

autograph **I**NSIGHT

An Old Chinese Secret that Changed the World and a Pen that Bogart Never Used

by Max Rambod

In a recent book ranking the 100 most influential persons in history, a man named TS'AI LUN was ranked the seventh most important person of all time. This puts him ahead of Edison, Plato, Columbus, and Washington. Yet, most people today have never heard of TS'AI LUN. But, absolutely everyone has benefited from his invention. In fact, you are holding in your hand right now an item that would not have existed if it was not for TS'AI LUN. Have you guessed what this important invention was? Paper.

The above-mentioned book argued that TS'AI LUN's invention of paper created a suitable writing material that allowed China to progress at a much faster rate than the western civilizations. When the western nations began using paper, they were able to catch up to China. TS'AI LUN's invention about the year 105 was presented to the Emperor HO TI, who rewarded the inventor with an aristocratic title and great wealth. A small footnote in history, TS'AI LUN was too ambitious and became involved in an unsuccessful palace plot and had to poison himself.

Before TS'AI LUN, most books in China were made of bamboo and were very heavy and difficult to carry around. In the west, books were first written on clay tablets, then on

wood boards and papyrus and, by the 7th century, on parchment and vellum (processed sheepskin). Vellum was both scarce and very expensive, and therefore not widely available. It could only be used for the most important documents and, if those documents lost their importance, they would wash the vellum and reuse it with new text. It took about a thousand years for paper to be made in the west. We all know that knowledge is transferred from one generation to the next through the written word. Because it was too expensive and impractical to write on material other than paper, it can be argued that knowledge was not transferred at the rate it should have been. This situation was something akin to computers not being available in one civilization for 1000 years. Imagine the impact on that civilization compared to the other that had access to it.

Paper first came to the Arabs around the 8th century. Spain was the first country to produce paper in the middle of the 12th century. Can you find an autograph today on paper dating from the year 1200? Absolutely not. The earliest autographs on the market today would probably date from 1300. But it is interesting to note that in China autograph collecting was very common one thousand years ago.

Paper today is still basically manufactured with TS'AI LUN's formula except, of course, for the mechanization process. As a collector you need to be knowledgeable about paper, ink, and even envelopes to detect suspicious autographs and forgeries. Even though the general formula on how to make paper is still the same as it was 1800 years ago, different types of papers were produced in each period.

The first thing you should do is hold the paper to light to see if there is a date in the watermark inside the page. Obviously, the date on the letter should be after the date on the watermark. If your watermark has no date on it, there are books that list the different watermarks and their dates. Early American letters were written on pure rag paper, and you can often see chain lines that look like vertical columns about one and a half inch apart and horizontal lines packed next to each other 1/8 inch apart. Most paper would have this chain design in the U.S. up to the 1800s. However, you can find letters from Europe dating from the time of the American Independence on paper without the chains.



Typical address written on back of letter, folded
and written in center

Another clue you need to look for is the envelope. Any letter dated before 1845 should not have an envelope. Before 1845 it was customary to fold the letter, put on a wax seal and send it without using an envelope. This means that you should look for an address on the reverse side. There also should be a small tear present since the receiver had to tear the seal to unfold the letter. And of course, there should be fold marks.

It should be noted that other countries used envelopes before 1845. France used envelopes as early as 1615. By 1644 the French postal tariffs included a rate for letters mailed inside envelopes. In England, postal envelopes were available from 1840, and after 1855 almost all letters were mailed in envelopes. In the U.S. the envelope became common about five years later. Of course, letters sent by mail after these dates would not have the address on the back. If you are interested, you could study the postmarks from different periods to further validate the authenticity of the letter.

In the same way that you analyze the paper and the envelope, you should look carefully at the ink and the pen used to write the letter. Letters dating from before the American Revolution were written with a quill pen. In fact, both the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were written with a quill pen. After 1780, however, the steel pen began to replace the quill pen. The steel pen typically had two furrows and nib marks.

Most letters dating before the mid 1800s were written with iron-gall ink. The writing will look a brownish color, and because of its high acid content, this ink tends to eat the paper and even makes tiny holes in it. A fast clue is that iron-gall ink does not blur or run if exposed to water. But do not damage your paper trying this test yourself. All of Washington's, Jefferson's and Adams' letters, as well as all of the letters written by the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, were written in iron-gall ink. So if a George Washington letter is written in any other ink it is not real. It

Front of letter from William Williams

Address on back of letter

was not until the Civil War that other inks appeared.

Before iron-gall ink there was of course, China Ink, which dates back to 2500 B.C. The ball point came to the market around WWII and has since been more widely used than any other pen in history. Most forgers do not know much about the history of paper and ink and, as a result, they often make obvious mistakes, like offering a Jean Harlow photo signed with a ball point pen. That would be impossible because Jean Harlow died in 1937 before ball point pens were sold in the U.S. market.

