

Wachs Collection Is “World Class”

BY PAUL KINGSBURY

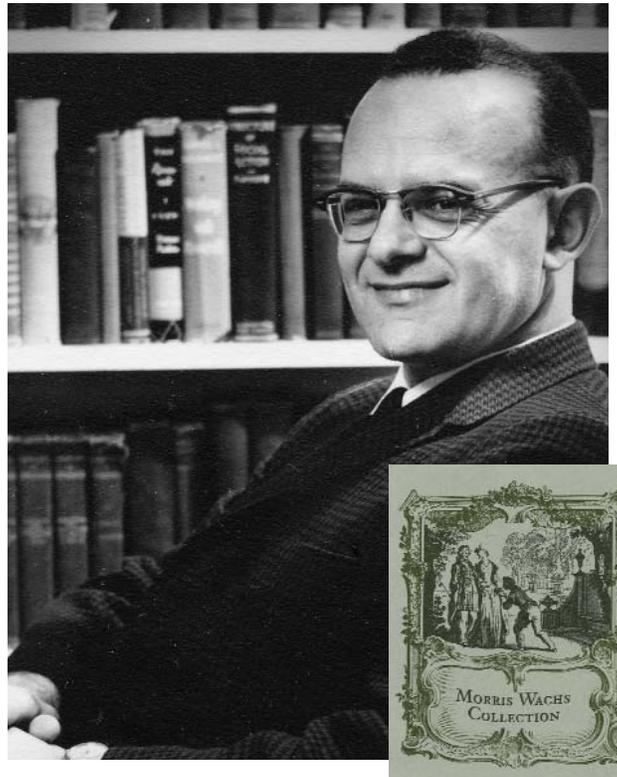
Quietly and frugally, during the 30 years he served as a Vanderbilt professor of French, the late Morris Wachs assembled a magnificent collection of some 1,000 rare volumes of French literature of the eighteenth century. For years it was his personal, working library. Now, thanks to a generous donation by his sister and brother-in-law, Frieda and Sol Shaviro, this unusually well-preserved and carefully selected library of French books—many of them still encased in handsome original leather bindings—has become the newest named collection within the Heard Library’s W. T. Bandy Center for Baudelaire and Modern French Studies. The Morris Wachs Collection of Eighteenth-Century French Literature expands the scope of the Bandy Center’s holdings to encompass the dawn of the modern era.

Originally established in 1968 as a collection and research center focused on the study of French poet Charles Baudelaire (see related story), the Bandy Center has in recent years acquired complementary collections, such as the Gilbert Sigaux Collection on modern French theater and the Pascal Pia Collection on modern French literature and culture. The Center’s newest addition, says Bandy Center Assistant Director Mary Beth Raycraft, “serves as both a complement and prelude to the Baudelaire collection.”

Morris Wachs retired from the faculty in 1992 and passed away in 2001; his wife, Jacqueline Touret Wachs, another longtime member of Vanderbilt’s French faculty, died in 1999. In memory of them, the Shaviros donated this valuable collection, along with another 2,000 related titles from Wachs’s personal collection, to the Heard Library in late 2003.

“For years and years, Morris Wachs sought out books in Paris and elsewhere whenever he visited booksellers,” says Patricia A. Ward, director of the Bandy Center. “Although he had a limited amount of money that he was willing to spend for each volume, over a period of time he built this very fine collection, which is very strong in popular fiction of the eighteenth century.”

Rather than concentrate on the well-known and widely collected work of France’s most famous eighteenth-century philosophical authors—Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot—Morris Wachs chose to build a collection that focused on lesser-known works, many of which had limited publication runs. Today a good number of these works are rare and difficult to find; some appear to be the only known copies in existence. The collection encompasses not only novels but also satires, translations, almanacs, travel literature, and fictional travel accounts. “It gives a wonderful overall view of the popular taste of the 18th century,” says Ward.



The late Professor of French Morris Wachs’ valuable personal working library of about 1,000 rare volumes of French literature from the eighteenth century has become the newest named collection within the Heard Library’s W. T. Bandy Center for Baudelaire and Modern French Studies. The bookplate for the new collection is most attractive.

Even before it was cataloged and shelved, the Wachs Collection drew the praise of a notable expert on 18th-century French literature. Richard L. Frautschi, emeritus professor from the Pennsylvania State University, spent some time examining the collection in the spring while preparing a new edition of a definitive academic bibliography of 18th-century French novels. Following his visit, Frautschi wrote to thank the Bandy Center staff, marveling at the number of rare volumes and remarking, “The Wachs material, now in the public domain, is of capital importance for students of the Enlightenment.”

Much like William T. Bandy, the Center’s founder and namesake, Morris Wachs amassed his outstanding collection bit by bit by prowling French bookstores looking for hidden jewels in the years before rare book dealing was available to anyone on the Internet.

“This is a world-class collection,” says Ward, “that we are adding to an already world-class collection.”