



DIGITAL ACCESS TO
SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD
DASH.HARVARD.EDU

HARVARD
LIBRARY



"A modest tribute to Widener Library" in "Widener Library: Voices from the stacks"

Citation

Márquez, Francisco. 1996. "A modest tribute to Widener Library" in "Widener Library: Voices from the stacks". Harvard Library Bulletin 6 (3), Fall 1995: 73-76.

Link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42665409>

Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at

<https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFIOWI2M2EwYTg>

Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

A Modest Tribute to Widener Library

Francisco Márquez

A library is never—for lovers of the written word—simply a place for conserving or storing books but rather a sort of living creature, with a personality and even moods which we should understand and learn to live with. A library's rooms, halls, and galleries are suffused not with the silence of the dead but with the massive polyphonic choir of countless voices begging for our attention from every volume. No scholar's biography is complete without a chapter devoted to his marriages, relationships, or love affairs with one or many libraries (think of Marx and the British Museum). In my case the account could be in itself a book, which at times I delight in planning. I would start with my early student years at the University of Seville (Spain), when I became the lonely claimant to a so-called scholarship paying something like two beggarly dollars a month for a number of hours of service at the library. The priceless reward, however, was a key in my pocket, which enabled me to use the library day or night, rain or shine, at my pleasure. The library was a dusty, nineteenth-century artifact, more a tomb of books than anything else, with very few users; only occasionally did it receive a new addition. Still, in the shy company of a harmless snake (cleaner and more efficient than a cat for mice) it became for me a cocoon of freedom, whose close quarters and unlimited browsing gave me countless hours of pleasure, in splendid isolation from the shabbiness of the dictatorship in full swing outside. I lived in its innards and recesses an enchanted life of adventure, which was not only intellectual, as on the day I could have broken my neck: precariously perched on a ladder on a second-floor catwalk, a rickety shelf containing an eighteenth-century edition of the complete works of Metastasio fell like an avalanche on my head. I confess that to this day I have not been able to make peace with that poor, old Metastasio.

This is not, however, the time to sing Leporello's catalogue. Instead, it is an occasion to celebrate an immortal love affair with Widener, that incomparable Beatrice of all libraries. Its loud if mute message, by simply being there, is that learning is endless toil, which allows neither for diversions nor shortcuts. Not simply a building, and not just a place for work, Widener is for me a living monument to the immensity of human achievement, balanced by humility over one's individual effort. Who could be vain, considering that one's own output takes but a few inches in so many miles of shelving? On the other hand, the Harvard Library is not a matter of sheer quantity or numbers, but of quality. It is not just that we have in all the Harvard libraries nearly 13 million volumes at our fingertips; the beauty of it is that, from an academic viewpoint, they are the right ones and the most important 13 million in the world.

FRANCISCO MÁRQUEZ is Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures.

Not lavishness, but an acquisition policy steadily guided by the highest standards in each discipline has made Widener Library, with its nearly 5 million volumes in related libraries, great and unique. Such an immense achievement is in itself a collective task of countless individuals contributing anonymously, year after year, to build what is an asset for the benefit not of a particular community of young and old scholars, but for the present and future of mankind. A priceless pool of expertise has made Widener Library what it is now. Our sacred duty is simply to be worthy of this noble heritage and to continue it on the same successful course.

Widener Library is the setting of endless vigils and toils, but it is also the pleasure dome for that semblance of idleness from which real creativity flows. Moreover, it allows us to shape our own rituals and pleasures: in my case, truaneries like paying a sudden visit to the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Rooms, simply to gratify the eyes in beholding the absolute beauty of the Widener copy of the Gutenberg Bible, the first product of the printing press, as well as its supreme standard of technical perfection. Widener Library means countless and unlimited opportunities for adventure and excitement, one of them the ability to check on the spur of the moment the viability of any wild idea that may cross one's mind. I admit taking this to the stage of interrupting serious work in order simply to play roulette, i.e., going to an unfamiliar area and stretching out an arm to a book or a journal totally at random. In this way I have gained more than one lottery prize; above all, this gamble of mine never fails to refresh my mind, guarding me from parochialism and keeping me receptive to cross-fertilization.

