Resolution on the Retirement of Professor Ronald Salter
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Literature

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It is no simple task to reduce to a few brief pages the accomplishments of Ron Salter’s thirty-seven years as a member of the faculty of Arts and Sciences at Tufts University. As a colleague, I have learned to be detached; as a friend, I have not. It is reasonable to say that his career as a teacher and scholar has spanned the most remarkable period in the history of this institution, and Ron Salter in no small way contributed to the university’s eminence. When he arrived in Medford in 1968, there were few faculty who combined the special gift of teaching that Ron possessed quite naturally, as well as the potential for scholarly accomplishment that eventually, eight books and dozens of scholarly articles later, would carve out a unique field of research that placed him at the pinnacle of his profession.

And he was lucky to be alive at all. He was born in Germany in 1938. Simple arithmetic proves instructive. The young boy ran from fields that were being strafed by low-flying American fighter planes in the closing days of World War II. Fortunately for everyone, Ron held no grudges and immigrated to the United States as a teenager, to Michigan. From the outset, Ron was what is called in German “ein Doppeltalent”, an individual of genuine accomplishment in two distinct fields, as well as two cultures. He began his undergraduate education at Wayne State University in studio art and art history and later added a major in German literature. His talent as a teacher extended from elementary education to graduate school. But, he first became aware of his gift in the classroom when he taught Saturday and summer classes at the Detroit Institute of Art for students ranging from pre-school children to high school level. Others spotted his performance skills, and in 1960 this young man was starring in a daily television program teaching German language and culture to children in the Detroit Public Schools system. He wrote the songs, created the games, built the puppets, made the sets and all the visual materials. Ron starred, directed and produced. He has never stopped teaching.

From Wayne State he went on to the University of Michigan for a Ph.D. in German literature, never losing sight of his interest in art. His dissertation and first book were on the German Expressionist poet Georg Heym’s visual memory: the poet as painter of words. From the very first foray into scholarship, Ronald Salter championed for the field of Germanics—Germanistik—a new interdisciplinarity. When he arrived at Tufts, his first and only career step after graduate school, he was led by his chairman to the doors of the Department of Art History, where we meekly and modestly informed the suspicious incumbents that there was no need to hire anyone to teach German art history, either 19th century realism or 20th century Expressionism. After preliminary sniffing around the intruder’s credentials and some shop talk, Ron Salter became for more than three decades the resident teacher, scholar, and slide collector for 19th and 20th century German art, inspiring generations of art history students through the astonishing colorations of Franz Marc, Wassily Kandinsky, Otto Mueller, Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka, van Gogh, Munch, and many others. His lectures were in an impeccable English, models of clarity and organizational agility.
That was one talent. The others were in the German Department, where from the outset he taught the entire range of German language and literature courses, a brilliant teacher for elementary, intermediate and advanced languages, a subtle literary historian and critic of German literature. He was disciplined, charming, vivacious and utterly beloved, even as he insisted that the German major courses be conducted in German. Never terrifying or embarrassing, he brought along in the most appropriate manner hesitant and inchoate learners for whom one small humiliation might have meant the end of effort. Instead, they worshipped him. He also taught large and popular general education courses in English on modern German art and literature. He could do it all, and did. The department thrived.

But, it was in his scholarship that Ron soared. Although totally bi-lingual, he made a conscious decision to use German as his professional language of scholarship, publishing in the leading German journals that focused on the arts of the book; because this was to be his scholarly passion: “illustrierte Literatur”, the illustrated text, to which he brought the unique combination of talent found in the trained art historian who is also a literary critic. He broke new ground in an uncharted field, and is recognized by colleagues and reviewers as the foremost interpreter of the illustrated text. Between 1990 and 2003 he had produced seven additional books, with two more in progress. His work has elevated the status of the German program at Tufts, which offers only a modest graduate Masters degree, to the international stage.

Ron Salter has made better everything that he has touched. He has superb organizational skills, and no detail is too small or too modest for his attention, whether organizing a weekly Kaffeestunde, the coffee hour in the German House on campus or championing the Tufts-in-Tuebingen program, which he also directed for a time. He sought funds for the German weekend retreats for department students, helped struggling high school programs, was active in the professional organizations and the Goethe Institut of Boston in its early days of struggle; everyone looked to him for leadership and guidance, which he gave freely.

And now he will leave us. He will continue writing, but he will do more boating, kayaking, hiking and gardening in his home in Winchester and the family retreat in Maine, where Ron will also turn his hand to another passion of his life: landscape painting. He has already exhibited his Alpine and New England motifs with the Winchester Art Association and the Brickhouse Gallery in Boothbay Harbor, Maine.

He has a new hip, and that will only make him a more ferocious tennis player. He has excelled at tennis his entire life and won the Winchester and Boothbay Region Open Doubles Championships, and the annual Winchester Town Singles and Doubles Championships. The new hip will limit his competitive playing to doubles, thank heavens.

Monika Salter has been the perfect soul mate and a part of the Tufts community, as well. Their two boys Timothy and Matthew both were educated at Tufts, also. This is a family we do not wish to let go of. But, after forty-five years of teaching, Ron has found the magic formula that says: enough. Let me have some time, more of the rocky coast of Maine, and my family. But, we will never let him go. Tufts has been his career and the locus of his professional life; friendships, for people like Ron Salter, are for a lifetime; and we have been truly blessed to know him and have him among us.

Be it resolved that this resolution be spread on the minutes of the faculty of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, and that a copy be handed to Professor Salter.