

Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

## RANSOM CENTER

New galleries and viewing areas celebrate the University of Texas at Austin's world-class collections of literature, art, and photography.

“**Amazing**” I thought, as a white-gloved staffer at the Harry Ransom Center gently placed the book on a cushioned green velvet cradle. *The book* set before me was a literary icon I never expected to see close up, right here in my home state.

Settled on a padded cherrywood chair in the center's bright and cheery reading room, I leaned forward to admire what literati call the “first folio”—the first collection of William Shakespeare's works, printed in 1623 only seven years after the bard's death. Even more amazing, the Ransom owns three copies!

The Ransom owns myriad other cultural treasures—such as the first book printed in English (William Caxton's 1474 *Historyes of Troye*), a first edition of Lewis Carroll's *Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*, beat-era writer Jack Kerouac's journal for *On The Road*, playwright Arthur Miller's rehearsal notebook for *The Crucible*, and even actor Marlon Brando's address book.

Plus art works by Frida Kahlo and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, photographs by Alfred Steiglitz and David Douglas Duncan, scientific tomes by Copernicus and Albert Einstein, and more than 100 archives of famous writers such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and James Joyce.

The largest collection—the archives of famed film producer David O. Selznick—fills 5,000 archival boxes and chronicles Hollywood's Golden Age (1930-1950) through documents, recordings, and even props for classics such as *Gone with the Wind*, *Rebecca*, and *A Farewell to Arms*.

The humanities research center houses works from across the globe and across time. It concentrates on 19th and 20th century works by American, British, and French writers, artists, and photographers. Holdings total some 36 million manuscripts, one million rare books, five million photographs, 100,000 works of art and design, and extensive performing arts collections. Appraised value—more than \$1 billion.

A \$14.5 million renovation last year gave the Ransom a much-applauded facelift. The seven-story structure's lower two floors became 40,000 square feet of galleries, viewing rooms, and reading room. Upper floors contain archival rooms, conservation labs, and offices.

Most importantly, the renovation makes the collections more accessible than ever to researchers, students, and the general public. More than 100,000 visitors already have come to see the new face of one of the world's premier cultural repositories...as I did on a recent day of discovery at the Ransom.

**W**hen built in 1971, the center looked like a limestone lockbox built for protection.

Now, huge glass walls flank the new entrance. Etched into the clear glass are the signatures or initials of creative geniuses whose works reside inside.

More glass walls bracket the building's base as if bookends. Etched into the translucent corners are 150 or so images that represent the breadth of Ransom collections. There's a photo of artist Pablo Picasso's penetrating eyes and a scene of actress Elizabeth Taylor in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. There's a childhood drawing by artist Henri Toulouse Lautrec and a poster of illusionist Harry Houdini in an escape trick. There's a musical manuscript by composer Franz Liszt, plus the likenesses of literary giants such as Charles Dickens, Edith Wharton, and D.H. Lawrence.

In the atrium lobby, I joined hushed visitors huddled around the center's star attractions. Housed in permanent archival enclosures are a 1450's Gutenberg Bible (the first book printed with moveable metal type) and the world's first photograph (an 1826 image by Nicéphore Niépce from his window in Gras, France).

The atrium overlooks open galleries filled with rotating exhibits of photography, art, and literature. Accompanying text illuminates the works and the motivations of their creators.

On my visit, the photography gallery showed powerful black-and-white prints by Russell Lee from the 1930s Depression era. (Lee was a federal Farm Services Administration staff photographer and later UT-Austin photo instructor.) One shot shows children on a farm near Smithfield, Iowa eating a meager Christmas dinner. Another depicts hobo-esque characters downing drinks in a Craigsville, Minnesota saloon. A Plexiglas display housed the 1935 Contax I camera and flash equipment Lee used to capture the poignant scenes.

The art gallery featured more than 100 deluxe artists' books—not books on art, but art presented in book-like forms. Throughout the 20th century, top American and European publishers collaborated with artists and writers to produce these limited editions. Most are loose pages in custom boxes. Some are downright radical.

Buckminster Fuller, the New England artist who popularized the geodesic dome, wrote and illustrated a strange children's story in 1977 based on the fairy tale, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. He packaged the work in an artist's book, named *Tetrascroll*, comprised of 26 large, rigid triangular pages which can be displayed flat or folded to form a series of pyramids.

The literature gallery displayed 120 works by 20 American poets of the 20th century. Spotlighted works ranged from the descriptive and romantic rhymes of Carl Sandburg to the experimental and perplexing lines of Ezra Pound. Alongside each volume were poets' manuscripts and artifacts—including a handwritten note by Walt Whitman describing West Texas, and a 1950s poster advertising a poetry reading by Langston Hughes in a Los Angeles jazz club.

