

\$1M could be relative bargain for Einstein set

Autograph dealer also pours energy into other celebrities with universal attraction

By Craig Wilson
USA TODAY

SOUTH NATICK, Mass. — The sign outside Ken Rendell's handsome white clapboard building here doesn't give much away. It only bears his name.

He says many people, even in this western Boston suburb, don't know what he does. In truth, he kind of likes it that way.

"I sometimes say we're library consultants, and that pretty much shuts everyone up," he says. "Kind of like telling people you're a funeral director."

What Rendell does is deal in autographs, letters and manuscripts penned by the world's most famous people. He and his wife, Shirley, are the undisputed leaders in the field, the main clearinghouse for those who travel these circles. You name it, and they have seen it, sold it, helped collect it or own it.

Here, and in their gallery on New York's Madison Avenue, they have letters from James Joyce (\$12,500), signed photos of Duke Ellington (\$1,750), and sheet music bearing the 17 original measures of Frederic Chopin's *Sonata for Cello and Piano in G Minor* (\$75,000).

"As long as you're alive, we have something that will interest you," he says with a smile.

Friday, when the Winter Antiques Show opens at New York's Seventh Regiment Armory on Park Avenue, Rendell will be there with what is expected to be one of the "talkers" of this year's show — a collection of Albert Einstein papers, including 36 letters and manuscripts, a signed photo portrait, three books Einstein signed and presented as gifts, and three others written by him.

Rendell helped compile the papers for a collector over the past decade, and only in late December did they come back into his hands. He concedes the timing was perfect, since *Time* magazine had just named Einstein its "Person of the Century."

The asking price: \$1 million.

Rendell will dicker, but be fore-

warned. Sometimes when someone asks if he can do better on the price, he'll raise it, if only for the shock value and his own amusement.

He expects the papers to sell quickly, most likely during the opening weekend of the show, which runs through Jan. 30. Who will buy them?

"Probably no one who collects Einstein," he says. "It will create its own interest."

Robert Schulmann, director of the Einstein Papers Project at Boston University, says it's "tricky" to say whether the collection is worth

\$1 million, adding that sales of Einstein papers are often "overhyped."

"Very often the Einstein name draws a great hoopla," he says, "but the expectations aren't always met."

"But then again, just one of the manuscripts in the collection could be worth that," Schulmann cites a 1912 Einstein manuscript that went for \$3.5 million a couple of years ago.

Rendell thinks the lot could be bought by someone intrigued not by Einstein's scientific side, but by his philosophical one, as evidenced in a 1927 letter

to his son Tetl, which is part of the collection:

Life in the service of an idea can be good if the idea is life-giving and released the individual from the shackle of the ego. Science and art can have this effect, but can also lead to weakness and over-refinement.

This is the good Einstein. Many of his letters that went up for auction a couple of years ago at Christie's did not sell because they showed the physicist's rather unpleasant side.

"I've found no one wants to see that side of anyone," says Rendell, allowing that other famous people's nasty letters do not sell well.

Schulmann politely disagrees, pointing out that what is probably Einstein's most brutal letter to his wife — banishing her to servant status — sold recently.

Chances are good the new owner of the collection will be younger than Rendell, who is 57.

Collecting since childhood, Ren-

Today's collectors buy what they like, "not because of what it costs. They just get a kick out of it."

— Ken Rendell



By C.J. Gunther for USA TODAY

Let us now appraise famous men: At the Winter Antiques Show in New York, autograph dealer Ken Rendell will be offering a collection of writings by Albert Einstein, 'Time' magazine's 'Person of the Century.' The asking price is \$1 million.

Getting a 'sense of being there' from a World War II museum

Although he has spent decades dealing with the likes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, T.S. Eliot, Mae West and Robert Frost, Ken Rendell always had one period of history that was his favorite: the Second World War.

An avid collector of all things World War II, Rendell will open his World War II museum this summer on Route 9, just minutes from his South Natick, Mass., office. The private museum will be open by appointment.

