

OLIPHANT

UNPACKING THE ARCHIVE

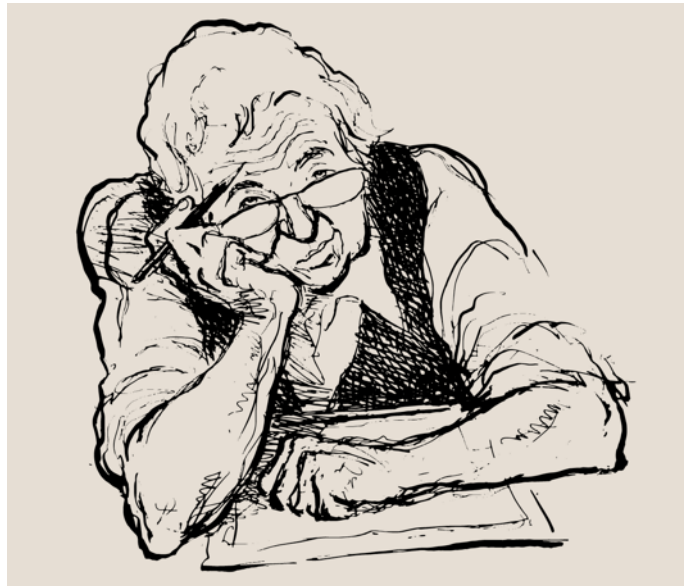
Celebrating the recent acquisition of editorial cartoonist Patrick Oliphant's voluminous archive, this exhibition juxtaposes cartoon drawings, sculpture, and paintings with manuscripts, correspondence, and personal effects. It tells the fullest story yet of the most influential caricaturist of American politics and culture in the last half century.

On view September 23, 2019 – May 30, 2020 in the Main Gallery of Harrison/Small

Oliphant.lib.virginia.edu

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW:

In 2018, the UVA Library acquired almost 7,000 drawings, watercolors, prints, sculptures, and sketchbooks from Patrick and Susan Oliphant. Complementing the original art is a wealth of archival material including correspondence, photographs, professional papers, scrapbooks, and audio and video recordings. The collection documents the career of the most influential visual satirist of the last half-century, and perhaps the last great political cartoonist in newsprint.



Naturally endowed with a certain skepticism of the status quo, a love of drawing, and little formal training, Oliphant began his career at eighteen working as a copy boy in Adelaide, Australia. When he joined the Denver Post in 1964 he introduced a linear

fluency and wit—a studied awareness of adversary traditions from Hogarth, Goya, and Daumier to David Low—as well as an expansive literary imagination and conceptual reach previously unknown to American newspaper audiences. His swift rise to prominence, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1967, was followed by five decades of sustained, uncompromising work.

What happens when a talented artist takes up the profession of political cartooning and utilizes all the tools in his considerable arsenal to send a message? In the hands of Oliphant, combinations of text and image incisively communicated often subversive arguments which slipped past anxious editorial boards. Covering thirteen presidential administrations, he lampooned the powerful, called the corrupt to account, and pitilessly exposed hypocrisy. From Watergate to Bridgegate, from Duoshade to digital delivery—while newspaper publishers consolidated print publications and moved from page to screen, Oliphant became the most widely syndicated, most emulated political cartoonist in America—thereby shaping the political consciousness of generations. As newspapers continue to fold or merge, and the number of editorial cartoonists drops from hundreds to dozens nationally, Oliphant’s archive is an essential resource on Oliphant’s visual satire in the final great era of newspaper print journalism. In the end, the unique performances of Oliphant’s images transcend the particulars of time and place to reify universal traits of human character and human foibles.

