

Memorial Minute for Josephine Ott
Written and read by Ann Leone at the January 30, 2019 Faculty Meeting

Josephine Ott died this past November. Jo received her B.A. and M.A. from Wellesley College, and her Ph.D. from Yale University. She taught at Smith from 1958 until 1992. Her obituary in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* is a testament to her extraordinary life among us, most especially as a mentor, teacher, friend, and legendary director of Smith's junior year in Paris. Those of us who studied with her or spent a junior year in Paris with her, loved, revered, or admired her—or all three. Jo was a leader, an articulate, forceful defender of the program and a champion of its intellectual and cultural value for our students and for Smith.

Over and over, Jo's students echo each other; their words amount to an abiding message of love, respect, and friendship. "She epitomizes—in her high standards, her ethics, and her genuine interest—the best of Smith" (Talia Schenkel, '63) "As our language skills improved, so did our world view open up and our confidence grow." (Gillian Martin Sorenson '63) "The year in Paris with Miss Ott" formed the core of my Smith education." Rebecca Rabinow '88 remembers such a formative moment: "In the Musée Matisse, I saw a room full of illustrated books that Matisse had created that I didn't know about. French professor Josephine Ott later told me, "Every now and then you can see when someone's life has changed and that's what I witnessed with you. We couldn't get you out of that room.'" That is Jo's voice, direct, warm, and strikingly perceptive.

All of us, alumnae, other friends, and colleagues, remember Jo as hostess, with awe. In alumnae letters, I read over and over about the combination of elegance and pleasure people felt at her brunches, lunches, cocktail parties, receptions, and dinners. I recall dinners at her house, elegant but also full of wide-ranging talk, sometimes serious, and sometimes rowdy.

I believe that Jo's great contribution to Smith was her teaching. I'm going to quote Ruth Simmons, from her first convocation speech in 1995, because she could have been describing Jo. I will change 'he' to 'she'. This is Ruth, speaking about her "greatest mentor": "[She] did not patronize me or humor me. [She] did not try to make me feel good about myself. [She] criticized my work when [she] needed to and pointed to the strengths of it when they were manifest. Ruth continued: "...Learning at its best is jarring. It takes our preconceptions and shakes them up....It takes our smugness and blows it out of the water. ...You must demand that high standards be set for you. You must demand that evaluations of your work be critical and honest and not patronizing."

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I studied with Jo and can attest to the rigor and passion of her teaching. I took two seminars with her in my senior year. In her seminar on Balzac, her teaching was passionate, fiery, demanding, exciting, inspiring, sometimes terrifying, always riveting. I will never forget her in the classroom, and I will always wish I were that kind of teacher. That Balzac seminar decided me to go to graduate school to study French language, literature and culture.

Jo had a rigorous, fearless intellect, taking on Balzac as her major area of research, with special attention to Henry James' critical essays on Balzac. She wrote for the *Année Balzacienne*, the place to be for Balzac scholars, and she worked on a translation of Henry James' essays on Balzac during the later years of her career at Smith.

I will close with words from Emeritae Professors Mary Ellen Birkett and Marilyn Schuster.

Mary Ellen: "Jo Ott was bigger than life, an indomitable institution, a force of nature. She was every bit as imperious as De Gaulle, and as understatedly elegant as Queen Elizabeth – with her own "je ne sais quoi" of French style and irony. Her intelligence was as penetrating as that of Henry James, her party-giving skills on a par with those of Julia Child, and her magisterial bearing that of a character from a Balzac novel. She was a dynamic teacher, a devoted director of the Smith Junior Year Abroad in Paris, and a thorough Francophile. She will always be remembered as one of the Grandest of Grandes Dames."

Marilyn: "Jo was Chair of the French department when I was hired in 1971. From the moment I was interviewed at a lunch in her apartment on Crescent Street, I recognized her as a woman with a formidable mind who was a power in the department; she was also an elegant and generous hostess as I would appreciate time and again over the years. I could see from the start that she had a quick, laser wit that could pierce your heart before you realized what had happened."

Passionate, fiery, demanding, exciting, inspiring, sometimes terrifying, always riveting. "De la classe," without snobbery, and with a direct, breathtakingly generous, lavish and sometimes rowdy—I'm saying it again—style. Balzac would have loved her.