**V**isitors get their own poetry readings (at noon on the first Wednesday of each month) by campus notables who read their favorite poems as part of the Poetry on the Plaza series. The center's Fridays in Photography series (held periodically throughout the year) features displays and discussions by curators and experts on various photography topics. With the addition of a 129-seat auditorium, the center hosts lectures, film series, and scholarly symposiums. It also sponsors traveling exhibits and a summer institute to show teachers how to use the collections.

In fact, anyone can learn how to use the collections. Begin by checking the Ransom Center website ([www.hrc.utexas.edu](http://www.hrc.utexas.edu)), which offers online exhibitions and searchable databases covering much of the collections. Or search the old-fashioned way, through the card catalog found in the warm and comfy new reading room.

The Ransom is not a browsing library. To access materials, you complete a readers application (also available online) and present a valid photo ID. Then watch a video presentation on handling collection materials. (Some materials require prior arrangement.) Make a request and staff bring the treasure to the reading room or adjacent viewing rooms. You can get photocopies of most documents. You can also take notes using a pencil and yellow paper (supplied at check-in) or laptop computer.

Laptop users tend to be serious scholars...such as Brian Sandberg, whom I noticed intently scouring a venerable volume.

Brian is an American researcher living in Florence, Italy. His post-doctoral project explores one of Italy's most powerful Renaissance families, the Medicis. A Ransom fellowship had brought him to Austin to scour the Ranuzzi manuscripts. The bound documents, handwritten in the 16th and 17th centuries, chronicle social and cultural connections between Florence and Tuscany. "This kind of scholarship takes time," he noted. "But looking carefully through the materials, you can find rare gems of information that tell an important story."

Reading room requests—from scholars and ordinary folks—have doubled since the Ransom's renovation, explained reading room receptionist, Jill Morena. "We're getting more people who may not have known about us before—such as college classes around the state and people working on family genealogies."

[NOTE: THE NEXT GRAF IS OPTIONAL]

Special interest groups also come to the Ransom for specific reasons, I learned from Barbara Houlton, a Californian member of the Angela Thirkell Society. This nationwide literary club traveled to peruse the center's Knopf library and archives. Publishing giant Alfred A. Knopf published the works of many popular authors, including British novelist, Angela Thirkell, who wrote about English country life of the early 20th century. "Oh, how we loved our afternoon at the Ransom," Barbara said. "The Knopf collection is so vast, we were amazed at the staff's ability to pull books, correspondence, and our favorite thing--original book covers--for us. It was like being there when the books were first issued."

A short walk across campus, the Ransom Center also houses an eclectic array of materials in the Flawn Academic Center (accessible by prior arrangement). Texana holdings include the archive and library of Austin writer J. Frank Dobie and the largest collection of works by El Paso artist Tom Lea. Two rooms feature surprising recreations—one replicates the Washington D.C. study and living room of John Foster Dulles, secretary of state under President Eisenhower, and the other duplicates the log cabin study of detective novelist Erle Stanley Gardner. [NOTE SPELLING OF ERLE IS CORRECT]

Other personal effects at the Flawn include: poet and painter E.E. Cummings' paint box and half-used paint tubes; actress Gloria Swanson's tortoiseshell sunglasses from *Sunset Boulevard*; Edgar Allan Poe's desk; poet Anne Sexton's typewriter; and, oddly, the cremated remains of Neva Perkins, a friend of Jessica Mitford, author of *The American Way of Death*.

**H**arry Hunt Ransom [NOTE SPELLING OF HUNTT IS CORRECT] proposed in a 1957 article in the journal, *Texas Quarterly* "...that there be established somewhere in Texas--let's say in the capital city--a center of cultural compass, a research center to be the Bibliothèque Nationale of the only state that started out as an independent nation."

To do so, the one-time English professor (later, UT system chancellor) consolidated the university's existing rare book collections, then launched a bold acquisition program that collected entire archives of established and promising writers and artists. The collecting style pursued by Ransom, who died in 1976, continues today.

“The key to Ransom’s success and vision,” noted center director Thomas F. Staley, “is the premise that the published work is not the beginning of literary study. Tracing the trajectory of the creative imagination involves the study of the first notes and early drafts that began the work...

“Now, with our new facilities, we can broaden this process for students and the public. We can make a real difference in society. This is truly a resource for everyone.”

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## RESOURCES

•HRC--clear content and quotes through:

Jennifer Tisdale; [jentisdale@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:jentisdale@mail.utexas.edu)

- Barbara Houlton; Angela Thirkell Society
- Brian Sandberg