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LIBRARY

SELECTED IMAGES FROM THE EXHIBITION

Download print-quality images (.zip, 200MB):

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Patrick Oliphant Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library

Lyndon Johnson (as centaur)

1984

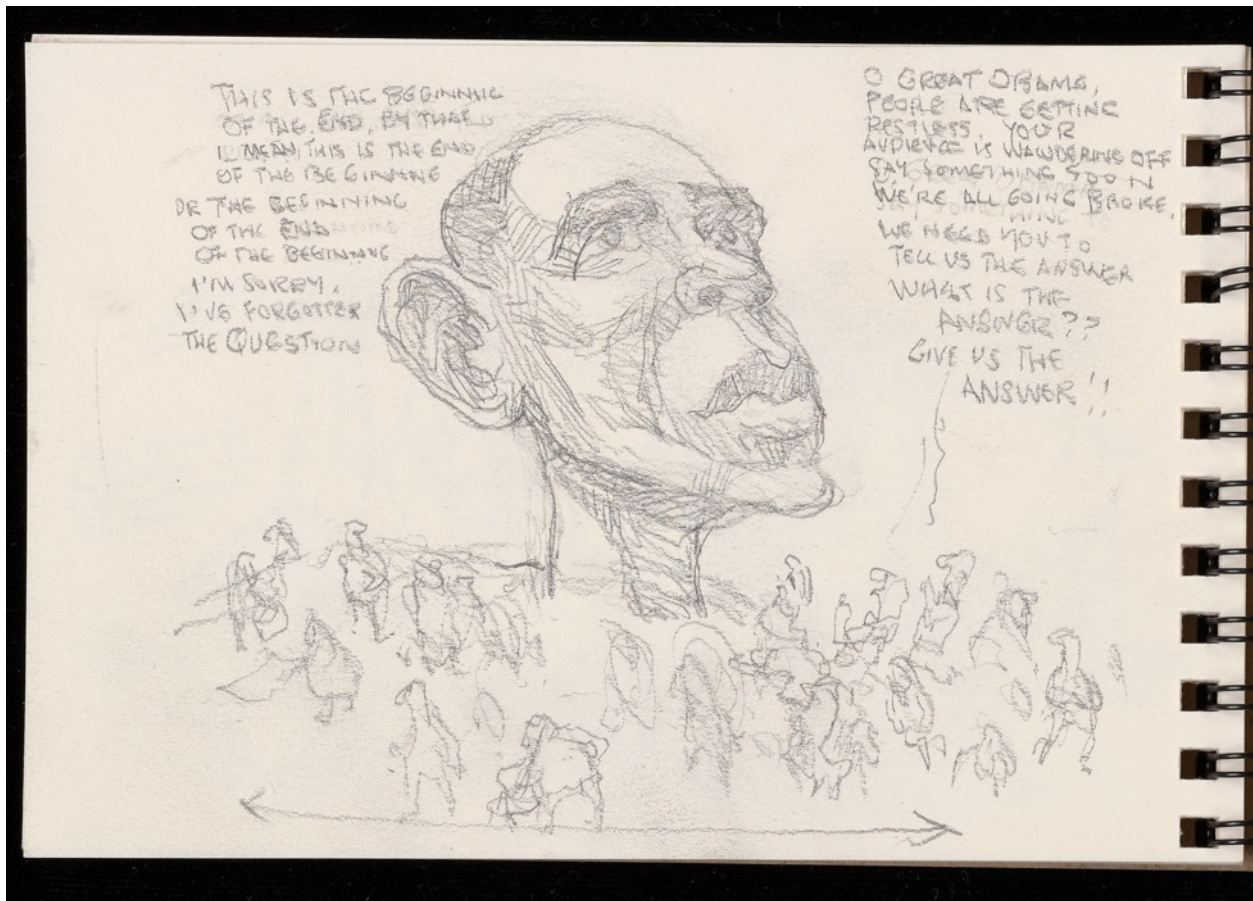
Bronze, Edition 4/12

18" x 7 ½" x 14"



Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–1973) was president when Oliphant left Australia to work for the *Denver Post* in 1964. Johnson, who had assumed the presidency in the wake of the Kennedy assassination in 1963, won the 1964 election, defeating Barry Goldwater in a tidal wave of approval that also secured large Democratic majorities in the House and the Senate. As Oliphant observed, “He had power and reveled in it.” Between 1964 and 1969, Johnson expanded the social safety net with landmark legislation such as Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. He addressed racial discrimination through the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968. Concurrently, through relentless dissembling, Johnson’s flawed prosecution of the war in Vietnam eroded public trust.

