On Campus

Always Shining, Rarely Shown

“Jewels in Her Crown” brings the treasures of Columbia’s special collections to light, many for the first time.

Winter 2004-05

Seeing a papyrus fragment of the *Odyssey* is exhilarating. Seeing it in the same display case as a signed first edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, and only a few feet from Florence Nightingale’s bible and Marie Curie’s mortarboard, is downright dizzying.

“Jewels in Her Crown: Treasures from the Special Collections of Columbia’s Libraries” occupied the Rare Book and Manuscript Galleries of Butler Library this winter. It is the first time in more than half a century that the collections have been opened for a major exhibition, and the first time many of the 250 treasures — such as a sixteenth-century Babylonian Talmud so rare it is widely known as the “Columbia Talmud” — have ever been put on public display.

“My feeling, when I came to Columbia about three years ago, was that we have extraordinary collections that have not been as recognized and as embraced within the community as they need to be,” says James Neal, vice president for information services and University librarian. “The 250th anniversary gave us an opportunity to highlight them.”

Unlike the traditional, more narrowly focused exhibition, Neal says, this one draws liberally upon different media, different disciplines, and different collections from throughout the University. “That’s why you see things from the Union Theological Seminary, from Teachers College, from the Medical Center, from Starr, from Avery,” he says. “We wanted to really show that it’s not just the Rare Book and Manuscript Library. It’s a much broader special collections capability at Columbia.

“And, of course, we wanted a little bit of a ‘wow’ factor as well.”

Guide to school abbreviations