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The Jean Hersholt Collection of Anderseniana at the Library of Congress

by Kristi Johnson and Taru Spiegel

Introduction

Hans Christian Andersen was already well known in the United States during his lifetime. Though he wanted to meet his American admirers, fear of accidents at sea kept Andersen from crossing the Atlantic. Three quarters of a century after the author's death, another Dane ensured that a part of Andersen's legacy would remain permanently in America. The Danish American actor, author, and humanitarian, Jean Hersholt, together with his Danish-born wife, Via, donated a treasure trove of Anderseniana to the Library of Congress in 1951. The Library's preeminent collection of Scandinavian materials is often overlooked amidst the institution's 130 million items in more than 400 languages. Andersen scholars in the United States, however, may want to explore the American Hersholt riches before venturing overseas for their research.

The Hersholt Collection contains original manuscripts, letters, first editions, and other items of note, each illustrating significant aspects of Andersen's life. It is not surprising that Hersholt should have collected Andersen materials with such sensitivity and understanding. Like Andersen (1805-1875), Jean Hersholt (1886-1956) was multitalented. Both men could write, act, draw, and converse in several languages. Neither took their remarkable success in life for granted.

Born in Denmark to a well-known Danish show business family, Hersholt had his first silent film role in 1906 at the age of 20. The young actor held jobs on various transatlantic ships as an entertainer, was discovered, and was offered work in the United States where he settled in 1913. After a period of playing movie villains, Hersholt achieved success with his character, "Dr. Christian." As this kindly healer, the actor starred in a popular radio series as well as on screen between 1937 and 1953. Hersholt claimed to have appeared in over 400 films. His deep study and appreciation
of Andersen prompted him to translate more than 160 of the author’s stories into English. A caring and generous individual who wanted to help those less fortunate, Hersholt was President of the Motion Picture Relief Fund. He established the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award given in connection with the Academy Awards to honor those who help the acting profession. Jean Hersholt received Honorary Oscars in 1940 and 1950. He was knighted by the King of Denmark in 1946. Hersholt was married and had one son, also an actor.

The Jean Hersholt Collection and Catalog
Though Hersholt’s initial donation was made in 1951, he bestowed additional gifts during his lifetime. He further enhanced the bequest by interpreting the works in a number of essays. The donation from Jean and Via Hersholt, offered as “a small token of gratitude and love” toward the country of their adoption, was thirty years in the making. Today, the Hersholt materials at the Library of Congress form the largest single collection of Anderseniana in the United States. This unique offering is housed in the Rare Book and Special Collections Division and is available to interested persons. Additional information about access to the materials may be found at www.loc.gov/rr/rarebook.

The collection is best approached first through the ninety-seven page Catalog of the Jean Hersholt Collection of Hans Christian Andersen. The work features descriptions of original manuscripts of Andersen’s tales, an original scrapbook, letters, works printed outside of Denmark in English, French, German, Russian, Spanish, Icelandic, and Swedish, plus presentation copies to notable individuals, and Danish editions published posthumously. While valuable as a set of material objects, the true worth of the collection lies in its power to evoke Andersen’s world.
Highlights of Andersen’s Life and Representative Pieces from the Collection

Highlighting aspects of Andersen’s life through several pieces from the Hersholt Collection, it is important to note that prior to 1819, Andersen’s life experiences centered in Odense—mostly around his family, neighbors, acquaintances, school companions, and teachers. Andersen was not a sheltered child. His father expanded Andersen’s world through literature, puppetry imagination, and story telling. Andersen’s interaction with other family members and neighbors led to an interest in books, reading, thinking, and expanding his mind. In addition, Andersen showed signs of some musical talent. He had a singing voice that was known to the community. Before leaving Odense in 1819, Andersen played a small role in a visiting Royal Theater production. So it can easily be said that Andersen had a varied life as a young lad.

Once he reached Copenhagen in 1819, Andersen moved into circles of individuals who were educated, professional, and even aristocratic. Many were actively interested in ballet, music, literature, and theater. In August 1822, at the tender age of seventeen, Andersen first published in the magazine Harpen (The Harp). This issue, containing a scene from the author’s dramatic poem, Røverne i Vissenbjerg på Fyn (The Robbers in Vissenbjerg on Funen), is quite rare, and thus among the most valuable items in the Hersholt Collection. Better known is Andersen’s first book, Ungdoms-Forsøg (Youthful Attempts), published pseudonymously by “William Christian Walter” in September 1822. The name William was borrowed from William Shakespeare, and the name Walter from Sir Walter Scott. Only a few copies were sold. Even though it was not a literary success, this work represents an early example of Andersen’s writing, and Hersholt was able to obtain this valuable copy for his personal collection.

Thanks to the encouragement that the Jonas Collin Family gave Andersen, he became a serious published author in the early 1830s. Jonas and his son Edvard were both influential in Andersen’s career path. It was Jonas who supported Andersen’s attendance at a Latin School in Slagelse. Although he eventually matriculated and was eligible to attend the university, Andersen chose not to; instead, he
embarked on a lifetime of writing, traveling, and circulating in the company of learned and colorful individuals.

