

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

From: Promotion and Tenure Committee, Department of History and Art History

Re: Candidacy of Sean Takats for Promotion to Associate Professor of History and re-appointment without term

Date: November 6, 2012

The following actions have been taken on the candidacy of Sean Takats for promotion to Associate Professor and re-appointment without term.

	In Favor	Opposed	Abstained	Not Voting	Absent
Dept. Committee	5	0	0	0	0
Other Tenured Faculty	19	0	0	5*	4*
Dept. Chair					

\* Those counted as "Not Voting" did not submit a ballot for this candidate. Those counted as "Absent" are on leave this semester. Neither should be understood as negative votes.

Professor Takats received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 2005. He worked as a Research Assistant Professor at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media from August 2006 to May 2007. In Fall 2007, he joined the GMU History and Art History as Assistant Professor of History on a tenure-track. Takats completed his three-year probationary term and was reappointed for an additional three years in Fall 2010.

**Research:**

Takats's research contributions involve two distinct areas of scholarship: his publications relating to old regime French history and his scholarship in the field of digital humanities. Because of the lack of overlap in the fields, half of the outside reviewers were asked to comment on Takats's accomplishments in French history and the other half on digital humanities. Each of these areas will be considered in turn.

In French history, Takats has published three articles, a forthcoming book chapter, and a book . One of the articles, which appeared in *Studies on Voltaire in the Eighteenth Century* in 2005, received the Voltaire Foundation's Besterman Prize, an indication of its high quality and the importance of its contribution to the field. Takats's reputation in French history, however, rests primarily on his book, *The Expert Cook in Enlightenment France*, published in 2011 by the Johns Hopkins University Press. In this work, Takats explores the importance of a group whose significance previous historians have overlooked or ignored. According to Takats, cooks

occupied a crucial place within the French household and in French society. Although skilled workers, they were not organized into a guild and thus were assumed not to have much power. Through a creative use of a variety of sources, including cookbooks, material culture, newspaper advertisements, and theatrical plays, Takats shows this was not the case. Although low in status, cooks, he demonstrates, possessed a relatively high degree of literacy and of numeracy. Using the Enlightenment's tools of science and reason, these cooks--women as well as men--attempted to elevate and professionalize their occupation. Introducing and promoting *la cuisine moderne*, they asserted authority over a specialized body of knowledge that was unfamiliar to their masters or to those in other occupations. Through this knowledge, they claimed a new place for themselves within the hierarchy of laborers in French society. Fashioning themselves as artists rather than as craftsmen, they determined which foods should be fashionable and how they should be prepared and eaten. Asserting their unique ability to understand food's medicinal qualities, they decided which foods were healthy and nutritious. Because they had control over household funds, they knew how much money their masters had and how it should be spent. Yet the cooks' efforts to advance their social position soon met with resistance. Many members of the upper classes mistrusted the cooks' skills, disputed their honesty, and impugned their reputations and morality. Despite these setbacks, the cooks' efforts had a lasting impact on French cuisine and on their own place in the status hierarchy of occupations.

Takats's work makes an important contribution to understanding French labor history, offers new insights into the history of consumption and taste, and provides a creative new approach to understanding the French Enlightenment as a movement of ordinary people rather than elite thinkers. The reviewers are unanimous in their praise for the book. One reviewer says that *The Expert Cook in Enlightenment France* "is a deeply researched, well presented and wholly original contribution to the social and cultural history of pre-revolutionary France." This reviewer was especially impressed by Takats's use of a variety of sources and "the imaginative ways in which the author went about documenting the multiple dimensions of his topic." Another reviewer notes that "no one has done what Takats has done with cooks." This reviewer points particularly to Takats's ability to reveal the "tension between the cooks' ambition and the public resistance to it," which Takats "brilliantly uncovers in its various forms." In conclusion, the reviewer observes that Takats's work represents "a solid, indeed pioneering attempt to bring ordinary people into our understanding of the Enlightenment." The final reviewer stresses "how difficult it is to write a history of eighteenth-century cooks" and applauds Takats's "innovative" use of sources. This reader is most impressed by Takats's portrayal of the cooks as individuals who used the tools of the Enlightenment, science and reason, for their own purposes. In concluding, the reviewer comments, "I think [this] is the most important contribution of Takats' book and a surprising one. One would not have expected the story of cooks to lead to a new notion of the uses of the Enlightenment."

The other significant area of Takats's scholarship is in the field of digital humanities. Since 2007, Takats has held the position Director of Research Projects at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. He has acted as the Principal Investigator, or Co-PI, on projects that secured external funding for over \$13.2 million. Some of these, such as *The Encyclopedia of Diderot and d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, *Old Bailey Proceedings: Data Mining with Criminal Intent*, and the *New Global History Initiative*, directly relate to his particular research interests in history. Other projects, however, are efforts to develop tools for

historical research. Although Takats was not involved in the initial development of Zotero, a software platform for collecting, organizing, citing, and sharing research, since coming to GMU he has had primary responsibility for its implementation and oversight. In this role, he has transformed Zotero from a citation tool for scholars to a general research platform that can serve a variety of purposes for researchers in many fields. He has also made great strides in guaranteeing Zotero's long-term, independent financial sustainability. In addition, Takats is the American director of a major project to develop an international open-access publishing platform which is being conducted through a partnership between RRCHNM and a French center, the Agence Nationale de la Recherche.

