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# Archives, Artwork, and a Garden: The John Stokes and Mary's Gardens Collection at the University of Dayton

## **Abstract**

The University of Dayton hosted a unique exhibit in the spring of 2017 highlighting the John Stokes and Mary's Gardens archival collection. In addition to materials from the collection, the exhibit also featured a live garden with flowers named for the Blessed Virgin Mary inside the library, and specially commissioned artwork by artist Holly Schapker. The library was able to reach different audiences and hopes this will serve as an example in thinking of more interactive ways for visitors to experience an archival exhibit.

## **Keywords**

exhibit, archives, garden, artwork, interactive, Blessed Virgin Mary

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

Kayla Harris is the Archivist for the Marian Library at the University of Dayton and is responsible for managing the library's archival collections including manuscripts, visual resources, and ephemera. Her primary responsibilities include the arrangement and description of materials, reference services, and outreach, with the goal of making the Marian Library's unique materials accessible. Prior to working at the University of Dayton, Kayla was a Records Manager for Clinton County, Ohio. Her interest in gardens however, originated with her internship with the Archives of American Gardens at the Smithsonian Institution.

Kayla would like to thank and acknowledge the Stokes family for their generous donation and the multitude of people involved with the Mary's Garden exhibit. Special thanks goes to Marketing and Outreach Librarian, Katy Kelly, who chaired the exhibit planning committee, and Director of the Marian Library, Sarah Cahalan.



Figure 1 A Mary garden at the University of Dayton.

*“And brightly the lady looked forward to a day when ‘the right man’ would turn up...a gardener who would make it the passion of his life to choir Our Lady’s glories in blossoms, so that with each week a new crop of lady-flowers would open from the mid-weeks of March till the first frost.”*

When John S. Stokes Jr. read these words in the article “Lillie Tower” by J.J. Galvin in *Our Lady’s Digest*, tears rose in his eyes. These words would inspire his work with Mary gardens--gardens that were brimming with plants and flowers that had once been associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary. Stokes would dedicate his life over the next several decades to creating a Mary garden movement from his home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to make these historical plant names commonplace again. His research on Marian plant names led to the creation of the business enterprise Mary’s Gardens, that sold seed packets with the traditional names. Stokes’ outreach efforts to make Mary gardens accessible for everyone began with the realization that he was the gardener Mrs. Frances Crane Lillie had imagined.

The Mary’s Gardens organization was founded in Philadelphia in 1951 by John Stokes and Edward McTague to research the flowers and plants symbolically linked to the Blessed Virgin Mary in medieval times. Once the historical names were compiled into comprehensive lists, Stokes and McTague hoped the practice of creating gardens dedicated to Mary could be revived as a unique devotional practice. Traditional Marian plant names can be traced back through early botanical and folklore dictionaries. This was especially true in England, known as

“Mary’s England” prior to the Reformation in which the Church of England split from the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Flowers are a device for visual storytelling – these flowers could remind people of Mary’s virtues, events in her life, or even her physical attributes by looking at them in bloom in the countryside. For example, lavender, also known as Mary’s Drying Plant, has a story behind its alternate name. According to the legend, Mary placed the infant Jesus’ clothes on the lavender bush to dry. When the clothes were dry, the lavender had absorbed its signature sweet fragrance from the infant’s clothing. Many plants unfortunately lost their name association with Mary post-Reformation when many in England wanted to distance themselves from what was seen as idolization.

Mrs. Frances Crane Lillie, a parishioner at St. Joseph’s Parish in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, had learned of Mary gardens during her travels to England. Along with two stone bell towers, she gifted the parish a modest Mary garden with the hopes that someone would come along to finish her work as described in her interview with *Our Lady’s Digest*.



Figure 2 John Stokes in a Mary garden, 1962.

## THE COLLECTION

The Marian Library is a special library at the University of Dayton with the mission to make Mary better known, loved, and served. Physically and administratively, the Marian Library is part of the main library on campus, Roesch Library. As a Catholic Marianist University, the Marian Library is a significant expression of the unique identity of the University of Dayton and contains one of the largest collections in the world related to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The John Stokes and Mary’s Gardens collection came to the University of Dayton in 2013 in over 125 boxes, or 220 linear feet. The archivist for the Marian Library at the time, Jillian Ewalt, along with students and volunteers, spent close to 300 hours processing the

collection for future use by researchers. Donated by his children and stepson, the collection contained articles, research notes, seed catalogs, correspondence, photographs, audio recordings, and other ephemera related to the Mary's Gardens business. Pamphlets and brochures also document his diverse interests related to Catholicism, sustainability, social justice, civil rights, and ecumenism.

Acquisition of this collection made it the largest archival collection in the Marian Library and discussions regarding an exhibit began shortly after the completion of processing. Instead of just telling visitors about Mary gardens, the library wanted them to experience one – the vibrant colors, the fresh smell of flowers, and the ability to reflect quietly on a bench amidst nature.



Figure 3 Archival collections displayed on the second floor of Roesch Library.