In 1835 Andersen's first major literary accomplishment, _The Improvisatore_, was published. At this same time, Andersen was traveling in Europe, mostly in Paris, Switzerland, and Italy. He continued to enjoy the company of Edvard Collin. One of the pieces that Hersholt has in his collection is _Eduard og Kunigunde_ (Edward and Kunigunde); Andersen wrote this work, it is believed, between 1833 and 1836. (Catalog, page 18.) This unpublished manuscript is a "burlesque about two young lovers and a heartless father who sends Kunigunde to a cloister. Both she and her lover grieve themselves to death, and when the father learns of this he softens and erects a monument on their grave." (Catalog, page 18.) The manuscript suggests music and stage direction for additional enhancement to the literary text.

**Hersholt's Letter Collection**

The Hersholt Collection contains numerous letters including those of correspondence with Richard Bentley, Henrietta Wulff, Jonas Collin, Mathilde Ørsted, and Horace Scudder. The donation to the Library of Congress contains ten letters to Richard Bentley from 1846 to 1848. Bentley was the British publisher for Charles Dickens until they had a falling out. Bentley and Andersen had a more positive relationship: Bentley published Andersen's works, and they had considerable correspondence with one another.

Other correspondence in Hersholt's collection includes the one with Henrietta Wulff. Henrietta was the daughter of Captain and Mrs. Wulff, another family who befriended Andersen. In all, Hersholt collected eleven letters from Andersen to Miss Henrietta Wulff from 1833 to 1858. The two were clearly endeared to one another. But tragically, Miss Wulff died in 1858 in a fire aboard the ship on which she was traveling to the United States. Miss Wulff's death had a profound impact on Andersen. So much so that Andersen might have traveled to the United States had it not been for his fear of sailing aboard an ocean liner with the possibility of a similar experience.
Another valuable letter that Hersholt acquired was written to Jonas Collin in 1855. (Catalog pages 11 and 12.) A friendly letter, there is considerable value in this piece as it was written to a person who influenced Andersen and who offered him educational, professional, and personal opportunities throughout his life. Jonas Collin was responsible not only for Andersen’s years of formal schooling, but also for financial support on occasions when Andersen needed assistance for continued success in his literary career.

Another single letter of importance is a thank-you letter Andersen wrote in 1868 to Mathilde Ørsted. (Catalog page 12.) Another of Andersen’s female friends, Miss Ørsted was the daughter of the Danish physicist Hans Christian Ørsted, who made Andersen welcome in his home and with his family.

Between 1868 and 1874, Andersen wrote thirty-five letters addressed to Horace E. Scudder. Among other accomplishments, Scudder was editor for The Atlantic Monthly and The Riverside Magazine for Young People. As Andersen’s American editor, Scudder corresponded regularly with Andersen about mutual literary interests.

Figure 2. A page from Andersen’s Picture Book, prepared for Jonas Drewsen.
The Picture Book

One of the most unusual pieces acquired by Hersholt was an original "picture book" put together by Andersen and his friend Adolph Drewsen. Dated 1862, this scrapbook includes hand-colored newspaper pictures as well as other newspaper illustrations and clippings from American, German, and English newspapers. (Catalog, Pages 16-18.) Andersen produced many similar scrapbooks in his lifetime. He enjoyed illustrating, writing poetry connected to specific illustrations, clipping silhouettes (Catalog, p. 15), and most of all scissor clippings based on his fairy tales. The 1862 scrapbook was specifically arranged and designed for Drewsen’s grandson, Jonas Drewsen; thus, a reference to "Jonas and the Whale." Other pages in the scrapbook include a map of Manhattan; a reference to Hyattstown, Maryland, during the Civil War; a reference to the Virginia War; a menu from a Royal celebration; and an image of a Norwegian Stave Church.

An Original Manuscript and A Presentation Copy of Andersen’s Tales

Finally, two additional pieces in the collection are from a period at the end of Andersen’s life. In 1871, Andersen began writing Auntie Toothache, (Tante Tandpine). Autobiographical in nature, Andersen expresses some of the difficulties he had in his later years, namely insomnia and problems with his teeth. (Wullschlager, Page 428.) This original manuscript of Auntie Toothache in the Hersholt Collection was dictated by Andersen to a secretary, but includes Andersen’s signature from 1872. (Catalog, page 2.)

In 1873, Andersen presented an illustrated copy of his fairy tales and stories to Her Royal Highness The Grand Duchess Maria Feodorovna, born Princess Dagmar of Denmark. Andersen inscribed the work: “With all humility I ask you to accept these tales of your childhood home. With sincere gratitude and the very deepest respect. H. C. Andersen.” (Catalog, page 35.) Dagmar was the daughter of Christian IX of Denmark. Married to Czar Alexander III of Russia, she was the mother of Czar Nicholas II.
Additional Treasures from the Hersholt Collection
The Hersholt Collection of Hans Christian Andersen treasures includes other items such as photographs, a sketch of Andersen by Hersholt, and other miscellanea. All in all, the contents illuminate Andersen's life from beginning to end. Representative pieces show Andersen as active and involved with people who shared his interest in the arts. Each piece, filled with remembrances that linger on, can be found in the Rare Book Room at the Library of Congress today thanks to Jean and Via Hersholt.

Figure 3. Pencil drawing of H. C. Andersen by Jean Hersholt.

Note: Three additional illustrations may be found in the color photo section.

References