ROBOTS THAT FORGE SIGNATURES

By: Brian G. Kathenes, ISA

Terminator III? No.... R2D2 turned crook? No... Robocop gone bad? No... This mechanical forger goes by the name of "Autopen." It has become a modern technological wonder for busy VIP's, celebrities, and politicians, but has become a headache for autograph collectors.

Knowing that autopens exist is not enough. An autograph collector must be able to determine which signatures in his or her collection were written by this mechanical forger. That is not an easy task.

The term "Autopen" has become the standard term for all machine signed signatures, just like "Jello" has become the generic term for gelatin. The Autopen is a machine designed and manufactured by the International Autopen Company of Arlington. The machine uses a fabricated matrix to reproduce signatures.

The "Signa Signer" is a popular, more sophisticated version of a signature reproducing machine. It stores information on magnetic media, and can reproduce entire letters. It is "smaller than a bread box" (for those of you too young to know what a bread box is, it's about the size of small microwave oven) and its "hand" can easily fool
the uninformed collector.

An autopen with advanced features can reproduce an exact a copy of a person's signature and even an entire letter, thousands of times. It does it with a real pen in its a mechanical hand. Each signature is exactly like the previous one, so be careful. Knowing the characteristics of these machines can help you to determine genuine signatures from machine made scribble.

Since these machines write the same signature exactly the same way every time, an experienced collector can discover whether the signature in question is real or a fake. You will need to compare the unknown signature with known examples of autopens. If the two signatures are exactly the same, it is probably an autopen.

The procedure is fairly simple. Take the signature to be evaluated and place it on top of the known autopen. The example illustrated here are two signatures of NASA astronaut and shuttle pilot John Young. His authentic autograph is very desirable and quite scarce. Hold them both together near a strong light source. (I usually lay them on my light table.) Align the signatures to see if they match. If they are an exact match, it's an autopen. Some machines can be adjusted to "tighten up" a signature, which may cause a minor change in the height. However, the overall length will usually not change. These items are a perfect match. The photograph and the letter were signed with an autopen.

Think you have it? Well, almost...but not just yet. The flaw in this logic is that we have assumed that there is only one autopen pattern per person. Many famous people have many different autopen signatures. John F. Kennedy had eight different patterns. Fred Casoni's book, Best Wishes Richard Nixon, contains twenty five different autopen signatures.

To definitively identify an autopen you need to have all the examples in order to make a proper comparison.

There are many excellent references available that illustrate many autopen patterns. The Universal Autograph Collector's Club, P.O. Box 6181, Washington, DC 20044, has published a book illustrating a variety of patterns.

There are some other characteristics of autopens that should be noted: 1) Autopen signatures have drawn appearance. They do not 'flow' like genuine signature. 2) The width of the ink line is usually constant from beginning to end. This is because the autopen writes the signature at a constant speed, unlike a "human" signature. 3) Signatures are written with an even pen pressure throughout the signature. The machine cannot vary pen pressure. This too is good clue of the machine's work. 4) In addition, a noticeable minute wiggle or shake my also be present. Older machine patterns sometimes bind and catch causing a friction shake in the signature.

5) The autopen uses a real pen. The ink will smear and run just like an authentic signature will.

One of the best ways to become familiar with the work of the autopen is to develop a library of its signatures. My autopen file contains over 750 examples of autopens. So build you own file of patterns and share them with other collectors. Sharing will help you to spot the characteristics described in this article. But just reading is not enough. It takes lots of time, effort, and practice to be a good "Autograph Detective".

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Illustrations:

#1) These two signatures of NASA astronaut John Young are quite scarce and desirable...IF they are genuine.

#2) Matching them up may reveal that a mechanical forger has been at work. Place them together over a strong light source and see if they match.

#3) A perfect match. Both items have been signed by an autopen and not by John Young.