

Vanderbilt Acquires Baudelaire Masterpiece

BY PAUL KINGSBURY

Since its founding at Vanderbilt in 1968, the W.T. Bandy Center for Baudelaire and Modern French Studies has assembled one of the world's most comprehensive research collections on the poet Charles Baudelaire, whose unbridled, intensely vivid style exerted a significant influence on modern poetry. This past April, with generous funding provided by the Friends of the Library, the Bandy Center secured perhaps its greatest collecting coup ever: an exceedingly rare, complete, first-edition copy of Baudelaire's masterpiece, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in excellent condition. The acquisition also marks a major milestone: the 3 million and first volume for the Jean and Alexander Heard Library collection.

Les Fleurs du Mal (*The Flowers of Evil*), the first book-length collection of poetry written by Baudelaire, was published in 1857, when the poet was 36. The book caused an immediate sensation in France, challenging the mores of the time. Many of the poems were erotic, sensuous, and flouted conventional morality and religion. In August 1857, Baudelaire was prosecuted for "offending public and religious morality." Ultimately, the French court fined Baudelaire 300 francs and banned six of the most erotic and sexually explicit poems from the volume: "Les Bijoux," "Le Léthé," "A Celle Qui Est Trop Gaie," "Lesbos," "Femmes Damnées," and "Les Métamorphoses du Vampire."

"While there has always been literature that's highly erotic, it often has been published clandestinely," says Bandy Center director Patricia A. Ward. "The kind of free expression that we're used to now was not the case then. This was a period when writers were breaking some of those boundaries in a more public way."

As a result of the verdict against Baudelaire, booksellers were forced to sell the first edition of *Les Fleurs* with the offending poems razored out, leaving obvious gaps in page numbering. When an expanded second edition was published in 1861, it did not include the banned poems. The Bandy Center has long owned one of these expurgated first-edition copies. But a complete, original edition of Baudelaire's landmark work had eluded the Center. Only 1,100 copies (plus 20 printed on special paper and inscribed by Baudelaire) were printed of that first edition; no one knows how many escaped the knife. Naturally, then, when a complete copy in excellent condition was advertised by Parisian book dealer Michel Bouvier, Patricia Ward immediately looked into acquiring it. Fortunately, the Friends of the Library made available the necessary funds to purchase the book.

Making the purchase all the more apropos was its unusual provenance. The book was originally owned by a well-to-do American journalist and author who spent several years in France, Charles Astor Bristed (1820-1874). His spidery ink signature is still visible atop the book's title page.

Bristed was an acquaintance of Edgar Allan Poe and had even given Poe money when he was in financial distress. For his part, Baudelaire was an enthusiastic champion of Poe and translated his works with such skill that they are still read in French schools today. There is a strong probability that Baudelaire visited Bristed in Paris to discuss Poe, and Bristed probably acquired Baudelaire's first book from a Paris bookstore in 1857.

As part of its mission to document the work of Baudelaire, the Center has long explored the links between Baudelaire and Poe. Founder William T. Bandy first became aware of the Bristed volume in 1986 (when it came on the market for the first time in many years) and conducted preliminary research on the connections between Bristed, Poe, and Baudelaire. Following Bandy's death in 1989, Professor of French Emeritus James S. Patty built on Bandy's research to publish a groundbreaking 1996 *Romance Quarterly* article on the three writers. Patricia Ward has recently undertaken new research on the subject with plans to publish her findings in the Center's annual *Bulletin Baudelairien* journal.

The Bristed volume had only recently resurfaced in the market when the Heard Library purchased it this year. "It remained in the Bristed family until the early twentieth century," says Bandy Center Assistant Director Mary Beth Raycraft. "Then it was sold to a book dealer in Massachusetts, and then a European prince had it in his personal library."

The newest addition to the Bandy Center collection joins more than 200 copies of *Les Fleurs du Mal* spanning more than 30 languages, including Italian, Dutch and Turkish. But the new volume, kept in an acid-free box under lock and key, is in a category unto itself.

"It is a very rare volume in that it contains those six poems," says Raycraft. "Given the history of research at Vanderbilt on the Bristed copy of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, we are delighted to have acquired this particular copy, which is a most appropriate complement to the collection."



University Librarian Paul Gherman (left) and Friends of the Library President Marshall Eakin examine the rare, first-edition copy of Baudelaire's masterpiece, *Les Fleurs du Mal*.