



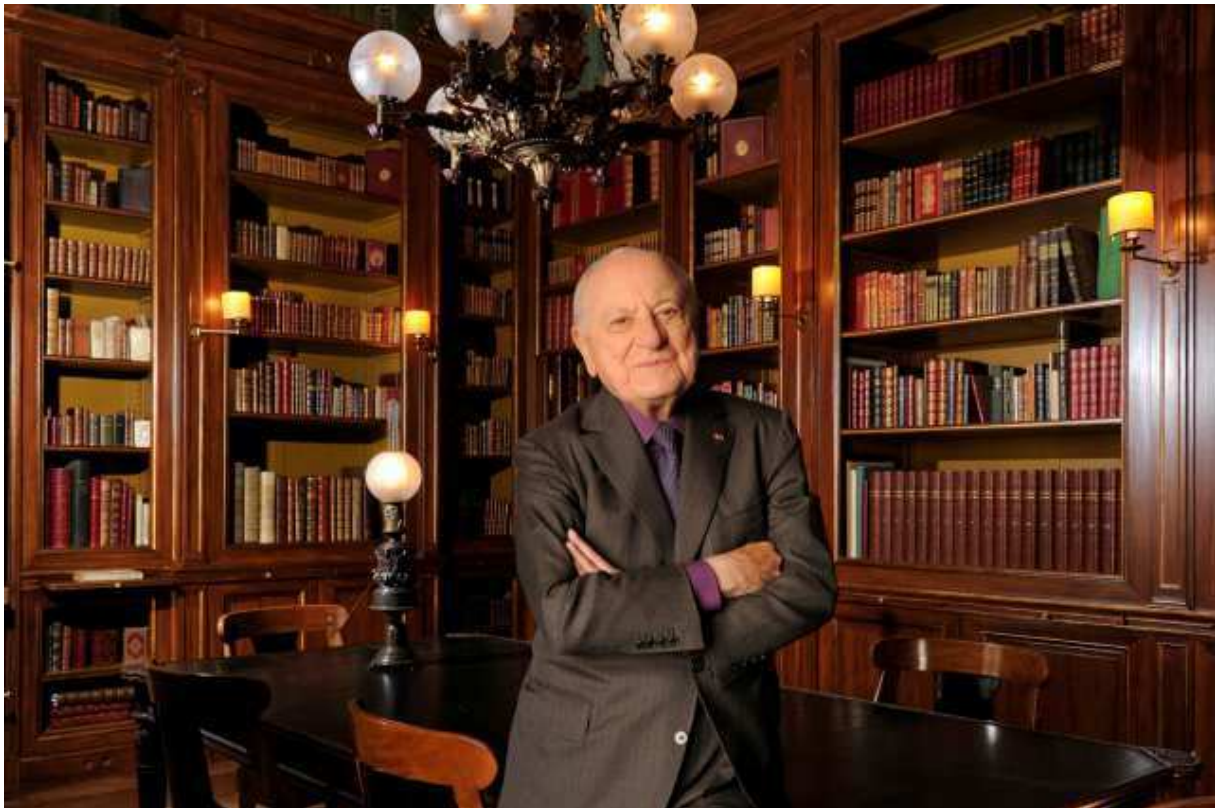
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Pierre Bergé Lifts Curtain on Private Library of Rare Books

By **Miles Socha**

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Pierre Bergé
Dominique Maitre

PARIS — Pierre Bergé is no book snob.

The former couture boss loves paperbacks, prefers to read on a Kindle when on vacation and devours contemporary novels galore — as he judges several literary prizes in France.

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Yet he is equally passionate about his collection of 1,600 rare books, manuscripts and musical scores that he is preparing to auction off, starting Dec. 11 at Drouot in Paris and at six subsequent sales in 2016 and 2017.

A selection of about 60 of the 150 initial lots is to go on display at Sotheby's in New York today through Sunday — providing a glimpse into a highly personal collection amassed over a lifetime.

Interviewed in the cozy library on the second floor of his Paris apartment, Bergé said there's a simple reason why he is parting with tomes that are estimated to sell for as much as \$700,000.

“Because I'll be 85 before the end of the year and one has to be conscious of one's age and think of the future,” he shrugged, seated at the leather-topped table in the center of the room.

Proceeds from the auctions, to be conducted in collaboration by Pierre Bergé & Associés, are ultimately destined for the Fondation Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent, which is to transform into permanent YSL museums in Paris and Morocco in 2017.

