

The Pedro Grases Library

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THE PEDRO GRASES LIBRARY

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The private library of Don Pedro Grases in Caracas will soon be relocated at the Universidad Metropolitana in that city. Clearly one of the finest private libraries in Venezuela, and probably the best collection of modern Venezuelan materials anywhere, these books will become the core of a Venezuelan research institute at the Universidad Metropolitana. The donation of this library is especially significant, for it guarantees the preservation of this fine collection and promises the continuing availability of these materials. Although the transition from private collection to university library will take some time—for cataloging, organizing, transferring, and the like—it is appropriate now to survey this monument to bibliographic persistence and academic excellence.

Unlike the collections of some bibliophiles, this one has always been conceived and maintained as a working research library. It is not devoted to pretty books or rare and expensive editions; there are no Gutenberg bibles and few luxurious editions of famous works. The guiding philosophy of this library is prosaic, practical, and, for all that, quite profound. Pedro Grases has spent almost four decades trying to accumulate in one place everything published on or about Venezuela, by Venezuelans, or related to the affairs of Venezuela. That he has succeeded so well is a testimony to the man's energy, intelligence, and diplomacy. As all Venezuelanists know, books in that country can be published and go out of print before the title is announced to the public; scholarly tomes can appear and never be distributed; works of literature and history can be published by all kinds of unlikely government and private agencies; and no institution has been able to keep track of what has become an increasingly prolific publishing industry. Through an incredibly complex net of personal and professional relationships, an extraordinary capacity for work, and a passion for scholarship, Pedro Grases has kept up with these publications and has brought them together in his exceptional library.

Like most private libraries, this one reflects the intellectual interests of its creator. Pedro Grases' first love was Hispanic letters, and his library has extensive collections of Romance philology, Hispanic literature, and the like. But the Spanish Civil War moved him from the Old World to the New, and it introduced him to his second love, Venezuelan life and letters. The Venezuelan section of his library is, of course, what makes the collection unique. Its strengths are obvious: The library has a virtually complete collection of items on Venezuelan history published since the mid-1930s; it has a complete collection of the important Venezuelan serial publications of documents, authors, institutional series,

and the like; it has virtually complete runs of Venezuelan scholarly and intellectual journals; and there is a complete collection of Venezuelan reference bibliographies, dictionaries, guides, indexes, and so forth. Because Pedro Grases has always seen Venezuelan culture and history within its Hispanic context, his library contains significant selections of works on Spanish and Spanish American history and culture, including a good collection of reference works and many complete runs of important journals.

Grases has reconciled the dual intellectual preoccupations of Venezuelan history and Hispanic letters through a long-term involvement with the life and works of that great pensador of the early national period, Don Andrés Bello. The library reflects this lifetime of interest with an exceptionally complete collection of *bellosismo*.

This, then, gives a bare summary of what a student might find in the 65,000 items in the Don Pedro Grases library. But it fails to convey one of the principal features of the library, and that is the relationship of the collector to his books. For Pedro Grases, the rambling Spanish-style library at the Quinta Villafranca in Caracas has been a haven of tranquility midst the noisy, fractious, dynamic world of Venezuelan affairs. Among his books, Don Pedro has always felt secure as with good friends. Fully realizing the artificiality of the tranquil world he has created there, he nevertheless has always relished the retreat it offers from the insistent and conflicting demands of intellectual life in modern Venezuela. It is a loving library, very personal and cared for with devotion.

In recent years Grases has agonized over the disposition of his collection, for a library of this magnitude ceases to be a mere personal possession. More than others, Grases recognized the obligation the library placed on him, an obligation to see that this magnificent collection never be dispersed. The alternatives were many. Some counseled a quick sale to a United States research library, of which there were several bidders. While such a solution might guarantee careful maintenance and the collection's integrity, Grases could never bring himself to send his beloved library into foreign exile. A library of *venezoliana* belonged, he maintained, in Venezuela. Others suggested a sale to a Venezuelan educational institution, but this too failed to satisfy the incurably romantic bibliophile. To sell the library seemed to betray the basic premise of a lifetime of bibliographical work. It implied a profit motive totally absent in reality. In the end, Grases donated the library to the university that would agree not only to maintain the integrity of the collection but also to establish a research institute around it. Thus, the Biblioteca Pedro Grases goes as a gift to the Metropolitana. It stays in the country that made it possible for Grases to create it, and it will serve as the nucleus of a research center dedicated to the study of Venezuelan culture and history.