
Guide to the Olivia Converse Papers

Collection number: MS-04

Cheadle Center for Biodiversity and Ecological Restoration
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California

Processed by:

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Date Completed:

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Encoded by:

Laurie Hannah

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Olivia Converse papers

Dates: 1939-1971

Collection number: MS-04

Creator: Converse, Olivia L.

Collection Size: 4 linear feet 5 boxes

Repository: Cheadle Center for Biodiversity and Ecological Restoration (University of California, Santa Barbara). C. H. Muller Library
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9615

Abstract: Correspondence, manuscript, artwork and photographs related to Olivia Converse's writings about Mexican plants.

Languages: Languages represented in the collection: English Spanish; Castilian Nahuatl languages

Access

Collection is open for research.

Publication Rights

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Preferred Citation

Olivia Converse papers, MS-04, Cheadle Center for Biodiversity and Ecological Restoration. University of California, Santa Barbara.

Acquisition Information

The collection came to UCSB through professor C. H. Muller, a friend and colleague of Converse. Muller was one of three people named in Converse's will who had the power to make decisions about her unfinished manuscript and botanical drawings. The two others were Annetta Carter, a botanist at UC Berkeley, and Isabel Kelly, an anthropologist in Mexico. It is clear, from correspondence in the Muller papers (see MS-01, box 2 folder 36) and letters in this collection, that Muller intended to offer all of Converse's papers and drawings to the Hunt Institute in Pittsburgh. However, after most of the material was consolidated at UCSB in 1987, Herbarium Curator Wayne Ferren made the decision to keep the collection at UCSB. The original set of drawings and one box of papers resided at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden library, where Muller's wife Katherine was director until 1975. There is no documentation to indicate why they were there. In an effort to bring all the Converse materials together, the drawings and papers were transferred from the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden to the Cheadle Center in 2008 to be kept on permanent loan.

Processing Information

Arrangement and description of this collection was funded by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Biography / Administrative History

Olivia Poole Long Converse was born November 23, 1898. She was the daughter of Louis Long. According to her friend Isabel Kelly, she was raised in California and attended UC Berkeley. She married George P. Converse, grandson of Edmund Cogswell Converse, former president of U.S. Steel, in 1922 and they were subsequently divorced in 1928. She lived part time in Santa Barbara and also spent much of her time in Valle de Bravo, a town located on a large lake, about two hours from Mexico City. While in Mexico, she worked on a book on garden plants of Mexico writing the text and making original drawings of about 70 plants she hoped to describe. Her yearly stays in Mexico were interrupted by the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and she was unable to go back until 1944 to resume work on her book. In 1946, she had a showing of her drawings at the Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin in Mexico City, sponsored by the Instituto de Biología de la Universidad Nacional and the Sociedad Botánica de México. A 16-page catalog was published containing the text that accompanied the pictures. Converse also illustrated the cover of an issue of the Sociedad's Boletín in 1948. While she worked on her book, she collected many plants from the wild and sent specimens to both Mexican and American botanists for identification. On the advice of Maunsell van Rensselaer, Director of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, she collected a voucher specimen for each plant so there would be no future questions regarding their identification. Many if not most of those specimens were deposited at the Jepson Herbarium, UC Berkeley. Some of her specimens are also in the herbaria at the U.S. National Herbarium, the New York Botanical Garden and the Missouri Botanical Garden. Two plants she collected were new to science and were named after her: *Aristolochia conversiae* H.W. Pfeifer and *Erythrina oliviae* Krukoff. Converse tried for a number of years to get a publisher interested in her book, to no avail. At the time of her death in 1972, her text was still very much in draft form, although she had 68 final or partially completed drawings. Her friends and colleagues Isabel Kelly, Annetta Carter, and Cornelius Muller were tasked in her will to dispose of her manuscript and drawings. After considering publishing her work as single journal articles, the group decided to contact the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation in Pittsburgh to offer the collection to them. However, UCSB, where the collection was housed, made the decision to keep the collection for its value as a botanical art collection. In her honor, a graduate fellowship has been set up at UCSB for botanical field research in Mexico.

Scope and Content of Collection

The bulk of this collection focuses on Converse's unpublished manuscript and drawings of Mexican plants, a project she worked on during the last thirty years of her life. Included are descriptions of about 60 plants with accompanying pencil drawings. Through her book, she wanted to introduce American readers to showy and beautiful flowering trees and shrubs which have not been widely introduced here (letter to Macmillan Company, April 4, 1939). By 1961 she had broadened her scope to address a growing interest in pre-Columbian life and to show the importance of Mexican plants in Aztec culture. She added to her early descriptions evergreens of historical or economic importance, vines, fruits, and edible plants such as coffee and vanilla.

