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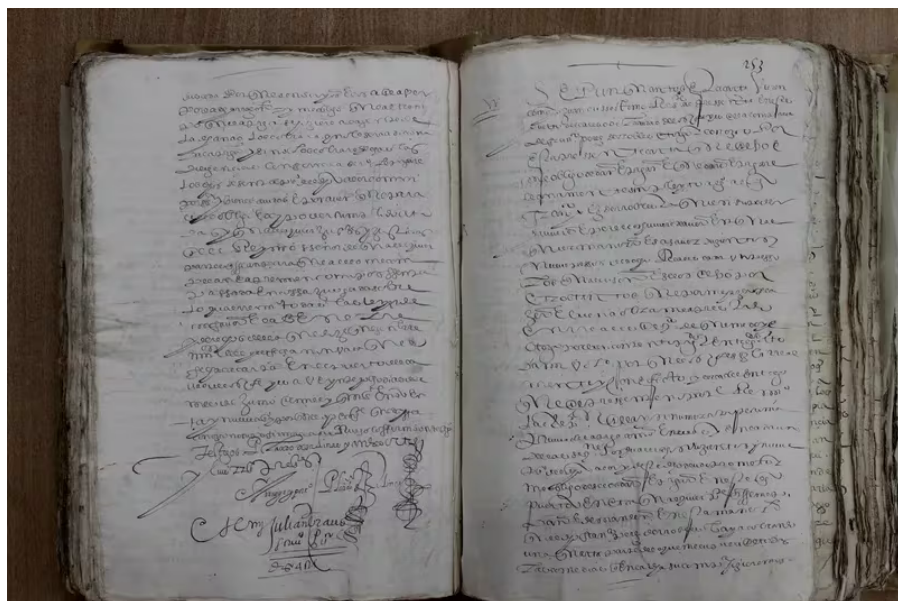
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ARTS & CULTURE



A stolen manuscript from the 16th century mysteriously resided at the Rosenbach for more than a century. Now, the pages will return to Peru.

The "earliest record of any theatrical company in the Western Hemisphere" may have been bought legitimately but they were stolen from a book located in the Peruvian archives.



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The 1599 manuscript was cut out of a large book of historical notarized documents that resides in the Archivo General de la Nación del Perú (the Peruvian National Archives).

Courtesy of U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Pennsylvania

by Rosa Cartagena

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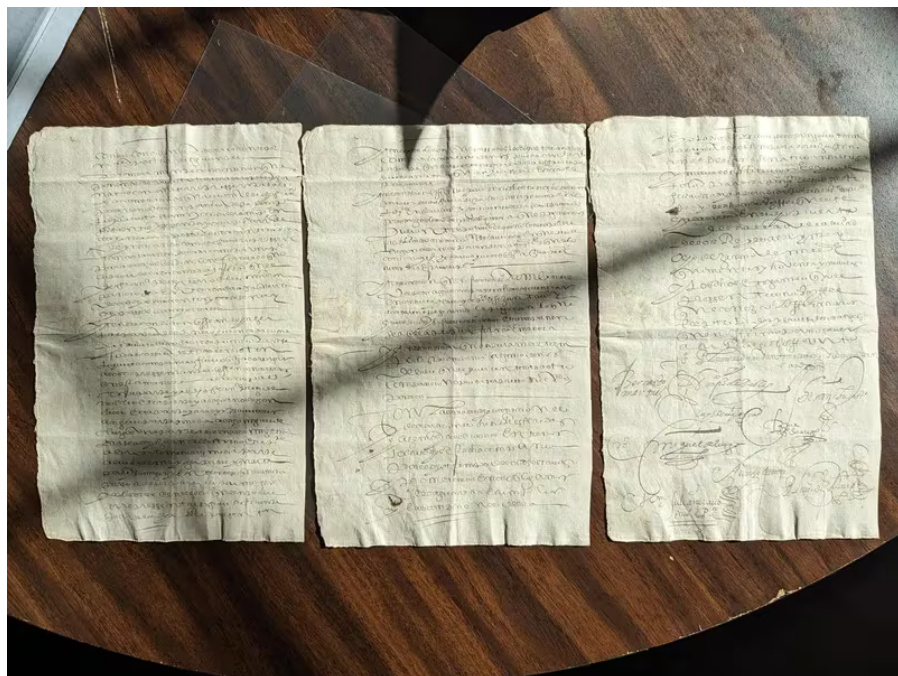
In the 1920s, renowned Philadelphia book collector A.S.W. Rosenbach purchased prints and ephemera from an American expat living in Peru. The collection included six pages from a 1599 manuscript, which,

Rosenbach learned, detailed groundbreaking history about the origins of theater in the Americas. What he didn't know — and never knew — was that the manuscript had been stolen.

The 16th-century document might have remained under the radar — and in Philadelphia — had it not been for Seattle-based theater scholar Susan Finque, who made the discovery that prompted an international investigation and changed how we think about the history of American theater.

