

autograph DETECTIVE

Do You have the Detective Skills to be an Autograph Collector?

by Max Rambod

In last month's article, we showed that it is necessary to have many samples of someone's handwriting and signature in order to authenticate his handwriting. We also realized that it was important to look for the peculiarity and idiosyncrasies of the writing habits of each person that defined that person's handwriting. So the plan of action was that every time we want to know if a letter or signature was written by a certain celebrity or historic figure, we would compare that item with 10 other samples of signed letters of that person from the same period. In this way we could find out if the questioned letter or signature has all the idiosyncrasies discovered in the 10 sample letters.

It seems simple enough, right? Not exactly. What if a forger actually copies a letter imitating every word as he sees it in the original? In theory he would fool you since you will be able, in theory again, to find all those little clues and idiosyncrasies of the original writer in his forgery. Let's see if this is true:

You can easily find out yourself by trying to imitate someone's handwriting. This is not as easy as it sounds. In fact each one of us has his own handwriting, which is very different than anyone else's, the same way we have different finger prints and voice patterns. So forging another's handwriting is a very difficult and unnatural task. Forgers will

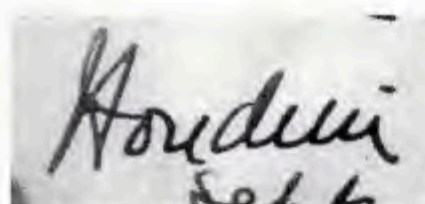
usually revert to one of two methods. The first one is to "draw" another person's handwriting as they look at it. The second way is to trace the other person's handwriting. Both these methods, however, can be detected if you look for three clues that we will discuss here.

Let's begin by analyzing the "drawing" method of forgery. If you try this yourself, you will see that you will have to go very

slowly and lift your pen many times. Since the forger has to pay a great deal of attention to each letter's formation, the pen moves at an unnaturally slow pace.

This slow pace of writing creates trembling in some letters (see example 1), which is the first clue that may warn you to be suspicious of a sample of handwriting. You should always be cautious when dealing with writing or signatures that have tremor in them. Like all rules in authentication of autographs there are, of course, exceptions. There can be legitimate

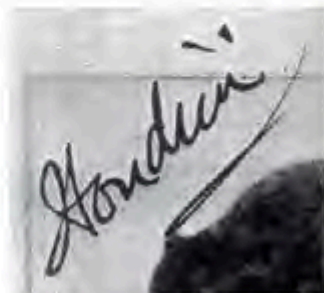
reasons why a person's handwriting has tremor — old age can create trembling, so can certain illnesses. However, most of the time trembling should alarm you to the possibility of



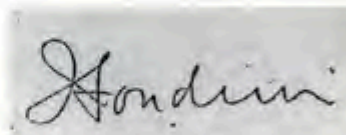
Example 2B - Authentic Houdini

forgery and require closer inspection of that autograph.

A second sign of forgery is letters that are written separately with the pen lifting up at the end of each letter and starting again, even though they may look connected. This stop and start phenomenon can best be observed with a magnifier. In normal writing, most of us would write a word by continuing some group of letters in a word without lifting our pen from the paper, and then we lift to start the next group of letters or another word. However, the forger usually lifts his pen at the end of each letter. This frequent interruption and lifting of the pen is due to the fact that the forger has to relax, and concentrate again on the formation of the following letter. Unlike him, we write quickly and naturally and do not think



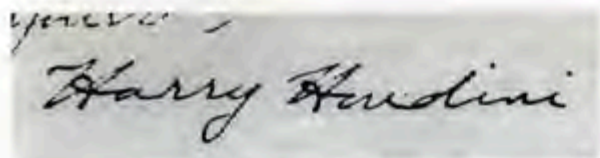
Example 2A - Authentic Houdini



Example 2C - Authentic Houdini



Example 1



Example 2S - Secretarial Houdini

about the formation of our letters. So you should always be suspicious where the words seem constructed piece by piece, letter by letter. Such frequent interruptions and "lift-off" of the pen is your second clue to a forgery.

