

From: Brian Platt, Chair, Department of History and Art History

To: Jack Censer, Dean, CHSS

Re: Dr. Sean Takats's promotion to Associate Professor, with tenure

Date: November 25, 2012

Sean Takats completed his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan in 2005. He worked at the Department of History and Art History's Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (RRCHNM) as a research professor for one year before taking a tenure-track appointment in fall 2007. Since then he has performed his work with distinction. The tenured faculty of the Department of History and Art History favor Takats's promotion and tenure, by a vote of 19 for and 0 against. The departmental RPT Committee, by a vote of 5-0, also recommend Takats's promotion to the rank of associate professor, with tenure. I fully support this recommendation.

Takats has maintained two rather different research agendas during his time at Mason: digital humanities and early modern French history. This dual trajectory is reflected in Takats's unusual employment history. He first came to Mason to do digital work at RRCHNM, but then was hired by the department a year later for a conventional tenure-track position in early modern European history. His extensive skills in digital scholarship, however, made him an asset too valuable for RRCHNM to leave unused, and his position morphed quickly into one that entailed both a leadership role at RRCHNM and more traditional responsibilities as a teacher and researcher of early modern European history. His work in these two seemingly distinct fields has interacted productively to generate an innovative body of scholarship.

His corpus of scholarship on early modern France consists of three scholarly articles, a forthcoming book chapter, three book reviews, and his book, *The Expert Cook in Enlightenment France* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). The book makes a number of important contributions to the field of early modern French history. It offers a social historical picture of an important but relatively unstudied group in French society, which Takats pieced together using an impressive variety of sources, from contracts and cookbooks to paintings. It is also a cultural history of how cooks were represented, and how they sought to represent themselves. Indeed, Takats's main argument is about the issue of self-representation: he argues that cooks used the rhetoric and tools of the Enlightenment, and of modern science and medicine in particular, to elevate their status from that of domestic servants to that of professionals. In the process of laying out this argument, Takats manages to shed light on a number of other important issues in the historiography of early modern Europe, including the history of professionalization, consumption, and the circulation of expert knowledge. The three outside readers who were asked to comment on Takats's scholarship on French history were unanimously favorable towards the book. Reader A calls it a "pioneering attempt to bring ordinary people into our understanding of the Enlightenment." Reader C states that the book is "a deeply researched, well presented and

wholly original contribution to the social and cultural history of pre-revolutionary France.” Reader E states, “*The Expert Cook* is an outstanding book, one that contributes to our knowledge of both Old Regime France and the Enlightenment in new and exciting ways.”

Takats’s record of production in the field of digital humanities is also impressive. As Director of Research Projects at RRCHNM, he has played a lead role (as project director or PI) in a dozen major projects that have together brought in over \$13 million in grant funding. They range from content-driven sites to software projects, and they draw both from Takats’s disciplinary training as a historian and his advanced technical skills. Though any one of these projects could warrant extended discussion here, the centerpiece of Takats’s digital work is Zotero, a software platform for collecting, organizing, citing, and sharing research. Though the project was originally conceived by Dan Cohen and others at RRCHNM before Takats started working at Mason, Takats has managed the project since 2007 and has played a key role in its development. What Takats has done, specifically, is to develop a funding model to ensure the project’s sustainability and to open the internal architecture of Zotero to broaden its use and maximize its capacity to foster scholarly collaboration. The three digital humanists among Takats’s outside readers speak at length about this latter point. They not only testify to the far-reaching importance of Zotero in general but also admire Takats’s specific role in it. Reader E dwells on this point, stating that Takats’s specific contribution to the Zotero project reflects “a profound understanding not only of software and software systems, but of the nature of scholarly activity and its future possibilities.” And in regards to Takats’s overall body of scholarship in the digital humanities, they speak in superlatives. Reader B describes Takats as “a digital humanist, programmer, and project manager of rare skill,” and adds that “it would be difficult to overstate the significance” of his work in the digital humanities. Readers E and F are equally impressed by Takats’ digital projects and provide additional comments about the impact of his professional blog, noting its importance in “translat[ing] the implications of the so-called ‘digital turn’ to non-specialist audiences.”

What is also impressive about the research component of Takats’s tenure file is the evidence of continued progress along *both* of his scholarly trajectories. His next book project on early modern France traces the emergence of the field of “tropical medicine” in the 18<sup>th</sup> century French colonial world. This work builds upon the theme of occupational expertise that he developed in his first book and draws from his background in the history of science and medicine. The book also engages with a central historiographical shift in his field: that of re-reading French history through a consideration of its colonies. He has completed much of the archival research for the book and will present one major piece of the project at a conference in the spring. Meanwhile, his digital work continues apace. In addition to his ongoing leadership of Zotero, Takats is at work on other major long-term projects, including his direction of a partnership between RRHCNM’s PressForward initiative and OpenEdition, an open-access publishing platform begun by the French National Center for Scientific Research.

Overall, the outside readers in Takats’s case are unequivocal, even urgent, in recommending Takats for tenure and promotion. The three French historians in this case unanimously recommend Takats for tenure based only on his work in early modern French history. The digital humanists state the case even more strongly. Reader E concludes his

letter with the statement, “I think you’re very fortun[ate] to have someone on your faculty who is thinking so boldly and so provocatively about the role of the digital in modern scholarship, and I recommend him for tenure and promotion in the highest possible terms.” Reader B concludes that Takats “has already had a greater and more significant impact on the humanities internationally than the vast majority of academics at any age or stage.”

Takats’s reduced teaching load (stemming from his responsibilities at RRCHNM) and his two years of research leave have resulted in a thinner teaching portfolio than is typical of tenure candidates from our department. Nonetheless, he has clearly met the faculty handbook’s standard of high competence in teaching. His teaching evaluations have been solid—in all but one case, right around the university mean. Senior colleagues in the department who have visited Takats’s classes have offered very positive reports about his performance. They remark consistently about his skill as a lecturer and the level of engagement by his students. I attended one of his graduate classes and came away very impressed, first by the rigor of the course—the level of discussion was extremely high—and also by the fact that every single student made substantive contributions to the discussion. Takats has also developed innovative courses and instructional methods. He created an upper-level undergraduate course on taste and consumption in Early Modern Europe that drew from the methodologies of both history and art history (and, accordingly, was cross-listed so that students from both disciplines could count it towards their respective majors). He has also experimented with the use of Zotero in his teaching by incorporating it fully into his section of the capstone methodology course for History majors. His experience in digital humanities gives him the potential to influence how other, less technically-savvy professors in my department teach history, and I look forward to his contributions on this front.

Takats’s service has also been solid. In our department the service expectations for junior faculty are modest, and Takats has met them by his work on the department’s Research Committee. Meanwhile, Takats’s service outside the university has exceeded what is typical for junior faculty, due mainly to his precociously elevated stature in the field of digital humanities. I expect that his external service obligations will expand in the near future due to his growing visibility in this field.

Takats stands for tenure on the grounds of genuine excellence in scholarship. His case is exceptionally strong. It bears repeating that each of the two groups of readers for this case—one in French history, the other in digital humanities—recommends him for tenure based only on his accomplishments in their own field of specialization. His scholarly achievements are, in other words, roughly double that of a typical tenure candidate from my department. His strong teaching and his commitment to service further strengthen his case, and I endorse his promotion and tenure without the slightest of reservations.