“I have no heirs, so I've willed this library to the foundation. It's decided and organized, but I prefer to take care of it myself while I'm still alive,” he added.

Bergé became acquainted with antique books at age 17: His first job was at L'Originale, a bookshop owned by Richard Anacréon on the Rue de Seine. Among his tasks were to scour the booksellers that rim the banks of the Seine, known as “*bouquinistes*,” and search for treasures that could be resold.

“I can't tell you that I learned everything in one year, that's not possible,” he said. “All the same, I learned things, and I never forgot the experience.”

His first important purchase, at age 21, was Gallimard's complete works of Marcel Proust. “It was not a paperback,” he said with a smile.

The money he would amass running Saint Laurent's global fashion empire would help him build the collection, starting in earnest at age 40. Today, it spans everything from a first edition of St. Augustine's “Confessions,” printed around 1470, to William Burrough's “Scrap Book 3” from 1979. The wooden cases reflect an eclectic taste for grand literature across multiple languages, including Russian, English, Italian, Portuguese and German.

Bergé was emphatic that the late Saint Laurent had no interest in his literary leanings, and left him free to assemble the library according to his interests and tastes.

While Bergé appreciates the longevity and beauty of his oldest volumes, pointing out the challenges of publishing and printing books amid strict social mores and technical challenges, he acknowledged that “the text is the text” and to read a paperback version and a more modern translation is more practical. What fascinates him is the journeys made by these ancient books, passing over generations through many hands, some famous — and likely some who never even read them, owning them for prestige “or because it's chic,” he winked.

For example, he showed off a copy of Gustave Flaubert's “Madame Bovary,” remarkable not for its printing wizardry, but for what's written in fountain pen on the first page: a dedication to Victor Hugo.

“For me, it’s very moving to think that, first of all, this is a first edition, the first time it was printed, and this is the copy Victor Hugo owned and the one he read. There’s a back story, and I love that,” he marveled.

Next he produced a small volume, Chamfort’s “Maxims,” from a hard case, and explained that it belonged to the 19th-century French writer known as Stendhal, who is said to have trimmed its cover so he could stuff it in a pocket, and who filled it with his thoughts in florid script.

To be sure, Bergé is an avid collector. While in 2009, Christie’s famously auctioned off the art collection he and Saint Laurent had amassed, netting some 374 million euros, or \$521.2 million at average exchange rates that year, he also boasts collections of skull sculptures known as “vanités,” of 19th-century statuettes known as “Santibelli,” and of African masks.

“I have a lot of respect for collectors,” he said, noting that extends to children who start out with stamps, appreciating not only the beautiful scenery or famous people they often depict, but the romantic connotations: What messages these stamps might have delivered; what journeys they endured. (And yes, Bergé was a stamp collector as a child.) “I will die a collector, of who knows what, maybe matchbooks,” he teased.

Bergé has a particular passion for Flaubert, not only because of the French writer’s influence and stature in global literature.

“There are books you read when you’re young that you love, but when you re-read them as an adult, you may not like them,” he explained. Not so Flaubert. “I loved his books when I was 15, I loved them at 20, I loved them at 30, and I love them in my 80s,” he said.

Among his cache of Flaubert novels is one that was owned by the American writer Henry James, with his address inscribed inside the cover.

Bergé enjoyed a personal friendship with two prominent French writers, meeting Jean Giono at age 18, and, at 24, Jean Cocteau, becoming such close friends with the latter that Bergé was named the godfather of his second child.

Cocteau’s “Le Requiem” from 1962 contains a personal dedication to Bergé. The handwritten message — “I know one must bear one’s cross — mine is heavy. I send you the stream into which we spit,” is the English translation — is cryptic, but not to Bergé, who knew that Cocteau suffered from paranoia towards the end of his career, convinced that people did not appreciate or understand his writings.

That volume is estimated to fetch between 2,000 and 3,000 euros, or about \$2,230 to \$3,350 at current exchange rates. The December sale is estimated to net about 8 million euros, or \$8.9 million at current exchange.

After the New York preview, Berge’s books are to go on display at Sotheby’s in Hong Kong from Oct. 2 to 7 and at Sotheby’s in London from Nov. 6 to 9.

<http://wwd.com/eye/people/pierre-berge-discusses-rare-book-collection-10210876/>