

Vanderbilt Holdings

Collections and collectibles

A Small Matter

The Heard Library's Pascal Pia Collection includes miniature books with a mysterious past. By PAUL KINGSBURY, BA'80

IN A MASSIVE, WAREHOUSE-LIKE brick building in a quiet, old residential neighborhood near campus, some of the oldest and most delicate items from the Jean and Alexander Heard Library's collections are carefully stored. On the second floor of the Library Annex stands row upon row of 7-foot-tall, collapsible compact shelving units, and deep inside one of these long rows of book-laden shelving, a group of 51 crisp and fresh-looking beige-colored boxes, the size of hefty hardcover novels, rests on three shelves at eye level.

Each beige box opens to reveal a tiny book nestled in a shallow, cutaway compartment inside. Most of these miniature books are smaller than the palm of a hand, some not much bigger than a thumb. Of these 51 miniature books, 34 share a certain resemblance, with delicate hand-tied string bindings, colorful fibrous paper covers decorated with often-playful typography, and pages sporting arty ragged edges. Each book contains a brief bit of French verse or prose, and is imprinted with the mysterious initials "pab."

Who was "pab," and why does Vanderbilt have these miniature books? Answering these questions turns out to be rather like opening a series of Chinese boxes.

Though the miniature books are stored at

the Heard Library Annex, their keepers are the staff of Vanderbilt's W.T. Bandy Center for Baudelaire and Modern French Studies. To examine the miniature books, this is where one comes. The Bandy Center can be found on the top floor of the University's Central Library in a spacious, well-lit reading room formerly occupied by the art book collection. The Center has been in this location since the spring of 2000, but its association with Van-

books by and about him. Bandy's extensive personal collection of books and materials on Baudelaire formed the basis for the Center; today the Bandy Center is one of the most important sites for Baudelaire study in the world.

Since the Bandy Center began in 1968 in Furman Hall, it has grown steadily, and now encompasses not only works related to Baudelaire but also other collections on modern French literature. These include the Gilbert Sigaux Collection on modern French theatre, the Morris Wachs Collection with its emphasis on 18th-century French literature, and the Pascal Pia Collection, which—aside from its preoccupation with avant-garde art, literature and culture—proves difficult to categorize at all. It is this collection that contains the miniature books.

The Pia Collection, which numbers about 20,000 titles, was a personal collection assembled

by French journalist and literary critic Pascal Pia between 1945 and his death in 1979. A close friend of several leading figures in 20th-century French literature, including Albert Camus and André Malraux, Pia was also

a leading journalist of the French Resistance during World War II. When Pia died, late Vanderbilt French professor Claude Pichois—who knew Pia—arranged with Pia's widow for Vanderbilt to purchase the collection, which arrived on campus in 1982.

Pia's extremely diverse collection, which



derbilt goes back to 1968 when it was founded by its namesake, the late William T. Bandy, who earned bachelor's and master's degrees at Vanderbilt and his Ph.D. at Peabody before spending most of his career as a professor of French at the University of Wisconsin. Bandy was an expert on 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire and an avid collector of

has never been added to since coming to Vanderbilt, contains volumes of poetry, criticism, religious writings, art and philosophy, as well as numerous magazines and newspapers of his time and collections of French songs and musical scores. (Several rare Pia periodicals, which cover the French literary and art scenes, will be displayed in a small Bandy Center exhibition slated for spring 2005.) The collection also includes quite a bit of literary erotica, which was one of Pia's many passions.

"The Pia Collection isn't as focused as Bandy's collection, and it's rather hard to define," explains James S. Patty, professor of French, emeritus. "I suppose you would do so in terms of avant-gardism, the revolution, the left. He was interested in whatever was revolutionary and avant-garde."

"We receive many research requests for this collection," says Mary Beth Raycraft, the Center's assistant director. "The material is so rare, including books inscribed by Camus and Malraux. Some of it is truly one of a kind."

Of the 20,000 Pascal Pia titles, almost three-quarters of them are integrated into the Heard Library's circulating library collections because they are not deemed rare or fragile. Just over 5,000 Pia items, however, such as the periodicals and the miniatures, do not circulate, and they are kept safe in the Library Annex until requested by researchers.

The 51 miniature books were among the items Pascal Pia collected. Each miniature book from the Pia Collection now resides in its own beautifully engineered 6-by-9-by-2-inch box, covered in starched buckram linen, a bookbinding material that makes each box feel scholarly and sturdy. The handsome boxes—clamshells, as they're known in the library trade—were all custom-made, most of them expertly crafted by Vanderbilt conservation technician Charlotte Lew in the

mid-1990s. The boxes are nearly as impressive as the limited-edition artist books they house.

A few of the miniatures reflect Pia's abiding interests in the sacred and the profane. They include, for example, a series of thumb-sized paperbacks published in Geneva that quote the aphoristic wisdom of the Bible, the Koran and French philosophers. They also include a palm-sized paperback called *La Liste Rose* (*The Pink List*), which turns out to be a very comprehensive-looking direc-

ings and abstract shapes. Some are simply maxims or proverbs. Take, for example, *Un Secret* by poet Paul Claudel. The blue-and-gray, 2-by-2½-inch book was printed in 1948 in an edition of 10 copies. Across its four pages it says in effect, "There is a secret / that I am going to give you to be happy. It is to interest yourself passionately / in the thing that you do best and consider it / a holy, sacred thing."

It turns out that "pab" was Pierre-André Benoit (1922–1993), a contemporary of Pia's and quite possibly a friend. A writer and book printer, Benoit once described himself as "the least known author in France but the most illustrated by Picasso and Braque," because he often enlisted the top modern artists of his day (his friends) to illustrate the delicate little books he published, which often featured brief verses and musings by not only himself, but also poets Claudel, René Char, Paul Eluard, and other modern French writers.

"We don't know a great deal about the miniatures," admits Bandy Center Director Patricia Ward. "I can only surmise that Pia was interested in them because of his connections with book production. It's the equivalent of someone in New York City who is at the center of a whole interlocking circle of artists and intellectuals. That's typical of the role Pia played in interacting with this whole scene."

Although the Pia Collection does not contain any miniature books illustrated by Picasso or Braque, each little book certainly qualifies as an exquisite work of art in itself. And all 51 miniatures are of a piece with the idiosyncratic, one-of-a-kind window on French culture that Pascal Pia assembled and—thanks to the Bandy Center—preserved for generations to come.



tory of massage parlors and houses of prostitution across France and its North African colonies.

And now to our mystery books: The most striking of all Pia's miniature books are the 34 that were published and printed—constructed may be a better word—by "pab" between 1948 and 1955 in very limited runs of as little as 10, 20 or 100 copies. Most contain brief, sometimes surreal poetic verses, occasionally illustrated with simple line draw-