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Ornate Bible a special addition to Special Collections

On a Friday afternoon in early spring, a small but enthusiastic group gathered on the second floor of the James B. Duke Library to celebrate a gift to Furman that, according to Special Collections director Debbielee Landi, “defies category.”

The object of their affection: a Greek Orthodox Bible encased in an intricately crafted cover molded from gold, platinum and other precious metals. The front of the Bible casing depicts the crucifixion; the resurrection of Christ, surrounded by the apostles and angels, is hand-carved on the back side.

The cover is set against a velvety scarlet background. Like most great works of art, it’s a piece you can get lost in.

“It could be classified as a religious artifact or religious art. It defies category,” says Landi. “Regardless, the Bible and cover [appraised at $19,800] represent the most significant donation to Special Collections in recent memory.”

More compelling than the gift, though, is the story of how it came to the university.

During a July 2006 trip to Santorini, Greece, to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary, Robert Schwartz, a Greenville physician, and his wife, Sheri, were window shopping when they discovered a jewelry store owned by Kostas Antoniou, a famed artist and jeweler.

Venturing into the store, the Schwartzes befriended Antoniou, who invited them to join him at his home for dinner. When they arrived they saw the Bible on display — and learned that it had taken Antoniou nearly two months to complete.

“I was enamored by its sheer beauty,” says Schwartz. “It was encased in a glass box that was mounted on a clear pedestal, with an overhead light shining down on it. The display enhanced its brilliance. It took me less then a nano-second to tell myself, ‘I want that!’”

The Schwartzes, both art enthusiasts, returned home with the Bible. But while they enjoyed showing it to friends, they eventually became uneasy about showcasing it in their home.

The Schwartzes are Jewish. Their oldest son, in fact, is studying to be a rabbi. After much thought, they decided to donate the Bible to charity. But where?

At the time their second son, Austin, was a senior at Greenville Tech Charter High School and was preparing to write his senior paper — an intense academic project required for graduation — on the topic of religion and science.

While searching the Internet for information, he happened upon the name of David Rutledge, chair of Furman’s Department of Religion and an authority on the subject. Austin sent an e-mail to Rutledge, and while many professors might ignore an unsolicited note from a high school student, Rutledge did not. He ultimately agreed to serve as Austin’s advisor for the paper.

During the 2006-07 academic year, Austin and Rutledge attended several lectures together. Rutledge also introduced the young Schwartz, who is now a rising sophomore at Clemson University, to Nobel Laureate Charles Townes ’35.

Austin eventually mentioned the Bible to Rutledge. The Furman professor, who speaks Greek and has traveled to Greece, arranged a meeting with Robert Schwartz. Later, he helped connect the doctor with Landi.

“We decided to donate it to Furman and have been deeply honored by the warm reception it has received ever since,” says Schwartz.

While the gift is currently in storage, Landi is planning an exhibition for early 2009 that will feature the Bible as its centerpiece.

— JOHN ROBERTS

This article appeared in the spring edition of Inside Furman, the internal campus newsletter.