Man of Letters

With Ken Rendell, America’s leading autographs and manuscripts dealer, the handwriting is on the wall. BY JOHN CANTRELL

EVEN THOUGH KEN RENDELL IS THE world’s premier dealer in autographs, letters and manuscripts, as well as a leading rare-book specialist, his life is anything but that of the stereotypical staid man of letters. How many arts and antiques dealers relax by heliskiing or by biking three dozen miles up the side of a Hawaiian volcano? How many follow a summer vacation that retraces part of Lewis and Clark’s trail through the American West with two weeks at the Bohemian Grove, the private camp of California’s tony Bohemian Club? And who else pairs elegant Savile Row suits with Air Nikes, as Rendell does when he’s working on major collections at his Boston headquarters or selling individual pieces at his Madison Avenue gallery?

Telling stories and dropping names—except those of his highest-profile clients, for whom he uses code words—Rendell, 56, is one of the most entertaining men you could meet. He’s also one of the most passionate, a trait that he seems able to transfer even to the wares he sells. A typical sampling from a booth he and his wife Shirley (his longtime business partner) recently set up for an antiques fair: a signed photograph of Fred and Ginger—dancing, of course ($2,500). On another wall, a letter from Ike to Mamie during WWII: “...if I could teach

Top right: The dealer with his wife and business partner Shirley and their daughter Julia. Top left: A display at Rendell’s Winter Antiques Show booth. Bottom right: Examples of his many treasures.
CONNOISSEUR'S WORLD

him to keep still it would be a real accomplishment," he tells her—of George Patton ($35,000). And on a nearby table, a melancholy missive from George Gershwin to a far-off friend: "Past midnight ...just finishing page 62 of Scene four Act two of Porgy. I am also thinking about you...you are probably asleep. Peaceful sleep. You're just young enough to get away without dreams..." ($32,500).

On the eve of his and Shirley's latest appearance at New York's Winter Antiques Show this month, T&C caught up with the peripatetic dealer in Boston. The only topics he would not discuss: the library he has been assembling for four years for Bill and Melinda Gates' Seattle home, and the annual income of his business. But the former has presumably been good for the latter. ...

T&C: Who's selling best these days in autographs and letters?

KR: Churchill, without question. And Babe Ruth is way up. He was always popular but has been much more so since this home run business last year. Eleanor Roosevelt, you couldn't sell her a few years ago. She lived forever, she signed every letter, she was in a position always to write letters and for people to know who she was. She was as common as could be. Now, she sells incredibly well.

T&C: Why is that?

KR: The change in women's roles. Susan B. Anthony—you couldn't give her away any more than you could make her coins work. Now she's on our basic buy list. Amelia Earhart is right up there too, plus she could write the kind of letters you want to give your daughter, really good letters about the roles of women—one we had said: "So you think women don't belong on expeditions, bold hussies that we are, why don't you just say that you can't deal with women?" But she's a lot scarcer than Roosevelt. I can get maybe a few letters a year.

T&C: Anybody else?

KR: Lincoln and Washington are really popular too, but they're expensive, and fewer people can afford them. And Bobby Jones skews the list. In the overall scheme of things, he is not that big a deal—he signed a lot of autographs and he lived a long time, so they're plentiful. But given the number of wives looking to buy things for husbands who have no interest but golf, it makes Jones expensive.

T&C: But generally, the fewer signatures there are, the higher the price?

KR: It's important, yes. But rarity isn't a simple thing. First of all, somebody's name has to be known, not only during his life but most importantly in the generations right after, or his material isn't saved to begin with. Why is Melville rare? Because nobody read The Whale. It became Moby Dick a lot later. So if in 1890 somebody found a packet of letters signed "Herman Melville," they threw them out. Another factor is if they're in a position to sign a lot of documents. The only reason that Hawthorne letters are not rare is that he got a job as American consul in Liverpool, and he signed all these official documents—so you can always get a Hawthorne.

T&C: Does that diminish the value to you, knowing that Hawthorne signed a million pieces of paper and that most were inconsequential?

