On a recent Monday, Irina Kandarasheva, the special-collections librarian for the law library, in Jerome L. Greene Hall, met some visitors in the third-floor lobby, brought them up on the elevator to the sixth floor, and led them down a hallway to an unmarked door. With a jingle of keys she turned the lock; the door opened, and her guests entered a chamber of antiquarian wonders: eleven rows of packed bookcases, suffused with the musty, pulpy, vanilla-tinged perfume of decaying fiber
and glue. “Smells like rare books,” one visitor said. For a moment, everyone stopped
to breathe in the soothing fragrance, which wafted sweetly from hoary volumes
whose spines of faded reds and browns encompassed centuries of legal literature
dating back to the Middle Ages.

Many libraries and museums have a “treasure room” — a depository for the most
valuable items in a collection — and the one at Columbia Law School is the jewel of
the law library, one of the largest academic law libraries in the US. Here, in this
hidden vault, by way of donations and purchases, are the personal libraries of
Founding Father John Jay 1764KC and legal scholar James Kent, the first professor of
law at Columbia College; the bound lectures of Theodore William Dwight, the first
dean of the law school; transcripts of the Nuremberg trials; notebooks of nineteenth-
century Columbia law students, including Theodore Roosevelt 1899HON,
handwritten with a calligraphic precision now mostly extinct; student notes from
Litchfield Law School, the first independent law school in the US; and an edition, one
of about forty in the world, of the Bracton manuscript, a thirteenth-century
compendium of English law originally compiled by the cleric and jurist Henry de
Bracton, written in Latin on parchment with filigreed flourishes of red and blue.

Not all the treasures were between covers. Kandarasheva showed off the diploma of
Ruth Bader Ginsburg ’59LAW, ’94HON, as well as a lace collar that Columbia Law
School had given the associate justice in 2018, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of her
investiture to the Supreme Court. The librarian then passed a pedestal bearing the
name Paul Robeson 1923LAW, with a screw sticking out from the top where a bust
should be. “Where’s the rest of him?” said a visitor.

Kandarasheva explained that the bronze head of the acclaimed singer, actor, and
human-rights activist, fashioned by the American sculptor Bo Walker, was being
spruced up for events this year honoring the hundredth anniversary of Robeson’s
law-school graduation.

It’s been a notable year all around for the law school, which recently received a
$17.5 million gift from Alia Tutor ’00LAW — the largest single commitment in the
school’s history. The gift will help fund a complete renovation of the law library, and
— to Kandarasheva’s delight — provide more display space for the books,
manuscripts, and bound transcripts of the treasure room.