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Collecting Sarah Piatt at The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library

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What role can a special collections library play in helping recover a forgotten writer? This article provides a case study from a curator's perspective on building a collection dedicated to the nineteenth-century American poet Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt at Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library (RBML). A partnership between teaching faculty and RBML has helped make OSU a center for Piatt research by developing published and archival collections, digital projects, and oral histories. I will discuss RBML's approach to collection development and how Piatt fits into the broader collecting goals, the strategies involved in this project, and the benefits of prioritizing a lesser-known writer.

RBML is the oldest special collections unit at OSU; the first fulltime curator was hired in 1964.¹ Early significant manuscript acquisitions include the papers of Samuel Beckett, James Thurber, and Nelson Algren. Concurrent with building the unit's literary archives was the creation of the Charvat Collection of American Literature. Named after William Charvat, an OSU English professor and book historian who helped launch the collection, it comprised first editions of American fiction.² In the 1980s, University Libraries received grant funding to expand this collection by focusing on titles published between and 1901 and 1925.³ Over the next decade, the curator acquired several noteworthy archival collections, including the papers of William S. Burroughs, Raymond Carver, and William T. Vollmann.

Today RBML holds over a quarter of a million print volumes and approximately 950 archival collections. The Charvat Collection is one of the best of its kind in the U.S., with a focus

on late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century titles.⁴ As curator of modern literature and manuscripts, I oversee RBML's holdings from approximately 1800 to the present, managing and building on the collections that have been assembled during the previous fifty years. Yet my perspective on acquisitions is inevitably different from my predecessors; the aggressive approach to collection development that was pervasive at many American institutions during the twentieth century has now shifted to more selective, strategic collecting.⁵ This means that RBML, like most special collections units, must think carefully about how to balance new acquisitions with space, resource, and staffing constraints. Curator Eric Johnson, who oversees medieval and early modern materials for the unit, and I rely on a collection development policy to guide our acquisitions.⁶ Using it as a reference, I seek out published and archival material that fills gaps and fits in with collections and aligns with faculty interests in instruction and research. Recent examples include parts of an early twentieth-century serialized novel for a book history course, 1970s punk zines for a class on music subcultures, and pre-1800 legal documents for an early American literature class.

While RBML's literary archival collections are impressive, they largely document the output of white male writers. Yet recording, preserving, and providing access to works by women writers, writers of color, LGBTQ writers, and others who have historically been marginalized is essential for a special collections unit that aims to effectively serve its users in the twenty-first century. Collecting more broadly also offers a more complex portrait of American literature and culture. With these factors in mind, a few essential questions inform my collection development work: in a time when priorities have evolved and budgets are smaller, how do we diversify our collections? How do we incorporate more voices and perspectives into the collections and do so in a thoughtful and deliberate way?

More to the point, how does the poet Sarah Piatt fit into RBML's collection development plans and why focus on her? Before answering these questions, some background about Piatt will be helpful. Although she enjoyed a wide readership during her lifetime, after Piatt's death in 1919, her poetry lapsed from print and was largely unavailable for much of the twentieth century. This began to change in the 1990s. Previously dismissed as a genteel poet, Piatt was reassessed and the complexity and irony of her writing seemed remarkably modern.⁷ Several anthologies included her work, making it possible to put Piatt on syllabi and bring her into the classroom.⁸ Additionally, the publication of two edited volumes of her poetry—Larry R. Michaels' *That New World: Selected Poems of Sarah Piatt, 1861-1911* (1999) and Paula Bernat Bennett's *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt* (2001)—meant that scholars and readers had access to affordable selections of her work for the first time.

In this context OSU Professor Elizabeth Renker first encountered Piatt's work and began teaching her poetry.⁹ In the early 2000s, Renker approached the head of RBML to discuss the possibility of developing its holdings on Piatt. Although not yet known as a significant literary figure, Piatt fit RBML's collection strengths in nineteenth-century American literature and Ohio writers. Today Piatt also fits well with the unit's collecting priority of women's history and recovered writers. Students often have little familiarity with nineteenth-century American poets beyond Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, neither representative of the poetry most Americans were reading. The Piatt holdings in RBML may help them better understand the literary context of the time and the market in which women poets were centered.

In 2003, Bennett donated the documents she collected while preparing her volume *Palace-Burner* to the RBML.¹⁰ The collection contains information on Piatt's family history, reviews of her books, contemporary encyclopedia and reference work entries on the poet, and

summaries and transcriptions of family letters from several institutions. The papers are not only valuable to Piatt scholars; they also offer an important case study of recovery work. Copies of Piatt's poetry collected from a variety of publications, documents about archives and library visits, and correspondence with Piatt descendants record the strategies involved in researching a neglected writer.

