Piecing TOGETHER THE Past

History Honors Program allows undergrads to experience the joys and challenges of archival research

By Michael Gawlik

When

When senior Mary Basso arrived at the Bibliothèque nationale de France's Francois Mitterand Library in June, it didn't take long for her to realize something was amiss.

"I had preregistered, I had paid for my pass, I knew the materials I wanted to see," she said. "But when I arrived, they said 'Oh. We have old stuff here—but you're looking for really, *really* old stuff.'"

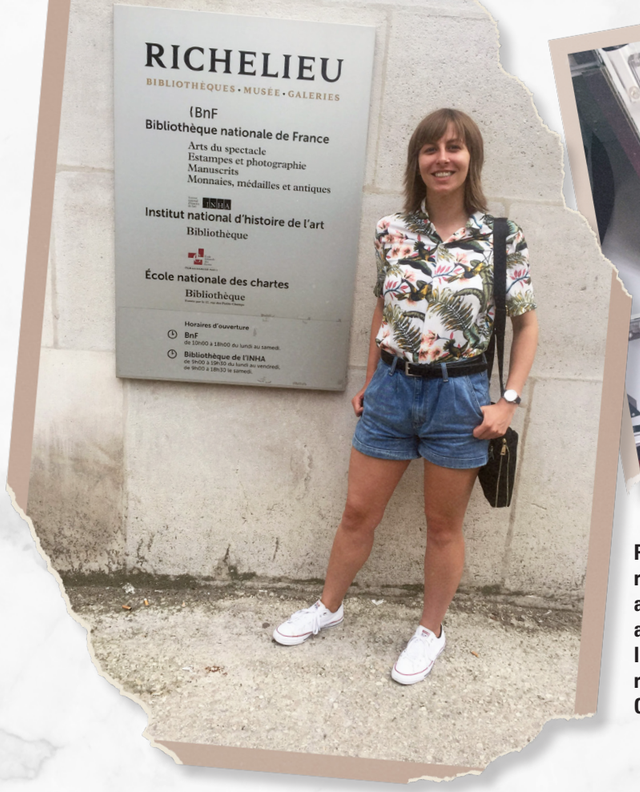
It turned out that the documents Basso was looking for—sixteenth-century correspondence between French royals—were housed at the BNF's Richelieu site on the other side of Paris.

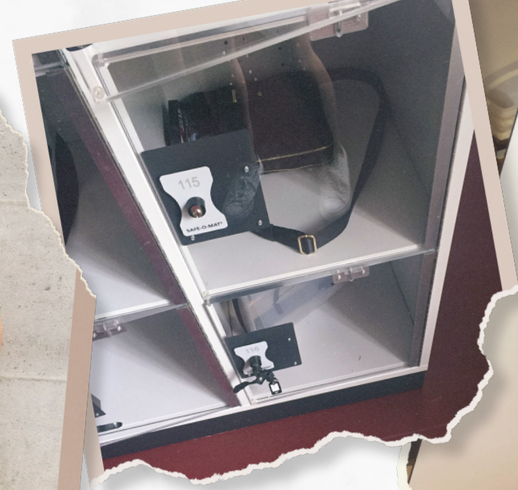
"That was when I found out the BNF is actually a system of libraries, not just a single site," says Basso. "[The archivists] felt really bad, so they gave me a weeklong pass for free, which was sweet of them."

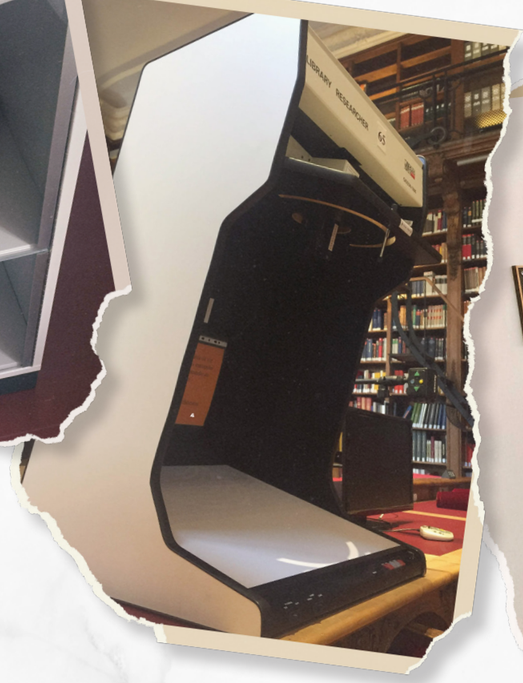
So goes the story for any number of undergraduates venturing into the field. Exploring archives, visiting museums and historical sites, and conducting oral histories play a crucial role in the History curriculum at Michigan. But at first, these experiences can be disorienting. Stepping outside of the classroom allows students to see the past up close—to smell the newsprint of a nineteenth-century penny paper or touch kitchenware from medieval Japan—but it also requires that they learn the rules and rituals of doing independent research.