Rendell has been collecting artifacts, papers and books for the museum for 40 years.

"The whole point of the muse-

um will be to give you the sense of being there," he says. "To me, it's the most important thing I've done. Saving these letters and papers and items keeps these people alive."

Included will be German code machines, French radios, the letter informing Dwight D. Eisenhower that he was becoming commander in chief, and drafts of both the Munich Pact and the Japanese surrender.

"Presenting the World War II era is important to me," he says. "But I don't want the focus being on me as the collector. I'm just the vehicle."

dell has seen his business change — from one that services staid men of inherited wealth to one that deals with an eclectic group of young self-made millionaires who are bright, articulate and passionate about what they are searching for.

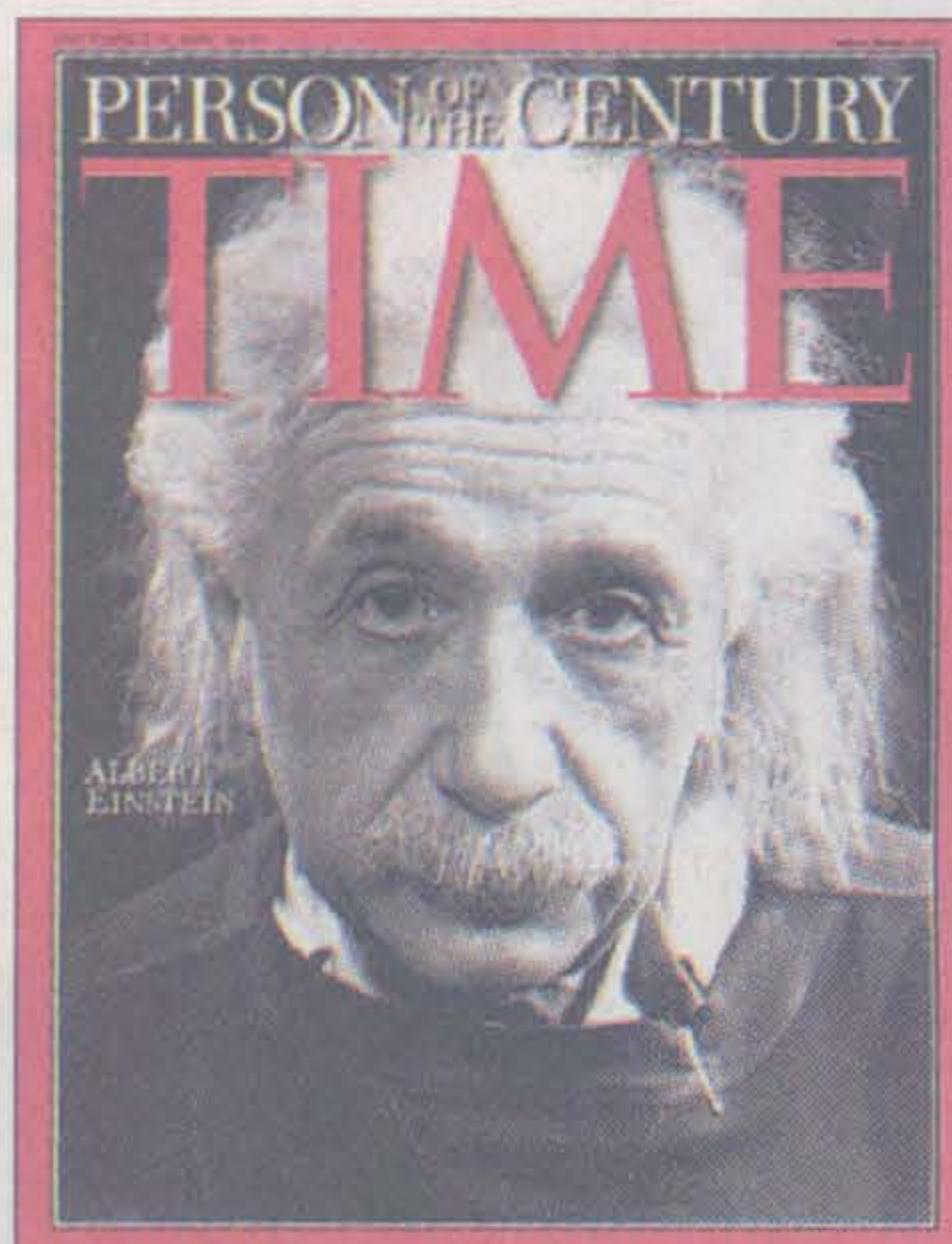
For four years, he has been assembling a library for Bill and Melinda Gates' mansion in Seattle, a project he will not discuss, other than to say he's amazed at how many people have tried to get to the couple through him.

