

COLUMBIA | MAISON FRANÇAISE

Columbia University Maison Française Director Shanny Peer Receives French Legion of Honor Award and Garners \$2 Million Gift from Florence Gould Foundation



New York, January 24, 2023 — Shanny Peer, Director of [Columbia University's Maison Française](#), was awarded the French Legion of Honor on January 9, 2023, in a formal ceremony held at the Cultural Services of the French Embassy on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, hosted by Cultural Counselor of the French Embassy Gaëtan Bruel and Consul General of France Jérémie Robert. The award was bestowed by the Consul General on behalf of the President of the French Republic. The distinction coincides with the recent gift of \$2 million made by the Florence Gould Foundation to the Columbia Maison Française, directed by Dr. Peer since 2009.

The Legion of Honor (*Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur*) was founded by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 to recognize eminent accomplishments of service to France. It has outlived two empires, two restored monarchies, and five republics and remains today France's premier presidential award. The Legion of Honor may be given to foreign (non-French) citizens in recognition of actions benefitting the country of France or, more broadly, achievements which uphold its ideals. American honorees include James Baldwin, Eleanor Roosevelt, Julia Child, and Martin Scorsese, as well as many American WWII veterans who fought on French soil.

Shanny Peer holds a Ph.D. in French Studies from NYU. Previously in her career, she taught French history and culture for 10 years at the University of Vermont and then NYU, publishing an award-winning book

and garnering a distinguished teaching award, and then worked as the Director of Public Policy Programs at the French-American Foundation.

In presenting her with the insignia of *Chevalier* of the Legion of Honor, Consul General Jérémie Robert said, “Among the ideals we hold most dear is the importance of culture, the arts, and education—an ideal that you, Shanny, have dedicated your career to upholding and defending,” adding, “This award is a testimony to your profound and lifelong dedication to strengthening the Franco-American relationship.” Mr. Robert spoke about the important role of the Columbia Maison Française in promoting understanding between France and the U.S.: “The Maison Française which you have directed since 2009 is a pillar of French culture and the French language here in New York, that resonates broadly... it is, and you are, a key force in promoting Franco-American dialogue.” He concluded by saying, “Throughout your rich career, you have made a tremendous contribution to bilingual education, global scholarship, and French-American cultural exchange, and it is a real privilege to honor you on behalf of the President of the French Republic.”

In accepting the Legion of Honor medal, Dr. Peer commented on how much her life has been enriched by a deep, lifelong engagement with French ideas and culture, and noted that in her most recent chapter, “it’s been such a great pleasure to join in with the long tradition of French studies at Columbia, working with remarkable colleagues, and to help create at the Maison Française a welcoming space and community of ideas where we have the honor of inviting and engaging with some of the most interesting scholars and thinkers, public figures, artists and filmmakers from France and other French-speaking countries—and introducing them to eager audiences at Columbia.”

When presenting Dr. Peer with a previous distinction as *Chevalier* in the French Order of Arts and Letters in 2013, Former French Cultural Counselor Antonin Baudry said, “One hundred years ago, the first Maison Française was founded in America at Columbia. It has since become a beacon of knowledge and inspiration... the Maison Française and Shanny’s immense contributions shine brightly between continents: they are the ‘light of the world’ for French culture in America.” Today, Columbia University’s [Department of French](#) and Maison Française often partner closely with [Villa Albertine](#), the French cultural institution launched by the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs in 2021. Columbia has garnered status as one of the French Embassy’s official *Centres d’Excellence* — premier higher education institutions for French learning in the United States.

The timing of Dr. Peer’s French Legion of Honor award coincides with another major testament to her role in making Columbia’s Maison Française a “beacon” of French studies in the United States: the Maison Française has just been rewarded with a remarkable gift of \$2 million from the Florence Gould Foundation, doubling the size of its endowment, that will create a legacy of support for the activities of the Maison Française for many years to come.

The Florence Gould Foundation has been supporting Franco-American cultural exchange in the United States since its creation shortly after the death of Mrs. Gould in 1983. The directors of the Foundation, under the leadership of John R. Young until his death in November 2019, regularly provided grants to Columbia University, in particular to support the Maison Française under the direction of Shanny Peer. Joan Murtagh Frankel, a Director of the Florence Gould Foundation (and Columbia Law School graduate in the class of 1972) said that this endowment gift, made in connection with the termination of the Gould Foundation, is intended to maintain the world-class experience that the Maison Française offers and allow its programs to continue and develop for the benefit of future students, faculty and visiting scholars at Columbia.

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