In the department's Honors Program, students have the opportunity to do just that. Over the course of three semesters, honors students experience firsthand what it's like to be professional historians. They select an area of interest, investigate existing scholarship, and design a course of research to satiate their intellectual curiosity. The program culminates in a 60- to 100-page thesis that students complete under the supervision of a faculty advisor.

"Students who conduct honors projects uniformly cite the process as one of their most valuable and rewarding intellectual







Pictured, left to right: Mary Basso at Richelieu, an archival storage locker, a microfilm reader, Isabel Olson at Stanford

experiences at U-M," said Honors Program Director Pamela Ballinger. "The program offers structure and guidance while also fostering initiative and independent thinking."

Basso's project examines the effect that Salic law—a system preventing women and their children from ascending to the throne—had on gender and power in the French Middle Ages. Her trip to Paris allowed her to examine letters written by royal women like Catherine de' Medici and Diane de Poitiers.

In these letters, Basso noticed that women used distinct strategies to work around Salic law and exert influence. Catherine—who effectively ruled France while her son, King Charles IX, was a child—argued that her role as a mother obligated her to protect Charles's domain. Diane, who was never queen herself but instead mistress of King Henry II, wielded power by exploiting the idea of women as sexual objects.

"They're taking the role they've been given and manipulating it to create a new role for themselves," said Basso.

Navigating the intellectual layers of these letters—their context, rhetoric, and place in existing historiography—is complicated enough. But, as Basso noted, something as trivial as penmanship also presented a challenge to doing research.

"I didn't realize that French kings have terrible handwriting," she said. "That was a really big obstacle. I'd be moving along, reading a letter written in beautiful script, and then I'd reach one that was illegible."

Working in a foreign language presented additional problems. Basso, who is also majoring in French, noted that the language had yet to be standardized in the period she's studying; many words were spelled differently in the sixteenth century than they are today. And, as she noted, "some people are just bad spellers."

"Working in my second language has been incredibly challenging," she said. "You have to use context clues and make guesses based on what you know."

But even for students working closer to home, challenges abound. Isabel Olson, one of Basso's classmates, used a department research grant to travel to Stanford University, where she investigated archival documents concerning the controversial 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment. But she approached her visit with a touch of anxiety about what she would—or wouldn't—find.

"There was no way to know exactly what was in the archives until I was there," said Olson. "I felt pressure to make the most of my limited time and feared the possibility of traveling to Stanford only to be disappointed with what I found."

Moreover, time in the archive can be lonesome. Though the thesis allows students to pursue unique and highly individualized interests, it also demands they spend hours sifting through material on their own—an experience 2019 honors graduate Meghan Clark described as "somewhat isolating."

"Always remember to seek out networks of support and create a work schedule that allows you to be human and whole throughout the process," said Clark, who won the John A. Williams History Award for best American history thesis for her project, "Detoxifying the System: DDT, Citizen Action, and the Efficacy of Multi-Approach Activism."

Despite these challenges, students continue to pursue independent research. On average, more than twenty History undergraduates complete theses every year, making it one of the largest honors programs in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. Why do students continue to flock to such a demanding exercise in self-discipline and grit?

Clark offered an answer: The Honors Program offers students the rare opportunity to crystallize their undergraduate work and explore their lingering questions and curiosities.

"The thesis tied together my interests in modern environmentalism, citizen action in social movements, and the origins of environmental law, which I studied throughout my undergraduate years," she said. "On top of that, I wanted to learn more about the intersections of various social movements in the 1960s, and this subject allowed me to rethink my preconceptions about the decade."

There's also something pretty cool about seeing your name on a piece of writing the length of a short book, she said.

"You'll be amazed by the sense of accomplishment when you share that shiny, bound copy with your family and friends." ■

A THEATRICAL TWIST

Isabel Olson, a double major in History and Theater, received permission from the department to take an unconventional approach to her thesis. In addition to an academic research paper, she will also write a stage play based on her historical research of the Stanford Prison Experiment. Conducted in 1971 by Professor Philip Zimbardo, the study randomly divided students into prisoners and guards. It was shut down after only a week when the simulated guards displayed inhumane behavior against the simulated prisoners.

"I believe that knowing how to properly research and frame a story is essential to being a playwright and historian," Olson said. Writing a play will give her the opportunity to explore conflicting perspectives of the experiment and will make the story she's telling accessible to broader audiences. "My research will reach people who might not otherwise sit down to read an academic paper," she said.