After a century of emerging only on rare occasions at the Rosenbach Museum & Library, the pages were brought out one final time in November.

Packaged in acid-free folders of Mylar for safe transport, they were handed over to agents from the FBI Art Crime Team in Philadelphia. The United States [will ultimately repatriate the stolen pages to Peru](#), where they will be reunited with the tome from which they were mysteriously cut decades ago.



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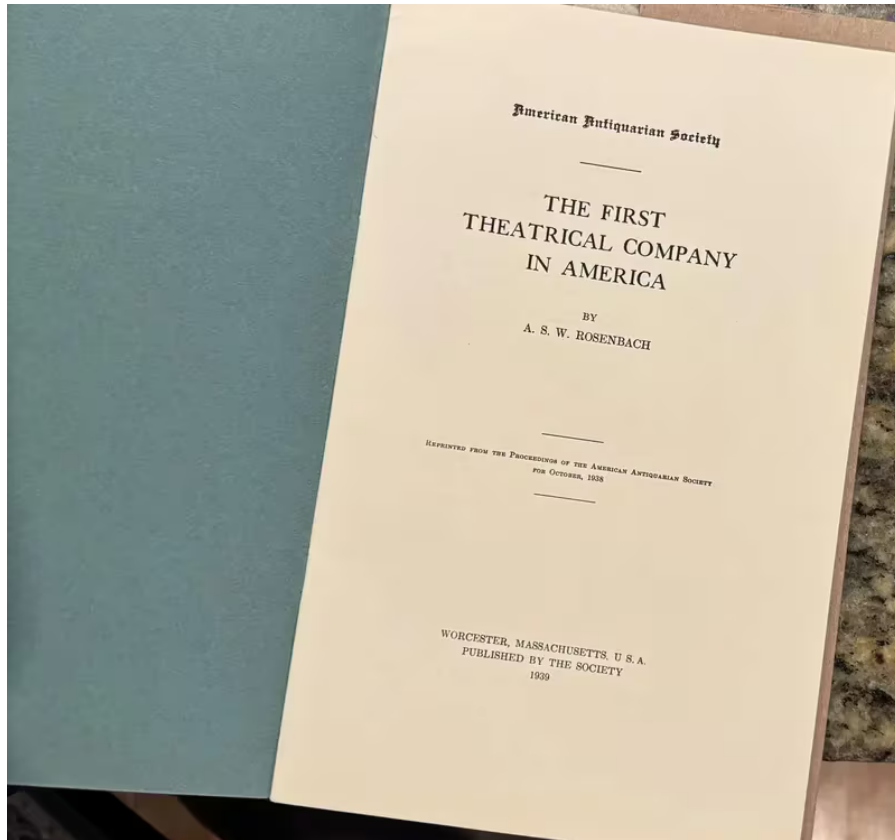


This manuscript from 1599 is a contract for the formation of the earliest known professional theater company in the Americas. A.S.W. Rosenbach purchased these pages in the 1920s without ... [Read more](#)
Courtesy of U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Pennsylvania

The jaw-dropping pamphlet

Finque, 66, calls herself a “recovering theater artist.” In her 50s, she returned to school to pursue a Ph.D. in theater history at the University of Washington, and during her research on Peru’s history of processions, she stumbled upon a 1938 pamphlet written by Rosenbach. It was called “The First Theatrical Company in America.”

The pamphlet examined the pages from 1599, which Rosenbach explained constituted a contract for a professional theater company formed in the port of Callao, just outside Lima. “This hitherto unknown document is the earliest record of any theatrical company in the Western Hemisphere. Nothing has previously been known in the annals of the theatre in the New World of this first association of actors,” he wrote.



In 1938, Rosenbach published this pamphlet on the 1599 Peruvian manuscript, titled "The First Theatrical Company in America."

Susan Finque

The contract detailed the division of shares among the company members and was signed by eight professional actors. Francisco Perez de Robles was the troupe’s manager, and the contract was notarized by Julián Bravo on June 28, 1599. “The names of these first American actors should be enrolled among the immortals of the New World,” wrote Rosenbach.

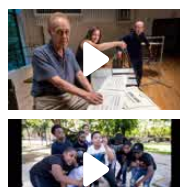
“Reading this pamphlet, my jaw dropped open,” said Finque.

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If Rosenbach's assessment were true, Finque realized, the history of theater was staggeringly inaccurate. Historically, American theater history begins in 1752, when [Lewis Hallam](#) founded what is considered to be the first professional theater company in the British colonies. These pages provided evidence that shifted the axis of this history to South America more than 150 years before Hallam crossed the Atlantic.

Even more shocking was that the company included two women: Isabel de Los Angeles, wife of Perez de Robles, and the unnamed wife of Luis de Mayorga. Not only were they stage actors, they were *paid* actors entitled to their own shares. Women of the same era were often prohibited on European stages, and male actors portrayed women in William Shakespeare's plays.

