

OLIVER SAMUEL TONKS

1874 - 1953

Oliver Samuel Tonks, Professor Emeritus of Art, died on December 25, 1953, one day before his eightieth birthday. Born in Malden, Massachusetts, he took his undergraduate and graduate work at Harvard where, in 1903, he received the first doctorate in Classical Archaeology conferred by Harvard. He was also the first student at Harvard to hold the Charles Eliot Norton Fellowship for studies abroad in Archaeology, spending 1901-02 in Greece. He began his long and fruitful career in teaching, first as an instructor in Greek at the University of Vermont, and then as lecturer in Greek at Columbia University. From 1905 to 1911 he was a member of the department of Art and Archaeology at Princeton.

Mr. Tonks came to Vassar in 1911 as Professor of Art and continued as head of the department until his retirement in 1944, after thirty-three years of service. In 1911 he was appointed curator of the Art Gallery installed that year in the newly built Taylor Hall. While studying for his doctorate he had served as assistant curator of Classical Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; and throughout his career he was active in the conduct and development of the Vassar Art Gallery, one of the first of its kind to serve a vital function in a college curriculum. His special interest in Italian painting was a factor in the acquisition in 1917 of the large and important Pratt Collection. Many valuable additions to the Gallery were made subsequently because of his efforts.

When Mr. Tonks came to Vassar he was the sole member of the department of Art; upon his retirement, the staff numbered 11 including a departmental assistant and an Art Librarian. His appointment established at Vassar the discipline of Art History, a relatively new field of studies at that time. His strong conviction that courses in drawing, painting and sculpture should be an integral part of instruction in art led to the appointment four years later of Professor Chatterton, who reinstated courses in painting that had been among the pioneer features of Matthew Vassar's college under Professor Van Ingen. His generosity of spirit, his deep wisdom and insight continued to sustain the growth and development of the whole curriculum in art. During his years as head of the department many scholars now distinguished in the field had an opportunity to launch their careers at Vassar - Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art, Hyatt Mayor of the Metropolitan Museum,

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Henry Russell Hitchcock of the Smith College Art Gallery and John Coolidge new director of the Fogg Museum at Harvard. He also fostered the new departure of adding a course in architectural draughting and design inaugurated by John McAndrew, now professor and director of the gallery at Wellesley.

The breadth of his interest was shown in such activities as his service on the managing committee of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, his chairmanship of the committee to select the WPA murals for the Poughkeepsie Postoffice, and his frequent contributions on a wide range of subjects to various periodicals. An article, "The Realism of Gothic Sculpture", appeared in Vassar Mediaeval Studies in 1923, and his History of Italian Faintin was published in 1927. In his lectures and in his writings Mr. Tonks' command of the English language set a distinguished and enviable standard. The venerable phrase "a scholar and a gentleman" could never be more appropriately applied than in this instance. He had the true gift of the teacher--of fostering and encouraging learning, in his students, his staff, and his own children, and this without a trace of self-importance or professional jealousy. But Mr. Tonks did not confine his interests to the academic life on campus. For many years he was active in the work of Christ Church, as a Vestryman and a member of the editorial board of the Chronicle. Among his particular enjoyments were the meetings of a Poughkeepsie group called "The Club", where papers were read and discussions held on all manner of subjects. This November he contributed a paper on Modern Abstract Art. Perhaps no member of our faculty ever commanded more love and affection from his fellows. Although his active association with the College ceased with his retirement, his interest in the community did not diminish. His companionship will be sorely missed by all those who knew him.

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