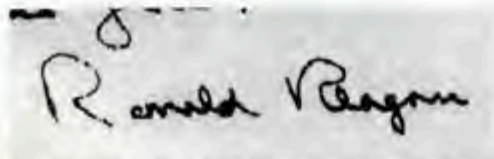
To detect places where the pen has been lifted and then replaced on the paper while writing, I would suggest you use



Example 3A - Authentic Ronald Reagan

a small 30 times magnifier and look at the ink pattern. You may have seen these magnifiers used by jewelers when examining diamonds. You can train yourself to detect this "start and

stop" motion by taking a piece of paper and trying it yourself. Like a forger, lift the pen at the end of each letter

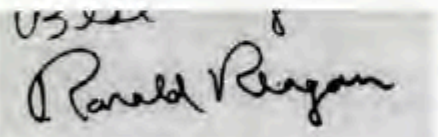


Example 3B - Authentic Ronald Reagan

and start again, still connecting the letters together so there is no space between them. Then, look at your creation with a magnifier and you will see that you can distinctly detect that where each stop and start occurs, there are stop and start nib marks. Take the same word and write it as you usually do. You will then observe that the ink flows from letter to letter with no interruptions and the same would be true if you examined it with the magnifier. At first it may not be obvious but as you try this several times, you will see the difference between

continuous writing and artificially connected letters.

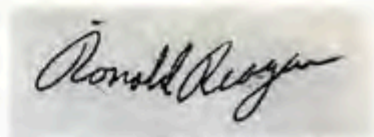
In the fraudulent writing, the forger has to pay so much attention to the



Example 3C - Authentic Ronald Reagan

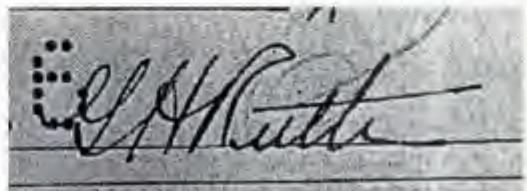
form of each letter that he has to stop at the end of each letter, and sometimes he will need to "touch up" his creation. You should look for such "touch-ups", which are the third clue that will often help you detect forgeries. Most normal writing has no touch-ups, and if you use touch-ups, they are

obvious and not disguised since they are used to improve legibility. On the other hand, forgers' touch-ups are disguised since they are trying to imitate the formation of the letter of the person they are forging, rather than improve the legibility. These "disguised touch-ups" give them away.



Example 3S - Secretarial Ronald Reagan

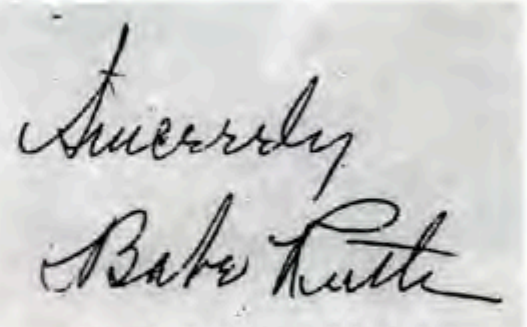
Another method forgers use is tracing. This basically means that the forger uses a pencil and a somewhat transparent paper and goes over an original handwriting or signature. He then uses an ink pen over his pencil tracing. He waits for the ink to dry and then erases the pencil marks. However, this tracing system often requires the forger to raise his pen frequently and replace it on the paper. The intense concentration necessary to trace the letters and the slowness required



Example 4A - Authentic Babe Ruth

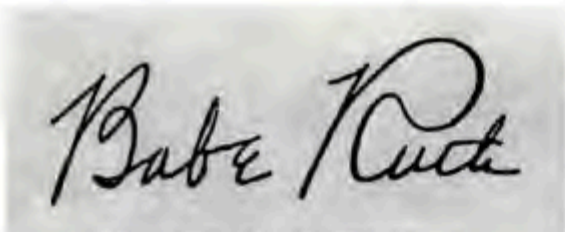
to be accurate often results in the forger's distinctive tremor. So you will see again the two characteristics described above, as the forger will have to concentrate on tracing each letter, and therefore resulting in unnatural writing. If the traced writing is a full page, you will usually find minute amounts of graphite left from the original pencil the forger used on the page, and this should make you very suspicious. Sometimes, when you use a magnifier, you will even see some of the pencil formations that were not entirely erased in between the ink writing.

Of course, there are many other things to look for in forgeries such as the slant of the writing, the proportion of



Example 4B - Authentic Babe Ruth

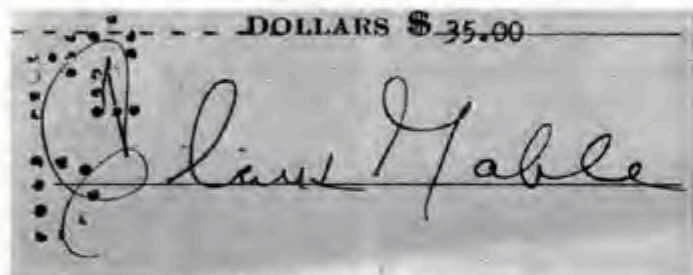
letters to each other, the spacing between words, the paper and pen used, etc. But as a rule, always be suspicious of too many stops and starts, touch-ups, and tremulous letters. These are three important clues that should alert you to a possible forgery. Remember that not every letter will be



Example 4S - Secretarial Babe Ruth

tremulous, but perhaps a few will have trembling. The pen may not have been lifted after each letter, but it will have been lifted where it should not normally have been raised, and there will be more start and stops than in normal writing.