The missing pages

In 2015, suspecting there was more to unravel, Finque traveled to Philadelphia to view the contract herself. She developed a dissertation on this overlooked troupe and made her way to Peru the following year. While perusing a book of notarized documents in the Archivo General de la Nación del Perú (the Peruvian National Archives), she made an observation: Three double-sided pages were missing.



Theater history scholar Susan Finque at the Archivo General de la Nación del Perú (the Peruvian National Archives) in 2016.

Susan Finque

"It couldn't be more obvious. There was even a little comment written

that said something about *el contrato*, the contract, with a little arrow,” said Finque. The page numbers aligned with the contract she had seen in Philadelphia.

Finque wrote to the archives’ director, Pablo Alfonso Maguiña Minaya, explaining her observation and her ambitious goal to help return the contract to Peru: “I hope that with my help, the directors of the Rosenbach will understand the importance of bringing the document into the light, so that the history of theatre, and indeed, culture, in the Americas can be properly understood.”

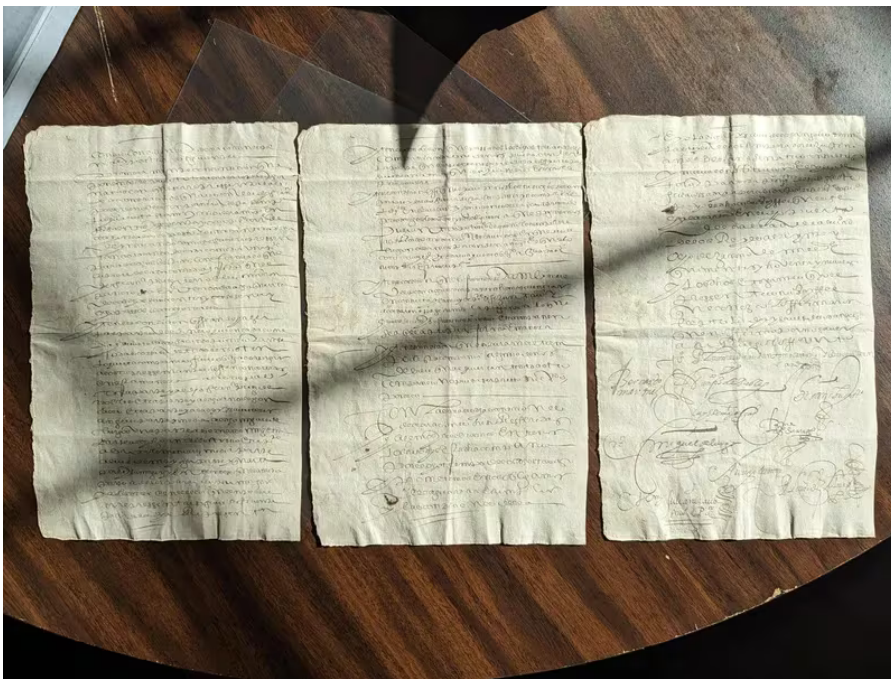
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She heard nothing back for years.

A surprising call

Finque’s letter eventually landed on the desk of Assistant U.S. Attorney K.T. Newton, who works with the FBI’s Art Crime Team in Philadelphia. The State Department had reached out to her after receiving an inquiry from Peruvian officials. Following Finque’s discovery, they had conducted their own investigation and requested that the United States assist in recovering the missing pages. One of the first necessary steps was for Peru to file a police report, though they didn’t have much information about when or how the manuscript was stolen. That prompted the FBI and Newton to begin investigating in 2017.



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Newton contacted the Rosenbach and showed them all the evidence: pointing to the similar handwriting, the page numbers, and the cut marks. She called Finque, who was surprised to hear that her hopes for seeing the contract returned to Peru could become reality. She also tried to find out more about art dealer Bertram Lee, who sold the pages to Rosenbach, and how he acquired them. Ultimately, nobody knows what happened.

“[Lee] may have purchased them legitimately,” said Newton. “We simply don’t know. Certainly there’s no information at all to think that Dr. Rosenbach had any reason to think that they had been taken from the archives.”

Parting with Philadelphia

Once the investigation’s results became clear, the Rosenbach voluntarily removed the manuscript from the collection and gave it to the FBI for repatriation. As for the collection’s other items from Peru, museum officials remain unsure exactly how many were derived from Lee.

“We wanted to do what seemed to us to be the ethical thing to do, which was to return this document to Peru, whence it came a long time ago, and to make the volume whole,” said Judith Guston, curator and senior director of collections.

Newton said there’s no timeline yet for when the manuscript will travel to Lima, but when it does, there will likely be a repatriation ceremony to

celebrate. As for Finque, she's elated to know that her research made an impact — and with the pages of the contract heading home, she thinks the Rosenbach has something to brag about.



Rosa Cartagena [✉](#) [🐦](#)

I write about arts, entertainment, and culture in Philly.

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