Sculpting Johnson some sixteen years after he left office and twelve years after his death, Oliphant shows him as a strong leader driven by ego and appetite: a centaur who is an authoritative man from the waist up — ever the Texan with the cowboy hat, confidently scanning the horizon — but a beast below the waist, standing on four legs, a wild, licentious, and unpredictable steed capable of destroying all that he created in a flash.



“O, Great Obama”

Pencil sketch

[2009]

Pencil in sketchbook

Researchers interested in the artistic process will find ample evidence of how Oliphant’s daily cartoon drawings developed. Shown here is one of Oliphant’s well-known tropes: Barack Obama as an Easter Island head.

The sketchbook is the artist’s first attempt to put an idea on paper. Many are remarkably close to the final drawing, while sometimes, Oliphant tests two or more versions of an idea (in the facsimile of this sketchbook sitting on the case, note another effort to visualize the Easter Island head). A key addition to the final drawing is the tiny penguin Punk. Like some of the other worshippers, he is walking away from his idol in mute frustration.

Also shown is the syndicate’s print of the original drawing, known as a “slick.” Slicks can be an important resource for researchers, and the collection contains many thousands. Many of Oliphant’s drawings are in private collections, and a published cartoon can be extremely difficult to track down, since cartoons are generally redacted from digital scans in newspaper archives due to copyright concerns.

George H. W. Bush as Mary Poppins

n.d.

Watercolor

12.7" x 20"

George H. W. Bush (1924–2018), President of the United States from 1989 to 1993, was best known for his interest in foreign affairs. He was a combat veteran, the youngest fighter pilot to enlist in World War II, Ambassador to the United Nations for Richard Nixon, and liaison to China for Gerald Ford. Early in his presidency, he led an international coalition that resulted in the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait. By contrast, despite his instrumental role in the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act and the Clean Air Act, Bush's vision on domestic policy was often underfunded and poorly communicated. Oliphant often equated Bush's attitudes toward the lives and problems of ordinary citizens as one of a nanny monitoring the needs of her charges. In this watercolor we look up at President Bush floating down from the sky like Mary Poppins, complete with umbrella and carpet bag—the detached, magical perspective bespeaks the wealth and privilege that in Bush's case extended back three generations.



The Reverend Ron's Jonestown Economics

1982

Pen and ink



Sui generis, in Latin, means unique. Political cartoonist Patrick Oliphant is exactly that.

In Washington, Oliphant made the mighty squirm as he joyfully skewered them. No ideological bias was ever detected as he ran roughshod over all, invoking gales of laughter for some while others assumed the fetal position.

The Reagan years were no different. He portrayed Soviets as oafish — but so too the American labor movement. Uncle

Sam was depicted as a boozy, overweight W. C. Fields in striped pants. Feminists were drawn as the Nordic Brunhilda, complete with lance, horned helmet, and shield. George H. W. Bush always had a purse on his arm, driving the Republican leader around the bend. Reagan was lampooned — though sometimes gently — drawn as a handsome if older man.

His sharpest barbs were often saved for the U.S. Post Office, NASA, Ferdinand Marcos, the IRA, and Reagan aides Ed Meese, Al Haig, Don Regan, and Ann Burford (head of the EPA) but also Democrats such as Gary Hart and Michael Dukakis. Ollie North (who caused a huge scandal in Reagan's second term) was among them.