I recently was offered a very attractive vintage Humphrey Bogart

signed photo and a beautiful Marilyn Monroe signed photo. Both were described to me over the telephone by the seller. When I asked him how they were signed he answered that they were signed with a bold large signature with a black felt tip pen on the light background area of the photo. At that moment, all my enthusiasm vanished as I knew that the felt tip pen came to market after both Bogart and Marilyn Monroe had passed away. The felt tip pen came to the U.S. market around 1964. If you find anything signed with a felt tip that dates prior to 1964, it is probably a forgery.

Of course, much more can be written about the different types and sizes of paper commonly used for each period in history, as well as the various types of ink, including India ink, iron-gall ink and the early ball points that had quite a different look than what you see today. But hopefully I have armed you with some basic knowledge to detect forgeries before you study the handwriting. Again, let me say that most letters are absolutely authentic examples and only a very small percentage of all autographs are forgeries. But detecting these forgeries is part of the challenge of collecting autographs — and, as in all fields, Knowledge is Power.

Max Rambod owns and operates Max Rambod Autographs. He can be reached at 9903 Santa Monica Blvd., #371, Beverly Hills, CA 90212, (310) 473-4535 or Fax (310) 475-9484.

WIN A JIM NABORS SIGNED CHECK!

AUTOGRAPH

AUTOGRAPH

C O L L E C T O R

DECEMBER 1995

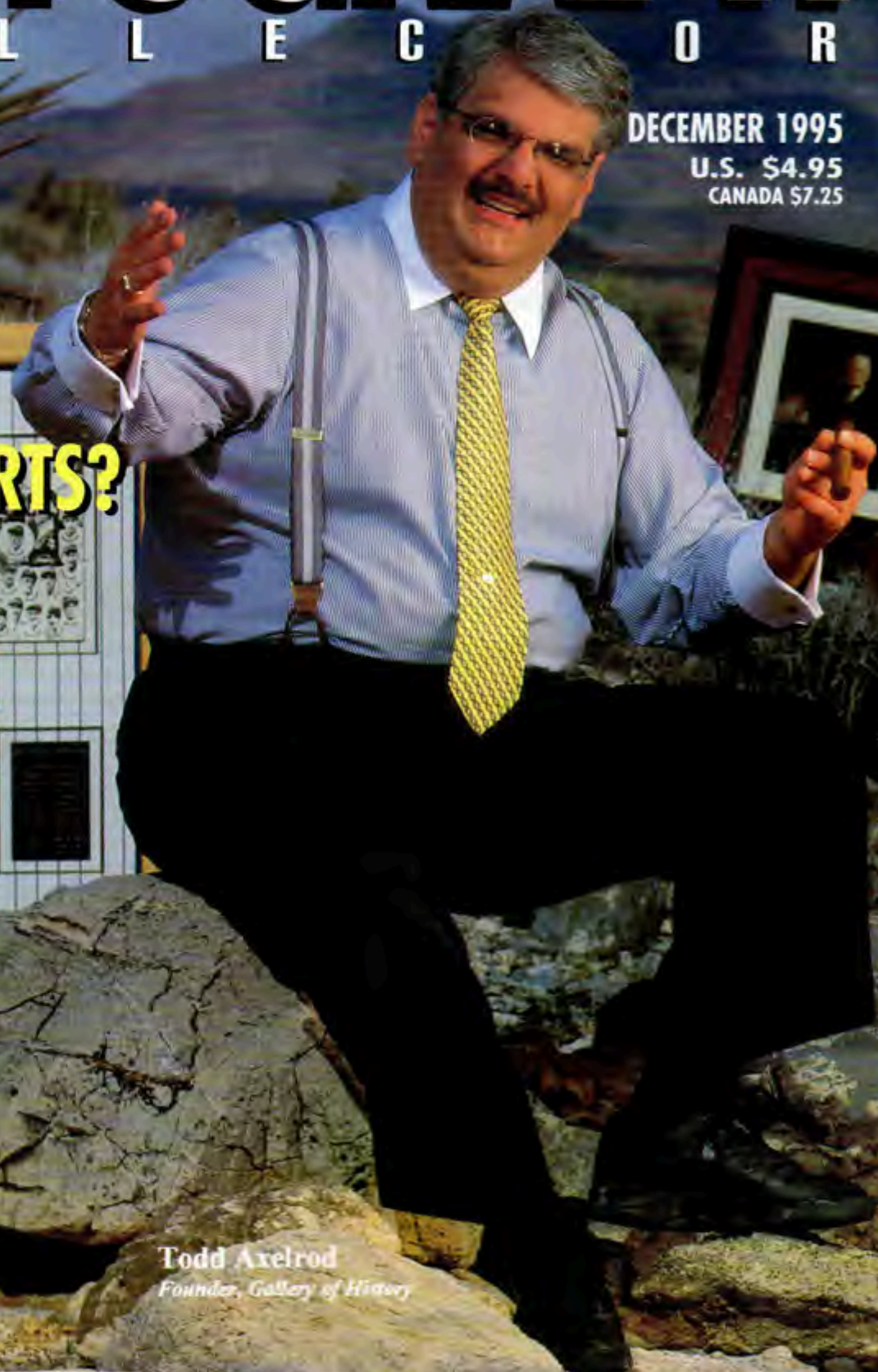
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