historical personages. It’s good to note, though, that “In the world of archives, nothing trumps something handwritten. Handwriting carries the perceptions and opinions of the writer in the moment of writing; its uniqueness makes it valuable....” Here, too caveats abound when it comes to institutional interest in such papers. Lengthy correspondences are greatly preferred over individual letters; content needs to illuminate not only the writer but the age in which they were penned in order to most interest potential researchers.

Dow and Cockrell also address my least favorite topic, the preservation of digital materials. Despite the massive hullabaloo about digital’s advantages over paper, the gist of their discussion appears to be that digital files should be resaved every two years, that every five years everything should be converted into the latest technology, that you should “Save three copies of everything in three different media and store them in three different geographic locations that do not suffer the same natural disasters” (are they kidding?!) and that for God’s sake the very first thing you should do is save every digital file that can be printed out onto high quality paper. This Old school paper guy (who uses technology constantly, but not by choice) can only add: Paper rules, digital drools.

Just like Elizabeth Dow’s earlier book *Archivists, Collectors, Dealers, and Replevin: Case Studies in Private Ownership of Public Documents*, reviewed in this column in the Fall 2012 issue, so too *How to Weed Your Attic* employs case studies to great effect. There’s nothing like reading how actual persons handled actual

situations to bring home a point. As powerful as Dow and Cockrell's case studies are, part of their strength lies in their brevity; most are a half page or less in length. Whenever a case study gets down into the weeds with detail, they risk becoming dull and losing the reader. Near the end of *How to Weed Your Attic* some case studies are an unwieldy full page and one even comes in at a whopping two and a half pages. Effectiveness greatly diminished!

Closing chapters on "Preserving Your Family Objects and Papers" and "Donating Your Family Objects and Papers" round out *How to Weed Your Attic*. Consider the former "Conservation 101." As commonsensical as these tips on the storage, handling and housing of artifacts may seem, the sad truth is that very few observe them. I have been called out to purchase or appraise countless book and paper collections of all sizes in all types of residences – mansions, trailer parks, fixer-uppers, warehouses, you name it. I've endured attics hotter than the South Dakota Badlands (car thermometer registered 113 degrees) and basements so dank you could see your breath and wring out your shirt, with items covered in dust and guano as thick as your pinkie. The point is that, in my experience, a person's age, gender, education, income level and other social variables bear almost no relation to how well or how poorly they take care of their *stuff*. Perhaps Dow and Cockrell's efforts will help create awareness that history deserves better treatment. The latter chapter gives you the nuts and bolts of how to actually go about finding a museum or archive that may want your stuff. How do you describe it? How much do they need to know to make their decision? Thoughtful lists tell you exactly what to include and offer useful advice on how to ship it, how to help support it after it's gone, all kinds of minutiae seldom discussed.

As a long-time board member of a local historical society and head of its collections committee, I can attest that such



societies get offered an enormous range of items, much of it totally inappropriate to their mission. And if that institution has been around long enough (mine was founded in 1938), chances are it may already own boatloads of items it wishes it didn't own. My collection committee has been much more about *deaccessioning* than *accessioning*. Over the years we've deaccessioned a 1972 prom dress, live ammunition, a vial of powdered placenta, buckets of rusty unidentified nuts and bolts, a coconut fashioned into a head with shell ears... on and on and on, hundreds of items. So know that if items you offer to a museum or repository are rejected it's invariably for good reason and after careful consideration – and conversely items they accept will be valued and well taken care of. Dow and Cockrell explain both sides of this coin well and from an insider's perspective in this handy hands-on guide.