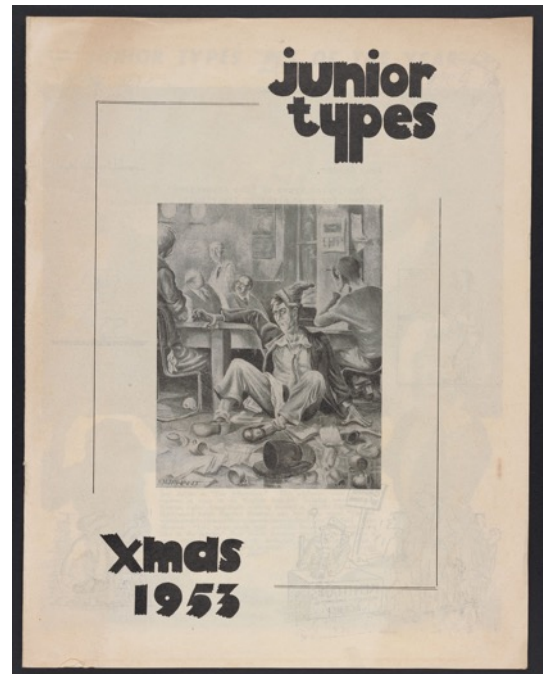
Throughout the 1980s, Oliphant did not shy away from social commentary and took on Affirmative Action, corporate corruption, and the nuclear freeze movement. One cartoon skewered "Hands Across America," a public relations stunt supposedly supporting AIDS victims. Oliphant, with his stiletto for a pen and his rapier-like wit, was always on point, his illustrations the subject of Georgetown cocktail chatter, and he always challenged the powerful of Washington.

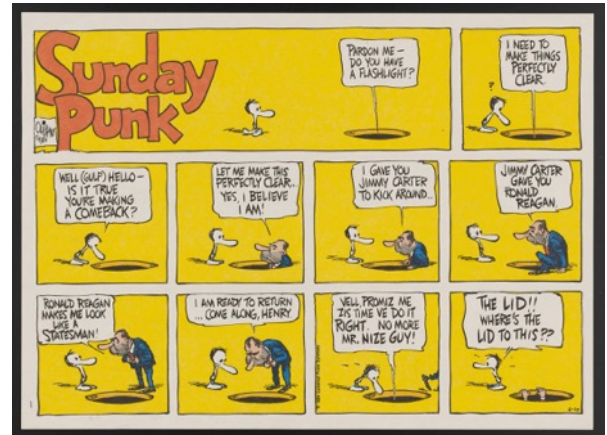
Junior Types, Xmas Edition (Adelaide: The Advertiser, 1953)

Oliphant grew up in a small cabin outside Adelaide. It was a solitary childhood, and he was to choose a solitary profession. He took traditional drawing classes for a time, learning perspective and doing figure studies, but quit before long. He preferred to learn informally, both on the job and by studying the work of other artists.

His career in journalism began in 1952, when as a teenager, he began working as a copy boy for Adelaide's evening tabloid newspaper, *The News*, which had recently been inherited by a young Rupert Murdoch. In 1953, he moved to the *News*'s rival *The Advertiser*, where he soon began working as a press artist, drawing maps and retouching photographs. By 1955, he was drawing editorial cartoons.

The archive preserves a remarkable range of Oliphant's early work, showing the young artist testing various styles and exhibiting a range of aesthetic influences.





Sunday Punk: “Pardon me, do you have a flashlight?”

Sketch

[1984]

Pencil in sketchbook

Printer’s Proof

1984

Offset print

Punk, the small penguin in Oliphant’s daily cartoons, has been beloved by readers from his earliest appearance in the Adelaide Advertiser in the 1950s. Some readers feel as strongly about Punk as they do about the real-life subject of a daily drawing. Many first hunt for Punk, then read the cartoon, and finally return to see how Oliphant has used the penguin to add a final layer of commentary to that day’s editorial.

Punk’s charm belies the added depth and rhetorical complexity he brings to every cartoon in which he appears (his rare absence is worth noting). He can be quizzical, clueless, bemused, cynical. He is often an innocent bystander, at other times very much the weary journalist, and sometimes even a sly co-conspirator. He is often in conversation with another tiny figure.

In 1984, Oliphant agreed to turn Punk into the hero of his own Sunday comic. The experiment didn’t last long: on top of daily deadlines, the labor to produce work each week for the funny pages—including penciled codes for every patch of color—proved too much and Oliphant decided not to continue less than a year into the experiment. The archive contains many examples of Sunday Punk original drawings and proofs, as well as a handful of original newspaper pages on which it appeared.

