

Hero Autograph Displays

Both my youngest daughter and I are fascinated by heroes. For a number of years I have been collecting letters, photos, etc. of heroes - primarily American Medal of Honor recipients, English Victoria Cross recipients, and German Knights Cross recipients. From the mid 1950's to late 1960's I was often a volunteer helper at Medal of Honor recipient reunions and collected many autographs there. A few years ago I started creating framable displays from those photos and clipped autographs that I could make fit in a display. As I came across duplicate autographs, I made displays of those to sell and subsidize our collection. Those displays were very well accepted, so I made a concerted effort to obtain more autographs to use in my displays.

As occasionally happens I happened to be at the right place, the right time, and talking with the right individual. As an example, I met author/aviation historian Colin Heaton. A collector friend of Colin's had a huge collection of hero autographs that he had to sell in a couple of weeks or lose most of them in a divorce. The price was astronomical, but by partnering and pooling our funds (plus some of our bank's funds) Colin and I were able to acquire the collection. That stock more than tripled my inventory of hero autographs.

Most of these autographs were obtained when the collector went to Medal of Honor, Knights Cross, and Luftwaffe reunions. Many of these heroes are (or were before they died) also personal friends of Heaton, who also attended these same reunions and interviewed the heroes for his books.

I also have a number of collectors and dealers that I deal with. Others I obtain directly from the heroes (or their relatives) or from referrals from these heroes.

My Displays...

All of my displays come with an acid free double mat cut to fit a standard 11" x 14" frame. I first research the recipient and put together a brief biography, his citation, and whatever else I can find about him, along with a photo of him and one of his medal. The photos generally come from reference books, but some I get from archives. Most of my U.S. Medal of Honor recipient photos come from Doug Sterner's fantastic site, homeofheroes.com. I then design the piece in PageMaker, leaving a mortice for the autograph, autographed photo, or small signed document. Finally, I print it on my color digital printer and affix the authentic document. I include the mat, but do not affix the display to the mat. The reason for that is that several people have let me know that they wanted to mount the display differently and damaged it when attempting to remove it from the mat. I include full instructions and everything that is needed to mount the display in the mat if the individual prefers it that way.

I have multiple signatures of some of my heroes. In those cases, the pictures shown on my web site or auctions are representative. All, however, are authentic.

The autographs in my displays are of several types:

Small Photos - About the maximum size photo I can use is 4" x 6". These are either candid shots or "self portraits" where the hero signed the photo either in the margin or across the photo in pen, Sharpie, etc. Some are original photos, but most of my German ones are copies that were post-war signed by the hero. Most of these are reprints of their wartime postcard photos.

Business Card - Many of my Medal of Honor autographs are on the recipient's personal business card or on generic cards. Others prefer the 3" x 5" cards because it gives the hero a little more room to add information if he wishes. I have many of both

Clipped Signatures - These are signatures that are clipped off autographed envelopes, letters, documents, etc. Many of these were clipped from signed limited edition prints that have been damaged or from signed copies of books.

Bookplates - There are several different types of "bookplates." Most common are those which are signed in pencil or ink on a high quality acid free paper stock. These are normally obtained from the signer to be glued into books when the signer is not on hand to personally sign the book. The bookseller may purchase a dozen or so books and the signer will send him a dozen or so bookplates. The other type is more commonly used by aviation artists and those who create displays relating to the signer. These are normally signed on the print's matboard and if the mat gets damaged after having been signed, the signature is clipped from the mat. The artist or display creator will either pay the signer a fixed price for each signature or will contract for a percentage of each sale. Many of mine are ones that have not yet been affixed to a book. Others are ones I have clipped out of autographed books.

Ink - My autographs are signed with a wide variety of writing instruments. Many bookplates and clipped signatures from limited edition prints are signed in pencil, but some are signed using ballpoint or ink pens, silver or gold ink, Sharpie markers, etc. The metallic inks were often used to sign over dark parts of a photo or for mats used by artists for their limited edition prints (see "Bookplates" above.)

Autopen, Secretarial, Counterfeit Signatures - An autopen is a method of reproducing a dignitary's signature automatically. These are often (but not always) easily identifiable because there is no difference in the thickness of the signature and all signatures are identical. I know of no heroes who used autopens, but a few may have. Many entertainers and politicians use autopen. A secretarial signature is when someone else signs for the individual. These are very easy to identify if you have a known original to compare it with. I have a number of reference books that contain pictures of thousands of authentic signa-

tures. Finally there are counterfeits and these are more difficult to identify. Many appear "shaky," but so do authentic autographs as the signer ages. If you are looking at an expensive autograph - like Sgt. York or Audie Murphy, it is best to have it authenticated and to get an unconditional money back guarantee without time limit if an autograph turns out to be counterfeit. You will find many counterfeits and autopens on internet auction sites. The safest bet is to deal with a responsible advanced collector or an ethical dealer.

Affixing Signatures - I use a special acid free removable adhesive to affix my signatures to the mat. It is an archival type rubber cement that should be available from your local frame shop. To remove, very carefully lift the signature off the backing and then with a finger, rub any remaining adhesive off the backing and the back of the signature. To re-mount, be sure to use an acid free cement or hinge with special museum mounting linen tape.

Autograph Values - There are a number of autograph price guides - some are better than others. My two favorites are the Sanders price guide and the Martin price guide. Keep in mind that these are only guides. As an example, Sanders shows an Audie Murphy signature at \$100 and a Sgt. Alvin York signature at \$275. You would be hard pressed to find one at these prices. However, it shows William "Buffalo Bill" Cody signature at a little over \$1,000, but you might well find a nice one for \$100 or so less. Just try to find an authentic Hans Ulrich Rudel signature for Sander's \$100. \$300 to \$400 or more would more in line. Bottom line is that you must keep in mind that the actual value is what you are willing to pay for it. I price my displays using a combination of what I had to pay for the signature, plus the cost of creating and matting the display. Many of my displays are priced less than the price guides show and some are priced substantially more. Wartime signed photos or documents are substantially higher priced than are post-war signed items. Signatures of those killed in action are extremely rare and I have very few of those. As an example, a signed photo of Wolfgang Luth (killed in 1945) or Gunter Prien (killed in 1941) can easily realize well over \$1,000 each, where a post-war signed photo of the most successful U-boat commander, Otto Kretschmer may realize only around \$150.00. Almost any posthumously awarded U.S. Medal of Honor signature will have a very, very high premium. The reason is these heroes were, for the most part, unknown until the award was made and they signed no autographs. On those rare occasions when something they signed surfaces, the price goes through the ceiling.

Individual Autographs - I do not normally sell individual autographs. I use all of my autographs in my displays. The exceptions are if I obtain a signed photo or document and it is too large to use in one of my displays or if I purchase a collection that has militaria autographs I am not interested in (like German SS or most other German WWII ground troops.)

I do not ask heroes for "free" autographs except for our personal collections. I do not like to ask these heroes for something they willingly give for free when I know it is my intention to include it in something I intend to sell. I either pay them for the autographs, give them one of my displays that includes their autograph, or get them elsewhere. My displays are in many collections around the world. In September 2002 I am creating special displays for each of the living US Medal of Honor recipients who attends the annual MOH Reunion in Shreveport, Louisiana. I am doing the same thing for attenders of the German Knights Cross union in the Fall of 2002.

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