In many ways, Rendell is more like his new clients than his old ones. He wears Savile Row suits with Air Ni-

kes, and his huge, wood-paneled office is filled with many wondrous things, none of which is for sale. If it makes it into Rendell's office — and his heart — it stays.

In one corner on an easel is a portrait, rather poorly done, of Winston Churchill. It was painted by Dwight Eisenhower. Over his desk is Gen. George Patton's battle helmet, the one he wore throughout World War II; on his desk is a rock brought back from Elephant Island by explorer Ernest Shackleton. The excitement in his voice is noticeable when he talks about the objects.

More than once, he has said to a



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."

He says today's collectors buy what they like, "not because of what it costs. They just get a kick out of it," similar to the kick he gets out of the treasures in his office.

"All these things give me a bond to these people," he says, adding that one collector he works with says he can "feel" the people in the room when surrounded by their books, papers and manuscripts.

But Rendell won't sell books to fill a library, books just for books' sake.

"If people want to do books by the mile, we'll refer them to a good book dealer," he says. "But we don't do that kind of thing."

Although the Einstein papers are expected to get all the attention this

Honest Abe? Not exactly

Some facts from Ken Rendell's world:

► Worried it's counterfeit? "Look for the illogical thing." Abraham Lincoln, for instance, never signed his name "Abe."

► Beware — another John Hancock was living at the same time as the signer of the Declaration of Independence. Also, a lot of John F. Kennedy's letters were signed by secretaries or machines.

► Rendell's inventory is not growing with the passing years, mainly because letter writing has taken a nose dive since the mid-'60s.

► Will e-mail from famous people become valued? "Only by the Justice Department."

week at the show, Rendell is bringing other papers and items that are far more reasonable in price and that some would find just as interesting.

He has a signed photograph of a dancing Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers (\$2,500); a poignant letter from Noel Coward to "My dear Sidney," describing Vivien Leigh's drinking problem (\$4,500); the original working manuscript of Frederick Loewe's *I Wonder What the King Is Doing Tonight* (\$125,000); and Daniel Decatur Emmett's original 42 measures of *Dixie* (\$250,000).

Rendell isn't sure who will buy them, but he knows one thing: They will buy because they love them.

He likes to tell the story of a man who bought an expensive letter from him a few years ago. His wife went nuts, and the man brought the letter back. "And then he just looked at me and said, 'It's my money! I want it!' And he went back home with it."

The story makes Rendell smile.

Rendell deals with many celebrities and the nouveau riche, using code words for his highest-profile clients. He is politic when he says some are more pleasant than others, but he adds that the vast majority of them appreciate what they are after.

"They're buying something that is almost always more important than they are," he says. "If they come to us, they are usually interested in something or someone other than themselves. That gets us a better class of people."

So, who's top of the heap these days when it comes to autographed letters? Churchill, Babe Ruth and Eleanor Roosevelt are hot.

Abraham Lincoln and George Washington also remain blue chip. Anything written by them goes for about \$1 million, depending on what the letter says. Rendell finds Lincoln the more fascinating of the two.

"A flawed character is far more interesting than someone called the Father of the Country, don't you think?"