

Washington's Shakespeare treasury

Luke Hughes on the Folger Library where he has redesigned the public furniture

The Folger Shakespeare Library, which houses the world's largest collection of Shakespeariana (as well as many other rare literary materials from 16th-18th century), was officially re-opened on June 21 after a four-year renovation, transforming its historic home next to the Supreme Court on Capitol Hill, Washington DC.

Among the treasures now on display are copies of the Folger's collection of First Folios, first published in 1623, without which 18 of Shakespeare's plays – including *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* – may have otherwise been lost forever. About 750 copies were printed, of which only 235 are known to survive, each worth around £6 million. Five copies are in the British Library, six in the New York Public Library. The Folger, by contrast, has 82 – all now on show in one large display case. The rest of the collection includes some 277,000 books and 60,000 manuscripts.

The private ribbon-cutting ceremony included numerous VIPs, including the Mayor of Washington DC, Muriel Bowser, the Librarian of Congress Dr Carla Hayden, poet Kyle Dargan, Folger Director Michael Witmore and members of the Folger's board of directors. King Charles III wrote a personal letter of congratulations which was read out by Dame Karen Pierce, British Ambassador to the United States.

One of the other official guests was Chief Justice Roberts.

The original building, designed by Philip Cret, was opened in 1932 and has since catered to a rarefied community of scholars and theatre patrons. In 2020 it closed for a £62 million renovation, led by the Philadelphia-based architects, Kieran Timberlake. Most of the Folger's holdings had been housed in a vast underground storage facility and to share more of its



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treasured hoard with the public new galleries were created, adding 12,000 feet of public space underneath the Great Hall and the little theatre, which is itself an echo of The Globe.

I was appointed to redesign much of the furniture in the public areas, especially the Reading Room and conference rooms, largely on account of experience on previous projects with Yale University's Sterling Library, the British Library, Oxford's Bodleian Library, the Cambridge University Library, the London Library, the UK Supreme Court Library, and about 20 other schools and colleges. Nevertheless, the brief from the Folger has undoubtedly been one of the most prestigious and the most stimulating – the books and objects in the collections are simply staggering. It is an honour to have played a part in helping to make them accessible for the next century or so.

The inaugural show in the galleries, *Imprints in Time*, displays 52 works documenting some of the greatest achievements of writing and creativity across many centuries, including an Egyptian *Book of the Dead* from the first century BCE; a first edition of Nicolaus Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus* (1543), which first proposed the heliocentric view of our planetary system; a first edition of the most notorious banned book of the 17th century – Galileo Galilei's *Dialogo*, which defended Copernicus's view of the solar system and was inscribed by Galileo himself; J.R.R. Tolkien's page proofs, corrected in his hand, for *The Lord of the Rings*; an advance press copy of Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech; and a section of the Apollo 11 flight plan that Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin had with them on the moon.

Garrick members may be intrigued to see the first trade edition of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, inscribed by author

A. A. Milne to his son. "For Moonest Moon and Poohest Pooh, from their adoring Bluest Blue (Oct 16th, 1926)".

The Folger Library was opened by Henry and Emily Folger, philanthropists of the Gilded Age who spent their oil fortune obsessively collecting all these materials, apparently motivated to create a monument in America's capital on the basis that "the Founding Fathers similarly adored Shakespeare, seeing in his tyrants the need for institutional checks on power".

The power of Shakespeare's admonitions must be waning. Only a week later, on June 30th, Chief Justice Roberts and his fellow justices in the Supreme Court just across the street ruled that presidents have absolute immunity from criminal prosecution for those official acts which fall within their "exclusive sphere of constitutional authority".

One wonders what drama Shakespeare would have written about that.