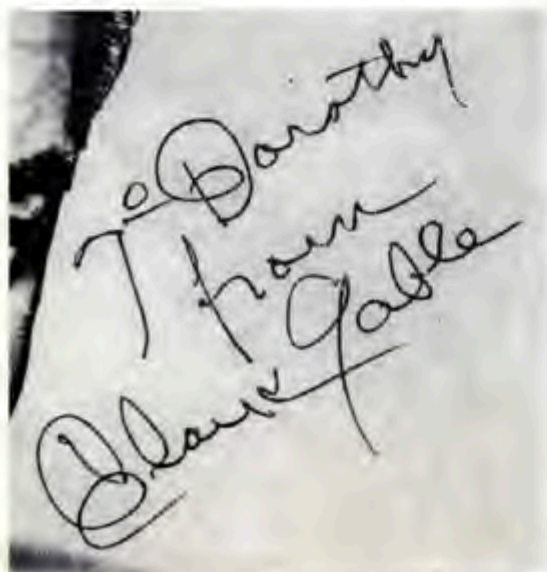
The concept of pen "start and stop" can also be used in reverse. This means that some writers may have a habit of not



Example 5A - Authentic Clark Gable

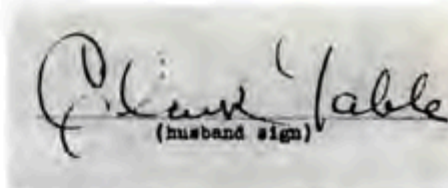
connecting some specific letters to the following letter. Not knowing that, the forgers will sometimes connect two letters where there should not be a connection. For example, Houdini would usually sign: "Hou dini" lifting his pen off the page between the "Hou" and the "dini" (see examples 2A, 2B, 2C — all authentic samples). His forgers and secretaries often did not catch the habitual raising of the pen from the page in his signature (see example 2S — secretarial signature).

Ronald Reagan's signature provides another example of the characteristic "stop and start" by which authentic signatures can be recognized. After the capital "R" in his first and



Example 5B - Authentic Clark Gable

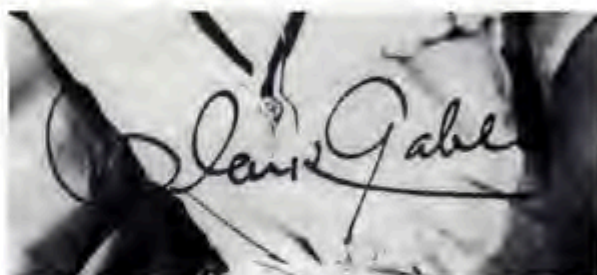
last name, Reagan leaves a space before the next letter, so that his signature appears to read "Ronald R eagan" (see



Example 5C - Authentic Clark Gable

examples 3A, 3B, 3C — authentic signature samples). Some of his early secretarial signatures can be distinguished this way as in his studio days many letters have the wrong signature with the connected "R". (See example 3S — secretarial signature).

The same is also true for Babe Ruth. Ruth usually lifts off after the first letter of "Babe" and then continues through the next three letters without lifting off the pen, repeating the same pattern for his last name. Although he often lifted the pen, Ruth did not leave a space between the "R" and the "u" in "Ruth" and it looks as if it was connected in the same stroke. However, a close examination will reveal that there



Example 5S - Secretarial or forged Clark Gable

was a lift-off of the pen and that the "u" was written after he had lifted the pen even if it looks connected at first glance (see examples 4A, 4B, 4C — all authentic). Neither of these two habitual lift-offs were observed by his wife, who signed for him during the last year of his life (see example 4S — secretarial signature).

Clark Gable would usually sign "Clark", lifting his pen after the capital "C" and after the first vertical stroke of the "k" (see examples 5A, 5B, 5C — all authentic Gable signatures). A secretary or forger has missed the fact that Gable does not stop between "r" and "k" in "Clark" in example 5S — secretarial or forgery.

Thus, we conclude that trembling in writing is usually an unhealthy sign which should alarm you to a closer inspection. Touch-ups are another sign for caution. Too frequent stops and starts are also usually the sign of a forgery. A combination of these three is probably very bad news. The pen lifting from the paper, however, can also be used to detect an authentic signature since many secretaries and forgers fail to notice this important handwriting characteristic. So always look for these three clues, which will help you unmask many forgeries.

Max Rambod is a member of U.A.C.C. and *The Manuscript Society* and is a contributing editor for *Autograph Collector* magazine.

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AUTOGRAPH

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