

# Thinking man's mystery: Stolen Descartes letter returned (Update)

June 8 2010

---

A stolen letter written by 17th-century thinker Descartes and found in the United States was returned to France on Tuesday, ending a detective tale featuring a Google search and a thieving Italian count.

"I am, of course, a bit amazed at what a simple search at home from your home computer late at night can bring about," Erik-Jan Bos, a Dutch Descartes scholar who found the letter through the web, said before a handover ceremony.

The letter written by French philosopher Rene Descartes in 1641 went missing more than 150 years ago, one of a vast collection of documents stolen by an Italian count, Guglielmo Libri.

Libri, a math professor in France in the 19th century who was also in charge of inspecting archived papers, is believed to have stolen thousands of letters and documents, selling them to collectors and booksellers.

Descartes' letter eventually wound up in a collection at Haverford College in the US state of Pennsylvania, and the school's administration was not aware of its theft generations earlier when Bos informed them of it.

Bos found the letter's trace after keying the terms "autographed letter" and "Descartes" into the search engine late one night in January, contacting the college immediately by email and hearing back soon after.

The letter was important not only because it was from Descartes, writing to his friend Marin Mersenne, who was acting as an editor for him as well, but also because it contained significant substance.

In the letter, the author of the famous statement "I think, therefore I am" discusses his soon to be published "Meditations on First Philosophy," writing of potential changes, among other things.

The school knew the letter was in its library's special collections, but did not realise it was considered missing in France and had been stolen.

John Anderies, head of special collections at Haverford, notified the school's president and recommended it be given back to the Institut de France, where one of the country's oldest libraries is located and where the letter was taken from.

For Anderies and Haverford President Stephen Emerson, the question of what to do with it was a moral one -- even though a legal case could likely be made for hanging on to it.

"Personally, I thought that if the shoe had been on the other foot, that if material had been stolen from our library, we would be very grateful if it were returned," Anderies said. "So, in that sense, it is a very easy decision."

Everyone hasn't seen it that way. In fact, Libri, convicted in absentia in France after fleeing to England, is believed to have stolen 72 of 75 archived letters from Descartes to Mersenne.

One Descartes letter was auctioned in Switzerland recently, and the Institut de France could not come up with the 150,000 euros (179,000 dollars) needed to buy it back, said Mireille Pastoureau, library director at the institute.

Emerson said he believed returning the letter was an obvious choice -- though he had personal reasons for wanting to keep it.

He had been a philosophy student and recalled reading "Meditations" in both English and French, saying it was one of the great works of Western philosophy.

"So I went over to read (the letter)," he said. "And it was great."

But he did not hesitate. With the decision to return it made, the four-page letter was encased in a wooden box, allowing the university president to take it with him on his flight to Paris this week.

On Tuesday, he, Anderies, Bos, French philosopher and Descartes expert Jean-Luc Marion, along with others, took part in a handover ceremony at the Institut de France.

The Americans did not leave completely empty-handed: The institute awarded their school a 15,000-euro grant for the letter's return.

(c) 2010 AFP

Citation: Thinking man's mystery: Stolen Descartes letter returned (Update) (2010, June 8) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-06-mystery-stolen-descartes-letter.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--