

To: Jack Censer, Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences  
 From: CHSS Advisory Committee on Promotion and Tenure  
 Re: Candidacy of Sean Takats for Promotion to Associate Professor and re-appointment without term  
 Date: 24 January 2013

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

	In Favor	Opposed	Abstained	Not Voting	Absent
Dept. Committee	5	0	0	0	
Other Tenured Faculty	19	-	-	-	9*
Chair	Yes				
CHSS P&T Committee	10	2		1	

\* The department letters show a number of faculty as non-voting. These included the department's Robinson professors who typically do not participate in P&T decisions as well as other faculty who were otherwise unable to attend the meetings. In the Absent column, the department letter only listed faculty who did not attend the meetings because they were on leave. To avoid the impression that "not voting" might equal abstention (and thus signal possible opposition to the candidate), the CHSS P&T Committee decided to move the "not voting" faculty to the Absent column, which then reflects the Robinson professors as well as faculty on leave or otherwise unable to attend the meetings and vote.

#### **Candidate's Career:**

Dr. Takats received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Michigan in 2005. He worked as a Research Assistant Professor for the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media from August 2006 to May 2007. From that point, he assumed the position of Director of Research Projects at the center (a position he still holds). In Fall 2007, he joined the George Mason University History and Art History Department as an Assistant Professor in a tenure-track position. Takats completed his three-year probationary term and was reappointed for an additional three years in Fall 2010.

#### **Research:**

Dr. Takats' research takes two distinct paths, one more traditionally rooted in the study of early modern Europe--specifically French history--the other in the burgeoning field of Digital Humanities. His scholarly work in these areas warranted the soliciting of reports from two sets

of reviewers: one set of scholars who specialize in French history, and the other whose expertise is in Digital Humanities. In French history, Takats' case for tenure rests on three published essays and a monograph. One essay, "Science without scientists: modern cooking in the eighteenth century" (*Studies on Voltaire in the Eighteenth Century*) received the Voltaire Foundation Besterman Prize in 2005, indicative of what the History and Art History subcommittee deemed its "high quality and importance." In addition to his publications, Takats has given 15 national and international lectures and conference presentations. The centerpiece of his scholarship, *The Expert Cook in Enlightenment France*, was published in 2011 by the Johns Hopkins University Press (the History and Art History chair described this as a top-tier press in History, comparable to UNC).

*The Expert Cook* argues that cooks in eighteenth-century France introduced and promoted "la cuisine modern" (modern cooking) as a vehicle to recast themselves as "taste professionals," as opposed to "lowly domestic servants"; and in doing so, cooks drew upon the Enlightenment tools of science and reason to position themselves among such privileged and respectable fields as medicine and science. Cooks thus claimed authority over an entire corpus of knowledge related to diet, nutrition, and health. This professional re-situating was no small feat, given that cooks were often viewed dubiously—as "disreputable" threats to "social order," their kitchens as potential "sites of pollution and corruption," the author avers. Takats clearly enunciates the project's parameters: "Although this book is about cooks, it is not about food." In its evaluation, the History and Art History subcommittee lauds the book for its "important contribution to understanding French labor history" as well as for offering "new insights into the history of consumption and taste" and providing "a creative new approach to understanding the French Enlightenment as a movement of ordinary people rather than elite thinkers."

While not wholly uncritical in their evaluations, the three external reviewers nevertheless attest to the originality and potential scholarly contribution of *The Expert Cook*. Though one reader found the book's "relative brief" length indicative of some omissions (specifically related to the history of work in the eighteenth century and the role of baking/bakers), s/he nevertheless concluded that the work is solid and path-breaking in foregrounding the role of ordinary people in the Enlightenment. Another reviewer expressed some reservations—some parts of the book being "too purely descriptive," while others weakened by the dearth of discussion on "what actually went on in the kitchen." These criticisms aside, however, this reviewer lauded the book as meticulously researched and nuanced. Overall, s/he found the study immensely valuable in expanding knowledge of the social and cultural history of eighteenth-century France. The third evaluator was especially impressed by the breadth and scope of the book, given the inherent challenge of writing a book on a subject as expansive and potentially unwieldy as eighteenth-century cooks. S/he extols *The Expert Cook* for contributing to historians' understanding of Old Regime France and the Enlightenment.

The other major component of Takats' tenure portfolio is his Digital Humanities scholarship. His most important contribution has been his work with Zotero, described by his History and Art History subcommittee as "a software platform for collecting, organizing, citing, and sharing research." Though Takats didn't participate in the creation of Zotero, he has overseen its implementation and management since his arrival to GMU in 2007. Zotero has grown from a general research tool for History scholars into a venue serving a wide range of research interests. This free software is used daily on over 300,000 devices and is available in over forty languages. According to Takats' department chair, Zotero "has impacted the Humanities in profound ways; it will have more impact on how scholars do research, more so than a book." Other high-profile collaborative digital projects include: *The Encyclopedia of Diderot and d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, which its website describes as "designed to make accessible to teachers, students, and other interested English-language readers translations of articles from the *Encyclopédie* edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert in the 18<sup>th</sup> century"; *The Proceedings of Old Bailey, 1674-1913: Data Mining with Criminal Intent*; and *Scholarship in the Age of Abundance: Enhancing Historical Research With Text-Mining and Analysis Tools*. With an eye toward the long-term sustainability of this work, Takats was part of a collaborative effort that generated substantial funding in the form of grants. The three scholars responsible for assessing Takats' Digital Humanities work were unreserved in praising the scope and sophistication of his contributions to this field. One reviewer finds Zotero one of the most successful pieces of software ever created. And while this reviewer noted with admiration the staggering amount of grant money Takats and his collaborators have secured, more profound to her/him is his interdisciplinary and trans-institutional work. A second reviewer spotlighted Takats' seminal role in "conceptually" reimagining humanities scholarship via the use of digital tools, along with his commendably making such tools accessible to non-technical audiences. The final Digital Humanities respondent not only foresees Zotero as becoming the cornerstone for modern scholarship, but s/he lauds Takats' influence as prodigious for an academic at any level.