KR: I don't value anything because it's rare; I value it because it is what it is. I call it the Rose Bowl parade syndrome. I remember looking as a kid at television, and looking at a very ugly float, and then hearing that it took 500 women two years and nine million carnations to make this thing. Well, you know what? It was still ugly, and it just didn't matter how much time it took. But most dealers don't know why an object is desirable. They think it's desirable because it's rare, because of its condition, because it costs a lot of money. I don't agree with any of those elements. It's whatever the object is and what it represents.

T&C: How did you become a collector and then a dealer? How were you raised?

KR: My father had a drugstore next to Harvard University. He had a great interest in people, he loved people, and he gave everybody credit and went broke. My mother was the one trying to hold things together. So I guess I grew up placing a value on being both practical and a dreamer. I got into dealing because in 1953, when I was 10, somebody came to my father's drugstore and paid for something with an 1806 half dollar. I went around to all the coin dealers in Boston and the highest offer I got for it was $3.50. And that started everything. In those days you could get an old penny and sell it for 10 cents; you could actually make money doing that. Then I got much more sophisticated—I got the guy who did the gum-ball machines at the drugstore to sell me all the coins. Now we started to get this thing organized! I was 12.

T&C: And the move to autographs?

KR: I had a friend in the coin business, a guy who was a leading coin dealer, still is the big deal. He had been collecting letters of the presidents, and I went to his wedding and I traded him an English coin collection for his presidential letters—actually, the wedding was delayed while we were negotiating! Coins are nice, but they're cold compared to a letter, where you get the sense of the person.

T&C: Are autographs generally more popular than rare books?

KR: Yes. If someone's offered a first edition of For Whom the Bell Tolls or he's offered a letter, at the same price, he takes the letter every time. It's unique; it's signed. He may want the book later, but the autograph material is vastly more popular.

T&C: Do you have favorite autographs, ones that you've kept?

KR: [Long pause] Why can't I think of any? I guess I've kept too many! Well, my favorite sports one is downstairs in the catalog library—Mickey Mantle, which is not something we'd ever sell. It's just a picture of him at bat, but it's signed "Best F-ing Wishes." Someone must have gotten him in a bar, when he'd really had it with requests! Another one is a George Bernard Shaw. It says, "Bless you, bless you, sell every scrap of writing you can, while this ridiculous boom in autographs lasts!"