[Jimmy Carter and his staff], Unidentified photographer

ca. 1980



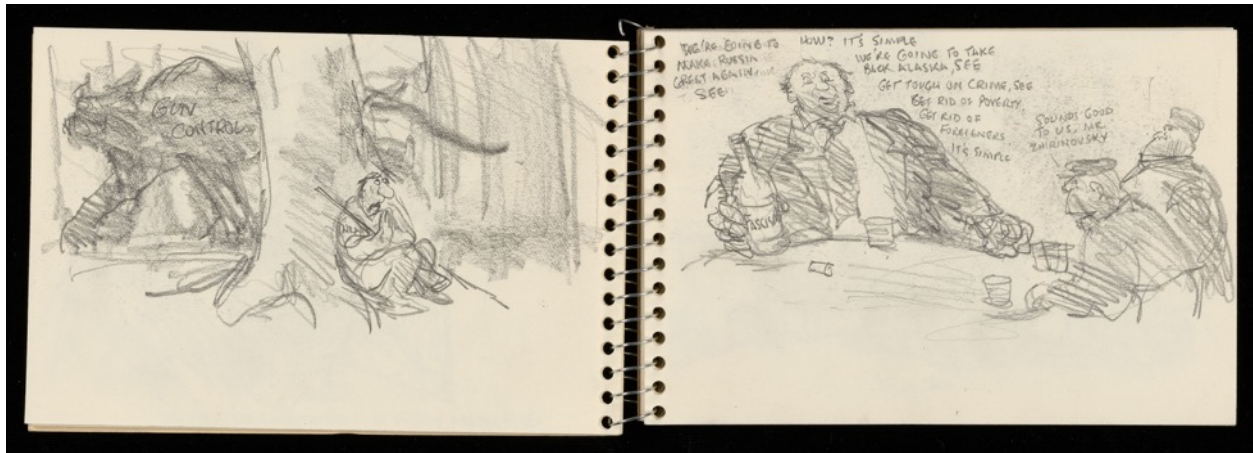
The archive contains numerous letters from readers expressing offense when the *Washington Star* published a large Oliphant panel cartoon of an imagined Jimmy Carter White House with stereotypical redneck adornments: tires hanging from trees, cars with their hoods open on the lawn, and an outhouse in the back. Four years later, he published a similar piece called “Foah Moah Yeahs,” adding insult to injury. Carter and his staff documented their delight for posterity when viewing the new work.

Printing Plate of Oliphant’s Pulitzer Prize-winning Cartoon, *Denver Post*,

first published 1 February 1966

Oliphant’s list of awards is long, but he is ambivalent about the value of such recognition. He has famously criticized the Pulitzer for decades. When he made his first submission to the award, he intentionally submitted this cartoon with other, stronger selections. Not only did he feel it was one of his less sophisticated works, but it had been “mauled” by an editor before publication. As he predicted, it was selected as the winning cartoon for the year, and Oliphant was certain it was chosen for its politics rather than its quality. Two years after his Pulitzer, Oliphant received the highest honor in cartooning, the Reuben Award for Outstanding Artist.





Sketchbook spread: Gun control, “we’re going to make Russia great again, see”

September 12, 1992

The archive contains 186 sketchbooks, mostly 6 x 4 in. pads, which Oliphant began saving in the 1980s. The sampling of sketchbook drawings on display here “hatch” satirical scenarios for a range of characters from the Reagan to Obama administrations.

The sketchbook is a testing ground — a vehicle or well-spring for Oliphant’s energetic, non-committal drawing technique. In it, the artist’s imagination can flow through and respond to the movement of the pencil —literally, as Paul Klee said, take a “walk with a line,” working out problems of concept, composition, and expression to arrive at new pictorial discoveries. In this way, a line of thought becomes synonymous with a drawn line. For example, in one sketch from 1984, Oliphant’s line plays with the pictorial gravity to show Reagan upside down “hanging on” for a second term. The pictorial physics of this idea of “hanging on” reappears later in the contours of Oliphant’s sculpture of a whirling bronco attempting to shed its rider (also on view in the gallery). Once when asked whether the drawing or the idea was most important to the political cartoon, Oliphant refused to choose: “I say it’s both.”