Since becoming curator in 2016, I have worked to continue to expand the Piatt collections. RBML now has first editions of nearly all of Piatt's books and I continue to seek out other publications that include her work. Piatt published in different venues, often placing her more experimental and political poetry in newspapers and periodicals.¹¹ Given her publication history, collecting printings of her work as broadly as possible is essential to understanding the range of her writing. In special collections instructional sessions, I encourage students to think about books and magazines as textual artifacts and ask them to consider what materiality and context can tell us about a work, its author, publisher, and intended audience. For example, seeing Piatt's poetry in her own books as well as in the *Galaxy*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the children's book *Christmas-Tide Stories* (1888) and the gift book *Harrison Fisher Girls* (1914) can be a productive starting point for a discussion not just about publishing strategies, but also about marketing, readership, and reception.

The availability of a writer's work is critical to her recovery, but archival material may also play an important role. Items such as letters, journals, and drafts deepen and expand the kind of research that may be done on a writer's life and work. Archives also may help recover a figure otherwise lost from public memory. Lisa Darms has said that her effort to establish an archival collection dedicated to the 1990s feminist punk movement Riot Grrrl at NYU was partially motivated by the desire to help make sure that the movement was not forgotten. She explained:

“As I studied to become an archivist in the mid-2000s . . . I realized that ‘historical importance’ is partially a result of what’s saved and preserved by institutions.”¹² Archival collections are long-term commitments for their institutions, and as such they are also public declarations that the documents warrant the investment of resources, space, and staff expertise, and that this material is critical to acquire, preserve, and make accessible.. Karen L. Kilcup has observed that the efforts to establish and develop the Piatt holdings at OSU have “helped ensure Piatt’s future reputation.”¹³

In 2018, RBML established the Sarah Piatt Collection for archival material created by or about the poet.¹⁴ The impetus was the purchase of two letters written by Piatt’s husband, John James (aka J. J.) Piatt, to William Hayes Ward, editor of the weekly magazine the *Independent*. In one letter, J. J. thanked Ward for his positive review of Sarah’s work.¹⁵ In the other, J. J. asked, “Will you not let me offer you two or three more poems by Mrs. Piatt?”¹⁶ Both letters show the active role J. J. played in his wife’s literary career. Upon acquiring these items, I knew that RBML needed a place for unpublished documents pertaining to Piatt, although what this collection may include or how it may evolve is unclear. Although Piatt has been rediscovered by scholars, she is not a household name and it is possible that items may reside in attics or basements of individuals unaware of the poet. Yet during the past four years, we have been able to add materials regularly to the collection and it currently contains more than a dozen items ranging from the 1850s to the early- twentieth century. Unfortunately, when many special collections were established in the early and mid-twentieth century, women’s papers, even those of a literary figure (or rather, *especially* those of a woman poet whose work was out of print), were often not deemed worth saving.¹⁷ Still, we consider it a success to now have an archival collection dedicated to a poet who was forgotten for much of the twentieth century and whose

archival remains are uncertain. The Sarah Piatt Collection is an unconventional approach to developing literary archives; special collections do not typically assemble a collection dedicated to a writer from disparate sources. Yet because archival material on Piatt at institutional repositories is scarce, the effort to collect and preserve what has survived is vital to scholarship and instruction on the poet.¹⁸

As Linda M. Morra and Jessica Schagerl have noted, “when confronted with archives that are limited in scope or by intent, feminist researchers are compelled to think laterally or seek out unconventional sources—eBay, blogs, anecdotes, and other ephemera.”¹⁹ Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that an unorthodox approach has also been necessary for developing holdings dedicated to a lesser-known woman writer. One immediate challenge is that Piatt published under several names: before her marriage “S.M.B” and “Sallie M. Bryan,” and after “Mrs. Piatt” and “Sarah M. B. Piatt.” Such a “proliferation of names typical of women of her era . . . can make them hard to trace.”²⁰ While useful to keep these variations in mind, most archival material has been located not by searching for Piatt but for individuals related to her, such as her husband or editor George D. Prentice. Anthologies that include her poetry sometimes can be found on the market but their descriptions do not always mention her as a contributor. Although first editions of books are relatively scarce, rare book and manuscript dealers do not regard her as a collectible writer. As a result, eBay often has been a more reliable source for locating Piatt items than dealer sites.

A major theme running throughout this project has been the importance of collaboration. In 2018, Renker introduced me to Larry R. Michaels, who donated his collection of more than 350 titles by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American women poets, including several of Piatt’s books as well as his research papers associated with his edited volume, *That New*

World.²¹ Thanks to Renker I also met Sean E. Andres, a Cincinnati-based marketing professional who studies Piatt. In 2019 he donated his research materials, including information on nine of Piatt's previously unknown publications that he had discovered the previous year.²² Like Michaels, Andres also donated Piatt items he had acquired, including both publications and archival material. Additionally, Michaels and Andres have regularly offered valuable insights and feedback and shared potential acquisitions that they have found. Locating and obtaining materials of a lesser-known writer is an intensive undertaking, and RBML's Piatt holdings have been vastly improved because of their generosity and expertise. Their efforts underscore the important work that can be done outside of academia and that such contributions can make a recovery project stronger. It is also imperative to emphasize that Michaels' and Andres' involvement would not have been possible without Renker. Given their deep subject knowledge and professional networks, literary scholars are uniquely positioned to partner with curators at their institutions on collection development projects. Promoting the collections, highlighting the work we do, and facilitating relationships are all powerful ways that teaching faculty can advocate for their librarian colleagues and the collections.