Unlike conventional historical research, these projects are collaborative in nature, involve a variety of technical computer skills including software development, and require a deep understanding of historical research methods. Takats is the rare individual who has mastered all of these areas. Outside reviewers make clear both the profound impact of the digital projects on the larger scholarly community as well as Takats's key role in their development. One reviewer observes that "Zotero is without question one of the most successful single pieces of software ever created in the Digital Humanities." Used daily on over 300,000 devices, Zotero is, the reviewer says, not just a tool for organizing citations but "is more fundamentally an intervention in this rather profound set of ideas about the architectonics of scholarly activity." Takats's efforts to open up the underlying structure of Zotero to users, the reviewer comments, indicates his "profound understanding not only of software and software systems, but of the nature of scholarly activity and its future possibilities." Another reviewer provides an even more specific accounting of Takats's contributions. First, he has been "active in *conceptually* reimagining scholarly and humanities *practices* through the use of digital tools." Second, he has "helped carve out the boundaries of digital humanities *practice* through collaborative execution of digital projects." And finally, Takats has "*translated* the digital humanities to wide and non-technical audiences." The last outside reviewer concurs with these sentiments: "From both a historical and digital humanities perspective it would be difficult to overstate the significance of Dr. Takats' work. He has been instrumental in delivering a suite of software that is transforming scholarly practice across the disciplines, and across the world." Takats, he concludes, "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 already has embarked on projects that indicate that he will continue to be an active and engaged scholar for many more years. In addition to his many digital projects, Takats has begun work on an ambitious study of tropical medicine in France's colonies in the eighteenth century. Building on his interest in the history of science and medicine, this project will explore how French thinkers understood and conceptualized the effects of environment, climate, disease, and native ecology on the human body in French outposts across the world. By studying how French authors understood health and disease in foreign lands, Takats will not only explore a previously understudied area in the history of medicine but will also elucidate assumptions about race and nationality that underlay France's imperial aspirations. Takats has already done research for the new project in several French archives. He also presented a paper, "Diet for the Debauched: Preventative Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Tropics," at the meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society in May 2012.

All of the reviewers unequivocally support Takats's case for tenure. Indeed, as several reviewers point out, Takats's record of scholarship based on his work in French history alone would be sufficient to merit tenure. In conjunction with his digital scholarship, Takats's record is unassailable. As one reviewer notes, "The real question is not whether Sean Takats deserves tenure. He would be employed in a minute at a senior level, at any number of institutions. . . . Instead, the question is whether George Mason can provide the intellectually flexible and forward looking environment in which someone like Takats can flourish; and which will keep him engaged as his own intellectual agenda evolves."

The committee believes that Takats has more than achieved the standard of genuine excellence in research.

### **Teaching**

Takats has taught courses in European history and French history at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. The demands of Takats's position at RRCHNM as well as two years of research leave have meant that Takats taught fewer courses in the department than most assistant professors coming up for tenure. Nonetheless, Takats has acquitted himself well in the courses he has taught. Student evaluations of his teaching show that except in one course his scores are around the university norm. Peer reviews by faculty members frequently mention the high level of student engagement in his classes and Takats's effective lecturing style. One report noted that the students "seemed genuinely excited to be learning." Another commented on Takats's "substantial gifts as a lecturer, holding most of the students' attention and presenting complex material clearly." Takats is especially skilled at using visual images as the basis for his lectures and discussions. His course on "Taste, Fashion, and Consumption in Early Modern Europe" was cross-listed with Art History. With its innovative and imaginative subject matter, the class drew a diverse range of students with a wide variety of interests. He also successfully melded his research expertise with his teaching in his History 499, Senior Research Seminar on the French Revolution, by introducing students to Zotero and integrating its use into the course.

The committee believes that Takats has met the standard of high competence in teaching.

### **Service**

The department typically does not require significant service from junior faculty. For the department, Takats has fulfilled our expectations by serving on the Research Committee for several years as well as by taking on an assignment this year to serve on the search committee for a faculty member in the field of America and the World. His service outside the university has far exceeded our expectations. He has given numerous presentations on digital humanities issues in a variety of national and international venues, including the Council on Library and Information Resources, the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies, the University of Bern and the European University Institute. His collaboration with the Agence Nationale de la Recherche in developing an international open-access publishing platform demonstrates Takats's significant skill in reaching beyond the university to create productive scholarly partnerships. At least two of the reviewers mention that his blog posts make Takats an intellectual leader in the field of digital humanities. Finally, he has served as a manuscript reviewer for Cornell University

Press and for the *Journal of Social History*, served as a grant reviewer at the National Endowment for the Humanities, and published several book reviews. These activities reveal Takats's high degree of professional engagement both with historical community as well as with a larger community of digital scholars around the world.

The committee believes that Takats has met the standard of high competence in service.

**Recommendation:**