T&C: Aside from changes in the popularity of individual figures, what's
going on in your business these days?
KR: There’s more of a general interest, more people with not fifty pieces, but five pieces, ten pieces. There’s much more interest in people now than there used to be—just look at “Biography” on A&E, and the enormous popularity of that. There’s much less to collect now, and you can’t collect in quantity, but there’s a genuine excitement.
T&C: And how has the person who’s collecting changed?
KR: In the past, a lot of major collectors were people who’d inherited money. You just sent material on approval, they basically bought all of it, and when they died everything went to Princeton or Yale. But you didn’t get notes from any of these people saying, “Wow, what a letter!” There was none of that. It was like they were professional librarians, professional collectors. But my major clients today tend to be in interesting fields and have interesting perspectives on subjects. And many of them are younger than I am.
T&C: How does that make you feel?
KR: Really lousy! One of them said he thought he was an “ideal client.” But I said, “No, the ideal client is 85, he has no kids, didn’t go to college, isn’t going to leave anything to a university library, and I’m going to get it all back in five years!”
T&C: Do you consider yourself a preservationist? Scholar? Historian? Caretaker?
KR: Yes, all of those. I also take a very businesslike approach, because if you don’t, none of these things will work.
T&C: How about showman—do you consider yourself that too?
KR: I don’t like the term “showman” because it implies adding something. I can’t give you a thrill from holding an Edison signature or that rock on my desk, which Shackleton brought back from Elephant Island, if you don’t have it. I said to one potential client, You’ve got to bring the spark. I’ll turn it into an inferno, but if that spark isn’t there, I can’t do anything for you.
T&C: How many clients do you have now for private libraries or major collections?
KR: It’s a bit hard to say, because I can’t personally work with that many. Everybody wants me to, and that’s a bit of a problem. I can only personally handle about five people at a time who are intense.
T&C: And that can take a period of time, right? A year, two years, three years…
KR: Yes. I know it sounds ridiculous, but when I was in California a few weeks ago I interviewed a guy who wanted to be a customer.
T&C: Did he get the job?
KR: Well, I’ve got another guy who’s fading, and he’s been collecting music and he wanted major working manuscripts of all the major composers. He probably has about fifty now, one manuscript of each, and he makes judgments based on whether he likes a piece of music—he plays everything, he listens to CDs, he has total involvement. This is a story you can tell: he had turned down a Schubert that was a lot of money, and I was at his house for dinner—there was no business involved—and I was in his music room when he left to go check on his son. I put a CD of the Schubert in his machine, and when he came back, I pushed play. And he said, “What’s that?” And I said, “This is the Schubert you turned down, and I have the manuscript here in front of me.” So he read the manuscript while the piece finished, then he went over to the piano and played the piece on his piano. And that’s my kind of guy. The satisfaction I got out of that was tremendous. But we’re really close to the point where there isn’t much else for me to find for him, and I can take on someone else—like the guy in California.
T&C: Roughly how much did the music client spend to acquire the fifty composers?
KR: Significant millions.
T&C: What are some other kinds of theme collections you can do?
KR: The “100 People Who Most Represent America” is a fun one. It started about twenty years ago when a Frenchman invited me to his house in Paris and he and I put a list together. He got to about forty or fifty and then I put in fifty, and then we discussed them. For instance, he wanted Al Capone on the list and I said, Capone doesn’t represent America. But he argued that he did, and from a European perspective, I could see why he thought that. I’ve never forgotten that in making other collections either—“The 250 Books That Most Represent American Culture”; “The 100 Books That Have Most Influenced Political Thinking in America”; “The Books That Influenced the Development of the American West.” It’s all in how you perceive it.
T&C: And sometimes you’re asked to do book or manuscript collections that even you can’t assemble?
KR: At least half of what I get asked about, there’s no chance. For instance, a person came to me last spring; his father was a financier of one of the early auto companies, and he wanted a collection about the development of the automobile. He pretty much had no limit on the budget—but there isn’t any material. In all likelihood, no one thought to save that stuff.
T&C: Now your own chief personal collection is your WWII material?
KR: Yes. It’s something that’s never been done before, a sociological look at WWII. I’m building up big files, research archives; I’m buying complete papers of famous people—I’m really building serious research facilities for WWII stuff. I hope to open my own private museum in Boston sometime in 2000.
T&C: How did you start with this material?
KR: In the ’60s I was saving letters; by the ’70s I was buying other material. Back then the cost was basically in time, because where you’d find this was at flea markets in Europe. If it was June, Shirley and I would always be in Normandy and it would always be raining. I can’t tell you the number of times we were in mudholes in fields, where people would have just put blankets out and put what they had on top of them. I paid nothing for most of my stuff and I have incredible things. I started with propaganda, but then I got into the artifacts, weapons, leaflets… I don’t know how many propaganda leaflets I have—at least 10,000. There were “I surrender” passes the British and Americans dropped on German troops
showing the Russians coming from the east. One of my favorites is a troop newspaper whose lead story warns that the British are faking German newspapers—and this is a German troop newspaper.

T&C: What is it about WWII material that most appeals to you?
KR: What got me initially was that everything I'm involved in is about human nature—that's what letters are about, what everything's about. To me that's the endless subject of life, that's the most fascinating thing. What struck me about WWII was that in the late '50s and early '60s, I knew so many people in England who had been through the war. They'd had incredible wartime experiences, but they were all just normal people. They weren't heroes; they had had no choice. So my initial question was, Just how did ordinary, decent people survive the war? It blew me away.

T&C: In what other areas could a collector who started now make a mark, the way you have with WWII?
KR: Somebody ought to be collecting Vietnam—not the war but the artifacts of all the protests. It's distasteful to this generation, but it's of phenomenal importance in American history.