From the beginning, our goal has been to make Piatt materials available to as wide of an audience as possible through such innovations as digital publication.²³ To this end, the Sarah Piatt Recovery Project was launched in 2019 to provide open access to works by and about the poet.²⁴ This site, a collaboration between Renker and University Libraries, is home to several projects, including digital collections of the *Capital* (a now difficult to find Washington, D.C.-based newspaper published by Piatt's cousin by marriage, Donn Piatt, that printed numerous poems by Piatt), and the *New York Ledger*. As with other aspects of our Piatt efforts, the success of these projects has relied on collaboration: the *Capital* project was possible because of a

generous loan to RBML by Margaret Piatt, a descendant of the Piatt family and manager of Piatt Castle, and the *New York Ledger* project benefited from the research of OSU English doctoral student Ayendy Bonifacio. A recent addition to the Recovery Project is an oral history interview series.²⁵ In 2017, Renker began conducting interviews with Piatt scholars and experts, with RBML and University Libraries staff overseeing the transcription and preparation of files. Oral histories have become an important way for archival institutions to capture the stories of those who are underdocumented in or absent from their existing collections.²⁶ This effort to create an interview series around Piatt's recovery, however, is the first major effort that I am aware of that uses interviews to explore research on a literary figure, recording both the story of the writer's recovery and the scholars behind it. The statistics for the oral histories have been particularly exciting to monitor. As of this writing, they collectively have more than four thousand page views and two thousand downloads.²⁷ Such numbers underscore that there is an audience for Piatt and a desire to learn more about her life and poetry, and that open access digital content is a crucial way of reaching users.

While the focus of this article has been collection development, it is important to note that acquisitions is just one part of the process. Making materials discoverable and accessible requires collaboration with library colleagues across several departments, including cataloging, archival technical services, digitization, metadata, conservation and preservation, and OSUL's digital repository. Most significantly, Lisa Iacobellis, special collections instructional services and digitization projects coordinator, has been instrumental in overseeing the digitization projects that are now part of the Sarah Piatt Recovery Project site.

Equally important to stress is that acquiring materials is just the first step. Outreach is essential to helping ensure that faculty, researchers, students, and others know about RBML's

Piatt collections. To this end, we have highlighted new Piatt items on social media and at Preview Night, RBML's annual open house event showcasing recent acquisitions, hosted a panel discussion on Piatt, and highlighted Michaels' donation and work on Piatt in a feature article.²⁸

Developing RBML's Piatt holdings has been an instructive experience on the challenges and benefits of collecting a lesser-known writer, the importance of collaboration in such a project, and the need to think about reaching users in a variety of ways. OSU now has the most extensive collection dedicated to the poet in the U.S., and importantly, one that enables researchers and students to learn not just about the poet, but also the nature of recovery work. Anyone wanting to study Sarah Piatt can explore RBML's published and archival materials and research collections of Piatt scholars in our reading room and/or remotely access Piatt's poetry and recent interviews with scholars and experts. Although there is more work to be done, thanks to teamwork of our partners, RBML has established itself as a center for research on Sarah Piatt.

--Ohio State University

Notes

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5. Amy Hildreth Chen, *Placing Papers* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2020), p. 17.

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7. "Interview about Sarah Piatt with Dr. Elizabeth Renker by Jolie Braun," Ohio State Univ., Rare Books & Manuscripts Library, accessed 18 November 2022 <<https://kb.osu.edu/handle/1811/92078>>.
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9. "Interview about Sarah Piatt with Dr. Elizabeth Renker by Jolie Braun."
10. Paula Bennett Research on Sarah Piatt, including for *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt* (Ohio State Univ., Rare Books & Manuscripts Library, Columbus, Ohio, accessed 18 November 2022 <<https://library.osu.edu/collections/spec.rare.cms.0116>>.
11. Bennett, *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2001), p. xxix.
12. Lisa Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), p. 8.
13. Kilcup, "Palace-Burner: Paula Bernat Bennett and Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry," *ESQ*, 64, ii (2018), 209.
14. Sarah Piatt Collection, Ohio State Univ., Rare Books & Manuscripts Library, accessed 18 November 18, 2022 <<https://library.osu.edu/collections/spec.rare.0256>>.
15. John James Piatt to William Hayes Ward, 11 May 1871, 10 November 1910 (Sarah Piatt Collection, Ohio State Univ., Rare Books & Manuscripts Library).

16. Ibid.

17. Eva Moseley, "Women in Archives: Documenting the History of Women in America," *American Archivist*, 36, ii (1973), 215.

18. The major collection dedicated to Piatt and her family is relatively modest at one linear foot: Piatt Family Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale Univ. <<https://ead-pdfs.library.yale.edu/4352.pdf>>.

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