Getting High at Houghton

**Houghton Library** is letting it all hang out. “Altered States: Sex, Drugs, and Transcendence in the Ludlow-Santo Domingo Library” offers pornographic comics and French erotica, along with glimpses of psychoactive drug use by Thomas De Quincey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge through their books and letters. Or, attend the show just for the sensational graphics for pulp-fiction books like *Marijuana Girl* and *Hippie Sex Communes*.

The 120 objects on display through December 16 are from private collector and jet-setter Julio Mario Santo Domingo, who died in 2009. Over many years, he amassed more than 100,000 items reflecting a range of fascinations: drugs, social taboos, sexuality, counterculture rebellion, nineteenth-century French culture and literature, the occult, and “the juxtaposition of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures,” says show organizer Leslie A. Morris, curator of modern books and manuscripts. “He was very rich and interested in botany, how poppies were grown, the medicinal uses, legal constraints.” Still, she believes it’s the first time Houghton has posted a “parental discretion” disclaimer at the door.

Harvard received more than 50,000 of the items in 2012 and dispersed them, by subject, among several of its libraries. A separate exhibit of Santo Domingo materials at the Schlesinger Library, “Altered Gazes: Sex, Drugs, and Rock & Roll” (October 2-January 19), explores women’s roles in making and using counterculture products.

The Houghton exhibition reflects the unwieldy scope of the original collection and takes a broad view of humans’ age-old search for a “high”—something, anything, that’s more enticing than quotidian life. *Orgy Town*, a 1961 paperback, promises “a wild weekend of jazz and junk in a hotbed of sex.” A section on cocaine includes the decadent-looking collector’s edition of *Snowblind*, by Damien Hirst, Howard Marks, and Robert Sabbag; it features mirror covers, an AmEx card to cut the nose candy, and a dollar bill rolled up for snorting it. These objects, and the early cartoons of super-sized sex organs and hyperbolic public campaigns against drug use seem funny, in hindsight.

Morris balances the human urge toward excess with the realities of sexual exploitation and addiction. There’s a haunting photograph of a prostitute in an 1892 diary by French poet and writer Pierre Louÿs that details his sex life. Dutch artist Ed van der Elsken’s *Amsterdam?* (1984) captures a junkie shooting up. In a letter to his publisher, De Quincey, author of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), notes his dependence on laudanum. “I never know at present for a minute that tranquility which you and most men know constantly…”

Most men in my situation would have committed suicide long ago.”

—N.P.B.

Images courtesy of Houghton Library

because they already know the traditions.” But members of both groups do come out for periodic movie nights, as well as the lively monthly Turkish Coffee Nights featuring book discussions, concerts, and guest speakers.

In Canton, the Irish Cultural Centre of New England sits on 46 acres and aims to “serve as a focal point for the expression of Irish culture through a variety of activities, events, and programs, which promote and showcase Irish culture” across the region.

In addition to the Boston Irish Festival, held every June, it offers classes in Irish language and history, and music and dance (tin whistle, fiddle, bodhrán, and accordion; and set dancing and percussive stepping), along with dramatic performances and readings of Irish plays and books. For sports enthusiasts, there are summer games (hurling and Gaelic football) played through the Northeast Division of the Gaelic Athletic Association. And the pub on site, open on weekends, features traditional Irish sessions on Friday nights.

For German language and culture, the Goethe-Institut Boston has been around since 1967. Its historic Back Bay townhouse, closed for renovations at the end of September, to reopen next summer, but a full line-up of language classes and events is being held elsewhere, according to cultural program curator Karin Oehlenschläger.

The organization has strong ties to Boston’s artistic and academic communities, and regularly sponsors lectures, book and film gatherings, philosophical talks, and culinary events. Gatherings this fall included an art exhibit and a panel discussion of the ramifications of the German elections. On November 5, as part a continuing German film series at the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline, rising director Julia Langhof will be on hand for a screening of her movie *LOMO: The Language of Many Others* (2017), about an adolescent boy grappling with questions of identity.