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Women in French Conference launches Marie Antoinette exhibit



(L-R): Ivan Christo and Jennifer Breeden ('10), a jury member of the Visions of M.A. art competition and bachelor of fine arts with a specialization in photography, promote a platter of Let Them Eat Cake Pops at the Women in French Conference's "Marie Antoinette: Pop Culture Icon" exhibit on May 7.

SUMMARY: A campus exhibit about Marie Antoinette seeks to pay homage to the 18th-century queen of

...with a campus exhibit about Marie Antoinette seems to pay homage to the 18th-century queen of France through a collection of objects, including food, figurines and makeup pallets that portray the Austrian-born queen as a pop culture icon. As part of this month's Women in French Conference, the exhibit at the Sawhill Memorial Gallery at Duke Hall will continue through May 22.

On May 7, the [Women in French Conference](#) paid homage to the 18th-century queen of France with the launch of the ["Marie Antoinette: Pop Culture Icon" exhibit](#). Curated by associate professor of French [Dr. Doe Polanz](#) and [School of Media Arts and Design](#) associate professor [Adrienne Hooker](#), the exhibit interprets the Austrian-born queen's legacy through a contemporary lens.

Before attendees were ushered into Duke Hall's [Sawhill Memorial Gallery](#) for the unveiling, Polanz led a conference in Miller Hall, where she outlined the background, purpose and organization of the exhibit.

Polanz recognizes three distinct versions of Marie Antoinette: the real-life woman, the historical queen and "M.A." — the queen's initials, which represent the pop-culture persona at the heart of this exhibit.

No artifact curated for the exhibit holds any historical value; instead, the exhibit is a collection of objects, from figurines to beer to makeup pallets, all depicting M.A. to some degree. "My goal is not just to fascinate, provoke or amuse the viewer, but also to account for the ubiquity of the M.A. figure and make sense of it," Polanz shared.





Dr. Doe Polanz, associate professor of French, highlights artifacts of 18th-century queen of France Marie Antoinette at the Women in French Conference on May 7.

The project started in 2013 at the National Museum of the French Revolution in Vizille, France, where pieces of the collection were displayed. According to the exhibit's homepage, Polanz and collaborator Dr. Guy Spielmann of Georgetown University set out to “put forth a series of arguments to explain the M.A. phenomenon, which reflects the need for immediately recognizable icons serving as cultural shorthand in our understanding of the human experience.” They believed M.A. fit that role.

After several years of development, Polanz approached Hooker in 2015 about bringing the exhibit to the United States. The plan idled for nearly a decade before the two revisited it, leveraging the Women in French Conference to finally bring the project to life.

The artifacts are displayed across several cases, each organized around the thematic concept of “Let them...,” inspired by the infamous remark attributed to the queen: “Let them eat cake.”





A display case at the “Marie Antoinette: Pop Culture Icon” exhibit at the Sawhill Memorial Gallery in Duke Hall shows off items to help interpret the Austrian-born queen’s legacy through a contemporary lens.

“The concept for the exhibit is to portray the beginning of Marie’s iconic line and let the viewers believe what they want about M.A.,” Polanz said.

Students in Hooker’s SMAD 332: Visual Communication Design course created the display cases:

- **Let them Create:** 2D, 3D, digital and mixed media artworks designed by Harrisonburg students

- **Let them Play:** artifacts centered around the theme of play, including gambling pieces, board games and dress-up dolls
- **Let them Eat:** objects connected to food and drink, ranging from cookbooks to culinary-inspired fashion pieces
- **Let them Learn:** an image of a cake depicting the representational structure developed by Polanz and Spielmann
- **Let them Fantasize:** creative interpretations of the queen, including pop-culture portrayals such as Sofia Coppola's 2006 historical drama, *Marie Antoniette*
- **Let them Judge:** a space for viewers to pass their own judgment on the controversial queen, featuring side-by-side depictions of M.A. as a young mother and an out-of-touch elitist
- **Let them Die:** objects that highlight the symbols and imagery of M.A.'s trial and execution

The background visuals of each case artistically depict a real location connected to the queen's life, as assembled by the SMAD students. In Let them Play, the Théâtre de la Reine, Marie Antoinette's personal theater venue, is emulated by the royal blue background. In Let them Die, the background shows the shadow of a guillotine and patterns reminiscent of the Conciergerie prison in Paris, where the royal family was held while awaiting trial.





Polanz speaks at the Women in French Conference in Miller Hall on May 7, prior to the launch of the exhibit. The theme of the conference and exhibit was “Let Them...” — as a way of reimagining the infamous quote attributed to Marie Antoinette, “Let them eat cake.”

The exhibit also included a competitive element, “Visions of M.A.,” which invited JMU and Rocktown High School students to submit their artwork inspired by Marie Antoinette. The first-place winner was SMAD major Kenna Murphy (’26). She created a cross-stitch piece titled “Cake or Crumbs,” which she said “explores both sides of the French Revolution — how Marie Antoinette was depicted in popular imagination and how the French people experienced the social and political realities of the time.”

The competition was more than just a class assignment, said Murphy, who is concentrating in Interactive Design. “It felt like a meaningful opportunity to express my ideas through a traditional craft medium and contribute to a larger curated exhibition.”

Selected pieces from the competition, including the second- and third-place winners, are available for viewing in the Let them Create display case.

The exhibit is available for viewing in the Sawhill Memorial Gallery at Duke Hall until May 22.





(L-R) Associate Professor of French Dr. Doe Polanz and Visions of M.A. art competition jury member Jennifer Breeden ('10) are pictured with competition winners Jaslene Lamas, high-school winner; Samantha Berg, JMU second-place winner; and Kenna Murphy ('26), JMU first-place winner; along with SMAD Associate Professor Adrienne Hooker.

Photographs by Rachel Holderman

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