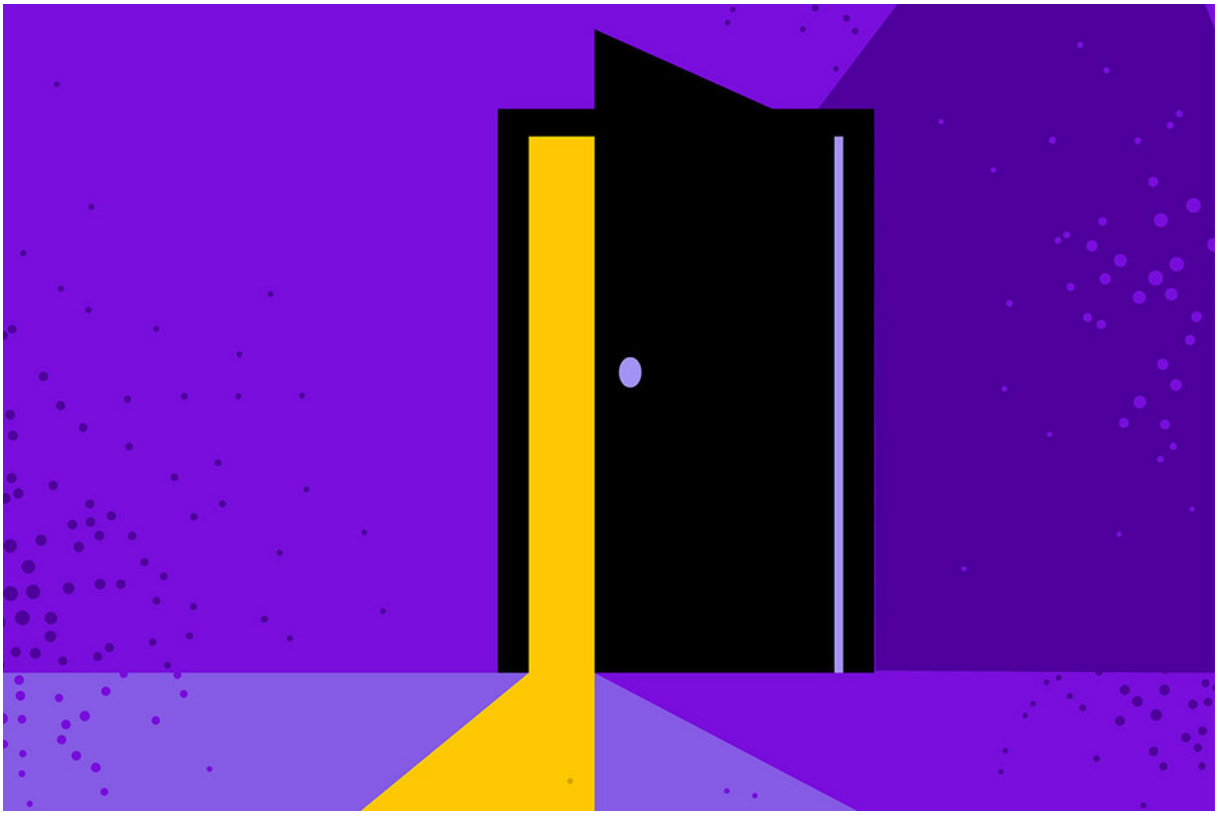
On Campus

Inside the Treasure Room at Columbia Law School

A look into the law library’s special collections.

By
Paul Hond
|
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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.

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