T&C: What about the future for papers or manuscripts by someone like your friends Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin? Any value in computer printouts, say, of Doris' original manuscripts? What about the first version versus the second?
KR: It's not happening. I don't think anybody saves this kind of stuff. But I'll ask Doris—she's coming to dinner on Wednesday night.

T&C: She must be aware—
KR: People are, but they throw it out anyway. Ironically, her husband Dick Goodwin, who with Ted Sorensen wrote all of Kennedy's speeches, said to me one time: "We were so busy making history, we never thought to save it." It's an absolutely great line, and I've used it over and over again. Kennedy would read the speech, correct it, and it would be left there on the podium for anybody to pick up. For instance, I own the Munich Agreement, in Hitler's handwriting, with Neville Chamberlain's notes on it. They sent it out after they argued about it, it was retyped with the changes on it, and the original was left on the table. The British Ambassador to Germany saw it as they left the room and picked it up as a souvenir.

T&C: You've been getting beyond selling just printed materials lately?
KR: Yes, we sometimes get beyond books. We buy technology for one of our clients—early calculators, PASCAL calculators, devices like that.

T&C: Will this happen more in the future?
KR: It could, but it depends on the person. I mean, as a gift I gave one client who loves Casablanca the table and chairs from Rick's Cafe; I got them from someone who had worked on the movie. But you can tell he's a good client—you have to be to get that kind of gift!

T&C: What do you think about the increase in sales of celebrity merchandise by the auction houses?
KR: I don't knock what anybody's doing, but people who give an artifact value because of a movie star association
—Madonna’s bra, that sort of thing—well, I think that’s a real hoot. But... if you’re really a fan of Madonna or some other celebrity, compared to someone who collects Lincoln—well, you know, they’re both getting thrills.

T&C: What about your competition? How do you stay ahead of them—especially the new Internet auctions?

KR: I don’t want to sound arrogant, because there are a lot of good dealers out there, but on the scale that we do it, we have absolutely no competition. Our business does more in a month than all the other autographs and manuscripts dealers combined do in a year. No one else even has a retail store, for instance. And the auction houses, I don’t even really consider them to be competition, because they just don’t do what we do—we work with you to build a collection, maintain it, put it in proper archival condition, everything. We give you a highly personal service. With the auction houses, it’s buying as is and whenever something does, or doesn’t, come up. And that’s it.

T&C: And what about on-line auctions?

KR: Frankly, I think they’re meaningless. People think that because eBay is a success, auctions of autographs are going to be a success, but they don’t understand that in the whole art and antiques field you have dozens and dozens of companies announcing they’re going to become on-line auction houses—while already there’s not enough material with just dealers like myself and Sotheby’s and Christie’s and Doyle’s and Phillips. Where are all these on-line sites going to get the material? Ebay’s success is that their type of material exists, but prior to eBay there was no efficient way to sell it to a mass market. There was an untapped source of material and a market for it. But my kind of material has long been pursued. It’s not sitting in warehouses waiting for an audience to come along.

T&C: As far as pieces that currently exist, is there a long list of material that you would like to come across but haven’t? Or have you seen pretty much everything in private hands that you want to?

KR: There’s nothing that I look for, not some kind of Holy Grail. There are a few things that I’m after that I couldn’t say, because I wouldn’t want anybody to know that they might be a little loose—and I’m prying and pushing and hoping for a few family squabbles or maybe a divorce! I’ve had people get ticked off at their kids and sell their collections. And on the other hand, I’ve also talked people out of selling their collections.

T&C: And talked them into...

KR: Enjoying them for the rest of their lives. I know with some people, their collections keep them alive. And later I can always buy them from their heirs. The first client I ever had with framed material was a local neurosurgeon here in Boston. He covered his walls with his collection, and said to me, “I love having the presence of these people around me. I walk through my house at night and see all the great people who created Western civilization, and I can just feel their presence.” There’s a lot to that, I think—so I can wait.