With respect to future scholarly endeavors, Takats has embarked upon a new project that dovetails with his first one on French history, specifically his interest in science and medicine: a study of tropical medicine in France's colonies in the eighteenth century. He has already conducted research for this project in France, Madagascar, and Vietnam and has 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.

#### **Teaching:**

Because of a two-year research leave along with his directorship at the Rosenzweig Center, Takats has taught fewer courses than other assistant professors coming up for tenure. Since arriving at George Mason in Fall 2007, he has taught a range of undergraduate and graduate courses that focus on early modern European and colonial history: "History of Taste" (ARTH 399), "The Enlightenment" (HIST 635), "Old Regime and Revolutionary Europe" (HIST 307), "French Revolution" (HIST 635), and the same course as an undergraduate section (HIST 499).

Scores on Student Rating Instruction forms suggest that students were generally satisfied with the instruction they received. Evaluation ratings for the majority of Takats' classes range from the lower to upper 4s (4.0-4.7), though scores for the question regarding instructor accessibility either electronically or in person dipped a couple of times to the low 3s; correlatively, the rating of overall teaching in HIST 499 was 3.62. Noteworthy courses include "Taste, Fashion, and Consumption in Early Modern Europe," which was cross-listed with Art History and drew diverse students from a range of disciplines. Peer reviews of his classes were uniformly favorable, commending Takats' teaching as rigorous and innovative. One colleague (Professor Cynthia Kierner) visited a HIST 307 section and observed that Takats "is at his best using images to elicit class discussion." Further, she was especially impressed with "the students' level of engagement, given that more than two-thirds of the class participated in the discussion." Another visitor (Professor Brian Platt) sat in on HIST 635 and was struck by "the remarkably advanced and complicated issues" under investigation, noting the "consistently insightful" nature of the students' comments. Even when the student leading the discussion lagged a bit, Takats adroitly kept the class critically moored without undermining the student leader. Another peer reviewer (Professor Mack Holt) observed HIST 615 and praised Takats' restraint and willingness to allow the class to evolve at its own intellectual pace: "Indeed, what was most impressive about the discussion was that Sean, as instructor, did not say one word until another 15 minutes had elapsed—30 minutes after the class started—and this primarily to focus on the larger questions of the evening: Why read Tocqueville in a class on the Enlightenment?" Though this reviewer suggested that Takats might have interrogated this question more explicitly and helped map for students some possible answers, he ultimately deemed the meeting a "successful" one with "so many positives." Finally, an evaluator of HIST 307 (Professor Matt Karush) applauded Takats' "substantial gifts as a lecturer, holding most of the students' attention and presenting complex material clearly." He did urge the instructor not to rely so heavily on lecturing, which was occasionally met with "some web-surfing, text-messaging, and day-dreaming." Ultimately, however, he found this a "minor criticism; this was an impressive class."

**Service:**

Dr. Takats' chair notes that "his service has also been solid." He has served on the department's Research Committee for several years. In 2012, he served on the search committee for a candidate in the area "America and the World." Outside the university, according to his History and Art History subcommittee, his service "has far exceeded our expectations." He has presented several presentations on Digital Humanities issues both nationally and internationally in such venues as the Council on Library and Information Resources, The American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies, the University of Bern, and the European Institute. Indicative of his transnational scholarly reach, he has collaborated with the Agence Nationale de la Recherche in developing an international open-access publishing platform. In the field of French history, he has served as a manuscript reviewer for Cornell

University Press and for the *Journal of Social History*, as well as reviewing grants for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

**Committee Discussion:**

The committee responded quite favorably to both Dr. Takats' monograph on eighteenth-century French cooks and his new project on tropical medicine in French colonies in the same century. The committee also recognized his considerable work at the Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media as it relates to projects such as Zotero and the substantial funds he and his collaborators have raised to help sustain them. Some on the committee questioned to what degree Dr. Takats' involvement in these activities constitutes actual research (as opposed to project management). Hence, some determined that projects like Zotero et al., while highly valuable, should be considered as major service activity instead. While the committee also duly noted Dr. Takats' reduced teaching load because of his administrative responsibilities at the Center and study leaves, the dearth of classes taught and occasional low scores did raise some concern. Based on the discussion, the committee found Dr. Takats' scholarship genuinely excellent and his teaching and service highly competent. His promotion and tenure, therefore, were endorsed by a majority of the committee members.

CC: Brian Platt, History and Art History Chair; Candidate (Blind) ✓