



HARRY RANSOM  
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[www.hrc.utexas.edu](http://www.hrc.utexas.edu)

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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**Web Exhibition Explores History, Connections  
Between Visitors to Greenwich Village Bookshop**

AUSTIN, Texas-- The Harry Ransom Center's web exhibition "The Greenwich Village Bookshop Door: A Portal to Bohemia, 1920–1925" uses a door from a book shop owned by Frank Shay in Greenwich Village in the early 1920s as an entryway into the lives, careers and relationships of New York bohemians of that era. The door is signed on both sides by more than 240 artists, writers, publishers and other notable habitués of the bohemian scene in New York City at the time, and the web exhibition uses the signatures to reconstruct the intersecting communities that made Greenwich Village famous as an epicenter of Modernism.

The Ransom Center, a humanities research library and museum at The University of Texas at Austin, will launch the web exhibition on Sept. 1 at [www.hrc.utexas.edu/bookshopdoor](http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/bookshopdoor).

As early as 1921, noteworthy visitors to Frank Shay's bookshop, located at 4 Christopher Street in the heart of the Village, began signing the narrow door that opened into the store's back room. When the shop closed in 1925, manager Juliette Koenig preserved the door. The Ransom Center purchased the door in 1960 and added it to the collection of Christopher Morley, who was a patron of the shop and a friend of many of the door's signers. The Center published a brief article about the door in 1972 in "The Library Chronicle," but the door has never been investigated thoroughly.

Many of the signatures on the door represent significant figures in the literary Modernism canon: Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis and Vachel Lindsay. Many more are remembered for their roles in the Greenwich Village and wider New York intellectual scenes. Other signers include founders of the Provincetown players, the theater troupe that launched Eugene O'Neill's career, as well as Hollywood screenwriters, "bohemian" characters, book designers, cartoonists and pilgrims to the Village.

"One of the most satisfying parts of this project has been learning about the lesser-known people who signed the door, almost all of whom were known well in their day, such as arctic explorers, bestselling novelists I've never heard of, minor actors and suffrage activists," said Ransom Center Cline Curator of Literature Molly Schwartzburg. "In the web exhibition, each of these individuals receives as much attention as a Theodore Dreiser or a Sinclair



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Lewis.”

The web exhibition allows visitors to learn about all of the identified signatures on the door. Surfing from signature to signature, from name to name and from thematic tag to thematic tag, visitors can view more than 300 pages that explore the lives, work and relationships of the door's signers. Each page is tagged with keywords that can be used to explore the thematic associations—Booksellers, Cartoonists, Socialism and Famous Bohemians, for example—between the individuals.

Like many Village businesses, the shop was as much an intellectual and social enterprise as a commercial one. Founder Frank Shay not only ran the shop, he also published a newspaper, books and a poetry magazine from the same address. The shop stocked publications that mirrored its range of customers: socialist little magazines and commercial weeklies, avant-garde poetry and best-selling novels, children's picture books and the latest censored shocker.

"While this project is primarily historical, it is also topical: the growth of virtual social networking and the demise of brick-and-mortar bookshops in the United States are both topics worthy of reconsideration in the historical context of this artifact," said Schwartzburg. "As we all know, bookselling and buying have changed dramatically in recent years. Not long ago, bookshops were important to the social and intellectual community of any given city or town, and as that changes it is important to understand the history of bookshops, both as businesses and as gathering places."

The web exhibition also highlights an item from the Center's collections related to each identified signature on the door. The connections found through the door may open up unexpected paths of inquiry into the Center's collections and reveal research and teaching opportunities, as well as connections and influences that are otherwise forgotten.

"One of the goals of this project has been to see how far the Ransom Center's collections can go in helping us to reconstruct the shop," said Schwartzburg. "Remarkably, we have succeeded in finding items related to almost every individual who signed the door."

While 190 of the signatures have been identified, more than 50 remain unidentified. Web visitors and scholars of Greenwich Village, modernism, theater, publishing and other fields can study the remaining unidentified signature and submit suggestions through an online form.

The exhibition will also have a section with educator resources geared toward high school teachers in language arts, visual arts, history and theater classes.

A gallery exhibition of the same name will complement the web exhibition. The gallery exhibition, which runs from Sept. 6, 2011, through Jan. 22, 2012, reconstructs the shop and its Greenwich Village context through artifacts found across the Ransom Center's collections. The door itself can be seen in the gallery exhibition.

High-resolution press images from the exhibition are available.



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