

From the Office of Public Relations
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139
Telephone: 864-6900, Ext. 2705

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An 1855 first edition of Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," part of the type for which the poet set himself, was presented to the Libraries of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Monday as a symbol of the M. I. T. library system's having passed the one-million volume mark.

The highly valued and rare book was the gift of Mr. I. Austin Kelly, III, a member of the M. I. T. Class of 1926. The official presentation was made by Mr. Kelly to M. I. T. President Howard W. Johnson at the annual M. I. T. Alumni Day Luncheon.

Mr. Kelly is a renowned collector of rare books and has presented many from his collection to the M. I. T. Libraries on previous occasions. Earlier gifts have included original works by Renaissance scientists, among them Galileo Galilei.

Having now passed the one-million volume mark, the M. I. T. Libraries join some 55 other major university research libraries in the U. S. with that many books or more.

The 1855 edition of "Leaves of Grass" was the first printing of what was to become--through revision and addition--Whitman's greatest collection of poetry. There were about 1,000 copies printed, but only a few sold. The balance were lost.

Tradition says that Whitman, a journalist at the time unemployed, paid for the 1855 printing and binding himself. The printing was done in the shop of Andrew and Joseph Rome at Ferry and Cranberry Sts., Brooklyn, N. Y. The Romes were friends of Whitman and the poet assisted in setting the type.

It is the only edition published under Whitman's direction to contain what is known as "the 1855 preface"--a long and lyrical narrative about the role of the poet in life. A copy of the 1855 edition came to the attention of the Boston literary giant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who saw genius in the work and used his own energies to bring Whitman to public attention and acclaim. When the second edition of "Leaves of Grass" was issued in 1856, the poet omitted the 1855 preface and substituted for it an open letter dedicated to Emerson. But Whitman dipped back into the lyrical rhythms of the 1855 preface for poetical phrases that he would use in later works.

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The 1855 edition is a thin quarto volume of 95 pages, more than half of which is taken up by the preface. The binding is green cloth stamped with designs of roots, leaves and small flowers.

There are 12 poems in the book, all untitled. It was not until later in his life, in subsequent revisions and editions, that Whitman gave titles to his poems. The opening poem in the 1855 edition, which Whitman later was to title "Song of Myself" and which was to become one of his most famous, begins with the lines:

"I celebrate myself,

"And what I assume you shall assume,

"For every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you."

Whitman tinkered with the first line of that poem later in his life so that it now reads: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself..."

But not in that very first 1855 edition, a copy of which now symbolizes what Professor William N. Locke, Director of the M. I. T. Libraries, calls "our coming of age"--an M. I. T. library system with more than a million books.