This exhibition was prepared by Joe Schmitt ('86) and Melissa Donahue ('89). Many people have generously helped, including the faculty of the Department of Romance Languages, Lafayette scholars Olivier Bernier and Peter Buckman, and Professor Fernande Bassan of Wayne State University. We also gratefully acknowledge the Houghton Library of Harvard University, which loaned us the final page of the Thoreau letter. The exhibition was made possible by the A. M. Todd Rare Book Room Fund, a growing endowment created by friends of the College.


Pen & Ink
Noteworthy Letters, Documents & Signatures

In the
A.M. Todd Rare Book Room
Upjohn Library
Kalamazoo College
Personal letters, documents, and signatures penned in the hands of important people have long been prized by collectors and scholars alike. Interesting for their own sake, they often provide unique resource material for biographical and historical studies and are especially sought after when the work or document is significant in relation to the person or event involved. With the handwritten word, the barrier of print is replaced by the intimacy and charm of imperfect, personal signs.

Signatures, whether found in books or documents, communicate an individuality whose character cannot be matched by the finest of printer’s fonts. Just as no two people share the same penmanship, so no two personal autographs are alike. Thus, the inscriptions on the books displayed here create variations of a most personal nature on otherwise uniform products. Beyond the unique physical properties of signatures, there is a sense, too, in which they serve to affirm and authenticate the neighboring text. While this affirmation is symbolic in the case of signed books, the signature’s function as authentication is more tangible in the case of the legal documents exhibited, where the endorsement represents the authority rather than the personality of its author.

Letters, of course, convey much more of a personality than signed books or legal documents. The private correspondence of an individual can reveal lesser known and less polished characteristics of the writer’s thought than would normally reach the public through the print medium. While some letters are interesting simply because they were written by a well-known personage (see, for example, the Hugo letter), others offer a wealth of primary source material for researchers. This is well illustrated by the Lafayette letters, which provide a contemporaneous view of historical events and reveal the more private nature of a man who is best known as a legendary hero of the American Revolution. The nine-page Thoreau letter, as well, demonstrates the sincerity of the author’s transcendental conviction and conveys an ironic wit that existed beyond the confines of his published works.

The letters, documents, and books in this exhibition have been chosen from the collection of the A. M. Todd Rare Book Room to exemplify their personal and scholarly qualities. Several items, such as the documents signed by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin and the letters of the Marquis de Lafayette, are valuable as primary historical sources. The letters of Henry Thoreau and John Burroughs are contemporary illustrations of nineteenth-century American thought. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s letter to British novelist Elizabeth Gaskell mentions his visit to Kalamazoo College and introduces Lucinda Hindsdale Stone, whose intellect and guidance shaped the early history of this school. Poets, writers, and other significant individuals who have visited the campus have also left behind some of the autographed volumes which are displayed here. Other signed books come from the collections of friends and donors to the Todd Rare Book Room, the most notable of these being Our Mr. Wrenn, which bears a delightful inscription to Mrs. Rudolph Light from Sinclair Lewis, and Climats, presented to Maynard Owen Williams by André Maurois.

A note on the display. Many of the letters contain writing on both sides of the page, a natural enough trait when the writer is not expecting to display his private correspondence. Where this has occurred, the side which contains the signature is usually exhibited. All of the letters are accompanied by typewritten transcripts of the complete letter and, in the case of those written in French, are accompanied by translations as well.
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