If lofty Widener Library looks like an Olympus of learning, it is also many other humble things, as, for instance, an emergency room of scholarship. I keep answering all the time anguished requests sent by colleagues from around the world, asking for help in locating the obscure article or the book lost or unavailable elsewhere, also arranging for colleagues to visit and then accompanying them to get a card for use of Widener. In giving them elementary instructions as to how to proceed with their work, I often warn that they may experience surprise and even despair at actually seeing and touching the quantity and quality of our holdings. Poor souls who considered themselves well advanced in their research before checking our riches have at times complained to me, with some edge of bitterness that "it's not fair," or that we had "too much to look at." I have also had to perfect the art of the cicerone, agreeing at the beginning on the length of the visit, trying often to keep what could be a whole morning or afternoon to a mere fifteen minutes. I customarily tell them about Harry Elkins Widener and of his mother's active part in planning Harvard's new central library. I lead the visitor to admire the self-supporting stacks, and I find myself at a loss to explain why the idea has not been more widely used. Maybe I look too much the unwarranted landlord in my pride at showing such treasures, and often I have to make my points at the expense of the visitor's well-meaning but misguided tributes. The most common one is, "Well, these Americans had money." My answer is: "No, my friend. What these Americans had was the will to have this kind of library, and the money came later. In other places they wanted instead palatial buildings, marble stairways, regally appointed offices, and they also got them."

The charming oval entrance hall of Houghton, with its memory of the puny Harvard College Library, destroyed by fire in 1764, also provides sure food for thought. "Do you know, for instance, how this would compare with the Palafoxian



The author asked that this work, received 18 February 1966, be ordered because he knew that the second edition was suppressed in Spain: it argued that eternal salvation was the normal fate of human beings and that damnation required true effort.

One of the many books recently transferred to the Harvard Depository.

library that the Mexicans had in Puebla in those same years?" Even visitors from the Spanish-speaking world have very seldom heard of such a glorious monument, whose thousands of volumes planned to represent every branch of knowledge still lie in their beautiful baroque shelves. "Well, look at the difference that a nineteenth century may make if put to some good use, instead of being thrown to the dogs."

It would take me too many pages even to summarize my memories (that spooky black-out of 1966!) and to recount anecdotes of Widener Library. I cannot refrain, however, from telling at least the most unforgettable of the latter, which happened a few months after my arrival at Harvard as a junior faculty member in the fall of 1959. As there were not then collection development officers for special areas, the

Romance Languages Department chairman (the late Professor W. M. Frohock) somewhat apologetically told me in our first meeting that my duties would also include advising the library on spending the funds for Spanish books. There could not have been for me more pleasant news, and I started to snatch to my heart's content old, rare editions, incunabula, journal series, and any interesting item that came on the market. Since, for the moment, nobody was active at Harvard in the field of Spanish fine arts, I appointed myself responsible for filling the lacunae in the very sizable holdings we already had in that field. I did not fail to wonder at the same time that nobody ever mentioned to me the word "budget," but I was sure that such a joyful ride after desiderata could not last very long. When one day a note came from the head librarian for collection development asking me to see him in his office, I knew that the moment of reckoning had come, and I went to the appointment with my repertory of ready-made excuses. The officer, Mr. Philip J. McNiff, received me all smiles, and he hastened to offer me the best seat in his office. He started by saying that he was very satisfied with my services to the library, except for a little problem that we should do our best to solve right away. (There it was, and my heart sank!) Of course, he said, it was such a pity that on occasion some of the most interesting choices had already been sold by the time they were ordered. A new arrangement should be made then with the library personnel to "search" those desirable items with all due speed and then to order them by cable!

Only then did I realize what it meant to be at Harvard University.