## THE EXHIBIT

Echoing the words of Mrs. Frances Crane Lillie, the Mary's Gardens exhibit came alive on three floors within the library during the "mid weeks of March" in 2017. The Mary garden was installed in the gallery space on the first floor of the library. It was in a prominent location for visitors and students to see as they entered the building and was a way to not only complement the collection from the Marian Library, but also continue the movement that John Stokes had started.

The exhibit planning committee worked with members of the Library Advisory Council (LAC), similar to a friends group, for assistance with promotion and marketing to new audiences. LAC members distributed event flyers to local gardening groups, and press releases and media interviews from library employees attracted many first time visitors to the library.

For the design, installation, and maintenance of the garden, University Libraries collaborated with Grunder Landscaping, a local Dayton company. The Office of Advancement fostered that connection by introducing owner Marty Grunder, a University of Dayton alum, to

the exhibit planning committee. Grunder Landscaping took care of most of the logistical issues posed by having a garden indoors. Workers watered the plants daily and checked for any signs of insects. The flowers and plants remained in containers down in the mulch so that they could easily rotate out if they wilted. The front section of the garden also changed every two weeks with a fresh batch of different flowers to reflect what would be in bloom during each of the four seasons. This encouraged visitors to make more than one trip to see each iteration of the garden.

To provide context for the garden and to highlight more of the John Stokes and Mary's Gardens collection, the second floor of the library featured a more traditional take on an archival exhibit. Several cases displayed materials and reproductions from the collection with each case answering a question. The first case tackled "What is a Mary Garden?" and showed the diverse examples of what a Mary garden could mean to different people – whether that was a garden affiliated with a parish, or a small dish garden in an apartment window. Other cases gave an overview of John Stokes' life; the inspiration he found at Woods Hole; how Catholicism in the United States changed after Vatican II; and issues like sustainability and social justice based on the various pamphlets Stokes collected.

The Marian Library is located on the seventh floor of the main library and features an art gallery space at the front entrance. For the Mary's Gardens exhibit, Cincinnati-based artist Holly Schapker created a series of commissioned paintings connecting events in Mary's life with flowers. The Marian Library featured some of Schapker's work in a previous exhibit but this was the first time that specific artwork was commissioned specifically to connect with an exhibit in the main library. Throughout the twenty-four oil paintings that Schapker created in just under two years, Mary is portrayed in different periods through history, and through different ethnicities and cultures. Visitors to the exhibit connected deeply with seeing Mary in every woman, while learning about specific events in her life and the legends behind the flower associations.



Figure 5 Social justice pamphlets in an exhibit case.



*Figure 6 What's Brewing at Roesch Library: Mary's Biergarten.*

## **THE CONNECTIONS**

From the early stages of the planning process, committee members wanted to make the Mary's Gardens exhibit an immersive experience for the campus and community. Targeted outreach to instructors brought several classes to the exhibit from different departments like Women and Gender Studies, Medieval History, and even a Graphic Design course. A website form allowed community groups to request a more personalized tour in addition to the self-guided tour handouts that were available so that the connections between the three floors were clearly articulated.

On the exhibit website, a submission form was created to learn more about people's personal stories with Mary gardens. Respondents were asked to provide their location and any information they wished to share about a Mary garden they currently maintained or whether they had plans for one in the future. Submissions came from across the United States and Canada, and the respondents were connected to each other via email as a way to foster and grow community. Submissions continued to be received long after the close of the exhibit, hinting that there might be more even people interested in Mary gardens.

Another way that the library leveraged the exhibit and encouraged the campus to experience the garden was through an event known as "What's Brewing at Roesch Library." Held for the second time, the event is specifically for University of Dayton faculty and staff over the age of 21. After spring semester grades are due, but before faculty have left campus for the summer, the library hosted a beer tasting as a way to get people inside the building. This spring's event was themed as "Mary's Biergarten" and featured six craft beers from three local breweries that incorporated flowers and herbs associated with Mary. Not surprisingly, the event was hugely popular and the library was able to promote the exhibit and gather feedback on other library-related initiatives, such as an upcoming renovation, while faculty and staff enjoyed beer and snacks.



Figure 7 Visitors viewing artwork by Holly Schapker in the Marian Library gallery.

## THE FUTURE

Flowers only live so long, and although the exhibit officially ended in May 2017, the library is continuing to think about ways to use this special archival collection in the future. The paintings by Holly Schapker were extremely popular, and the Marian Library gallery had some of the highest attendance numbers to date during the exhibit. Since the paintings are now part of the Marian Library art collection, plans are being finalized for a traveling exhibit.

The family of John Stokes has been closely involved since the donation, and they were delighted to see their father's world brought back to life when they all attended the opening reception. More materials have recently been found and are being boxed up and shipped as an additional donation. Part of the original donation included audio files on reel-to-reel and cassette tapes, which are in the process of being digitized. This is especially exciting, as the library does not have a way to play the reel-to-reel files, so discovering what information these hold will potentially open up other avenues for further use of the collection.

Bringing live plants into the library on purpose is a bold choice. With careful planning and thoughtful consideration regarding logistics, the University of Dayton was able to take that wild idea and turn it into a colorful reality.

*View a portion of the John Stokes and Mary's Gardens collection online at [http://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri\\_stokes/](http://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_stokes/)*