



## Write your own cheque

Autograph hunting is no longer the province of anoraks or schoolboys. The advent of celebrity means a film or pop star's scrawled moniker can be worth thousands, reports **Judith Lerner**

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A collection of hand-written lyrics by John Lennon and Paul McCartney sits alongside the Magna Carta at the British Library. Both are said to be priceless. It's a sign of the times - the public's endless fascination with Celebrity has now gained credibility. Shrewd investors are cashing in by collecting autographs and documents signed by the rich and famous.

Like antiques, paintings or stamps, autograph collectors concentrate on particular areas such as historical personalities, film or sports stars, politicians, writers or scientists. Adam Andrusier, the inspiration behind Zadie Smith's best-selling novel *The Autograph Man*, has collected famous signatures since he was 12-years-old. He now deals in autographs mainly of historical, literary or political figures and says this market is currently buoyant, but has its fads and fashions. "Franz Kafka is currently in vogue," he explains. "If you had anything signed by him, especially a letter, that would be rare and could fetch around £30,000. Winston Churchill is always popular, in fact anyone who has made a contribution to history is a firm seller."

Andrusier points out that autographs on their own are often not considered especially saleable. "You're really looking at quotations, correspondence, signed manuscripts," he says. "For example, a simple autograph by George Bernard Shaw would fetch around £100. His signature or scribble on a manuscript would be worth thousands."

Ted Owen, co-owner of auction house Cooper Owen, agrees. He says collectors of historical autographs are looking for more than just the signature. "War documents are popular," he says. "Anything from the two world wars or the Spanish civil war, such as signed peace treaties. But other historical documents sell as well. A letter from Al Capone has just been sold to an investor in the US for £25,000."

Historical figures can command thousands of pounds but it's the rock/pop/film celebrity market which has really expanded over the past fifteen years. Owen believes this is because the market has come of age. "People are no longer considered to be buying trivia when they spend thousands on a signed Elvis or Beatles photograph," he says.

"A younger generation of people are looking outside the stock market for investments and are turning to autographs and signed memorabilia because it's fun and it can be very high yield." Owen estimates the lyrics to the Beatles hit single *Love Me Do*, hand-written by John Lennon, would probably be worth around £500,000.

This is also a volatile market and not all autographs hold their value. At the height of their careers, a Spice Girls autograph was selling for between £200-£300. Now they're not worth half that. Getting started in the autograph collecting business means doing your homework. Richard Davie became interested back in the early 1980s. He now runs *Autographs and Manuscripts International Ltd*. Davie advises potential collectors to buy into an area they are interested in. "Educate yourself, do your research and decide how to build up a collection," he says. "This could be checking out websites, meeting dealers, building-up a relationship based on trust. There are a lot of forgeries out there."

In the celebrity market, there is no substitute for gathering pen and paper and chasing an autograph in person.

One dealer says the current fashion in West End theatre for Hollywood stars could make hanging around the stage door profitable. Celebrities vary widely in their approach to autograph hunters. American actor James Stewart was, in the words of one dealer, "probably the greatest autograph signer of all time". Instead of his name he often signed with a picture of Harvey the rabbit from his classic film in which he plays a drunk with an imaginary floppy eared friend. A Harvey sketch sells for around £300-£400 depending on the size.

Steve McQueen, on the other hand, refused to sign autographs. Writing to a celebrity asking for an autograph can be productive, but doubts may be raised about the authenticity of the signature.

Diana, Princess of Wales and former US presidents JF Kennedy and Ronald Reagan allegedly used an "autopen" which faithfully reproduces a signature millions of times.

Authenticity is a major problem when buying off the internet. Ted Owen cautions serious collectors to stay away from the web. "Buying-off the internet is a very dangerous game," he says. "It's extremely difficult to verify where an autograph has come from."

Garry King who organises the annual trade show, Auto graphica, goes a step further. He claims that around 80% of the autographs on offer on at least one internet website are fake. "I had a buyer recently who showed me a signed photograph of John Wayne she had bought off the internet for £180," he says.

"It was clearly a forgery as this is well below the market price of a genuine article." King would like to see some form of regulation for these types of internet sales, believing they are bringing the autograph collecting industry into disrepute and forcing prices down.

A number of organisations offer useful information to the autograph collector. The Professional Autograph Dealer's Association, PADA, lists its registered members in the UK and offers general advice on collecting.

The Universal Autograph Collectors' Club provides celebrity addresses and other information. Collectors should also check-out the Antiquarian Booksellers Association.

• For more information: [www.padaweb.org](http://www.padaweb.org), [www.uacc.org](http://www.uacc.org), [www.abainternational.com](http://www.abainternational.com), [www.andrusier.com](http://www.andrusier.com), [www.cooperowen.com](http://www.cooperowen.com), [www.ami-autographs.com](http://www.ami-autographs.com)

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