For each plant she gave its Nahuatl (Aztec) name, botanical name and any regional common name (in Spanish), as well as its native habitat, history of introduction if it was not native, medicinal or other uses, and other interesting information she found. She was interested in pre-Columbian uses of these plants and took copious notes from many historical works about Mexico. Her pencil drawings, showing flowers, fruits, and leaves, are stylized but accurate botanically. Accompanying these materials are research notes, field notes, and correspondence. Converse wrote to botanists in both the United States and Mexico for plant identification, verification of facts, and for assistance with editing. Notable correspondents include Annetta Carter and Herbert Mason from University of California, Berkeley; Maximo Martinez from the Sociedad Botánica de México, Sylvio Conzatti, Clif Smith, and E.O. Orpet. Letters are in both Spanish and English. She also received assistance from botanists Paul Standley, Richard Howard, C.H. Muller, and Harold Moore, Nahuatl expert Francisco Horcasitas, and anthropologists Bodil Christensen and Isabel Kelly.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged into 4 series: Series 1 Correspondence; Series 2 Publications; Series 3 Photographs; and Series 4 Drawings.

Indexing Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

Converse, Olivia L.

Plants, Useful--Mexico

Plants--Mexico

Drawings

Photographs

Related Material

Santa Barbara Botanic Garden Institutional Papers has correspondence between Converse and Maunsell Van Rensselaer.

Correspondence

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Box 1, Folder 1 | Correspondence 1937-1971 |
| Box 1, Folder 2 | Correspondence, Undated |
| Box 1, Folder 3 | Fernando Horcasitas 1963-1970 |
| Box 1, Folder 4 | Publishers Correspondence 1939-1960 |

Publications

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Box 1, Folder 5 | [Chapter 1] Aheuheute, <i>Taxodium mucronatum</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 6 | [Chapter 2] Oyametl, <i>Abies religiosa</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 7 | [Chapter 3] Ocote, <i>Pinus montezumae</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 8 | [Chapters 4 and 5] <i>Quercus rugosa</i> and <i>Quercus urbani</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 9 | [Chapters 7 and 8] <i>Ficus cotinifolia</i> and <i>Ficus petiolaris</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 10 | [Chapter 10] Cuauhnacatzli, <i>Enterolobium cyclocarum</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 11 | [Chapter 11] Caoba, <i>Swietenia humilis</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 12 | [Chapter 12] Habilla, <i>Hura polyandra</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 13 | [Chapter 13] Pochote, <i>Ceiba pentandra</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 14 | [Chapter 14] Guamuchil, <i>Pithecolibium dulce</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 15 | [Chapter 15] Copal, <i>Bursera glabrifolia</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 16 | [Chapter 16] Cirian, <i>Crescentia alata</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 17 | [Chapter 19] Guarumbo, <i>Cecropia schiedeana</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 18 | [Chapter 20] Sangregado, <i>Croton dreco</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 19 | [Chapter 22] Colorin, <i>Erythrina americana</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 20 | [Chapter 23] Tabachin, <i>Caesalpinia pulcherrima</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 21 | [Chapter 24] Guaje, <i>Leucaena esculenta</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 22 | [Chapter 28] Huele de Noche, <i>Cestrum nocturnum</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 23 | [Chapter 29] Floripondio, <i>Datura cornigera</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 24 | [Chapter 30] Yoyote, <i>Thevetia thevetioides</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 25 | [Chapter 31] Anacahuite, <i>Cordia boissieri</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 26 | [Chapter 34] Yoloxochitl, <i>Talauma mexicana</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 27 | [Chapter 35] Cacaloxochitl, <i>Plumeria acutifolia</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 28 | [Chapter 36] Xiloxochitl, <i>Bombax elipticum</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 29 | [Chapter 39 and 40] <i>Tabebuia pentaphylla</i> and <i>Tabebuia palmeri</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 30 | [Chapter 41] Tecomaxochitl, <i>Cochlospermum vitifolium</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 31 | [Chapter 42] Macpalxochitl, <i>Chiranthodendron pentadactylon</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 32 | [Chapter 48] Temecate, <i>Pithecoctenium echinatum</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 33 | [Chapter 49] Pinanona, <i>Monstera deliciosa</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 34 | [Chapter 50] Timbirichi, <i>Bromelia karatas</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 35 | [Chapter 51] Platanos, MUSA Specimens |
| Box 1, Folder 36 | [Chapter 53] Cuauhayotli, <i>Leucopremna mexicana</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 37 | [Chapter 55] Cuajilote, <i>Parmentiera edulis</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 38 | [Chapter 56] Texocotl, <i>Crataegus mexicana</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 39 | [Chapter 57] Atoyaxocotl, <i>Ciruela spondias</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 40 | [Chapter 58] Capulin, <i>Prunus capuli</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 41 | [Chapter 59] Guayaba, <i>Psidium guajava</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 42 | [Chapter 60] Anona, <i>Anona reticulata</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 43 | [Chapter 61] Chico Sapote, <i>Achras sapota</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 44 | [Chapter 62] Cochizapotl, <i>Casimiroa edulis</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 45 | [Chapter 63] Sapote Prieto, <i>Diospyros ebenaster</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 46 | [Chapter 64] Mamey, <i>Calocarpum mammosum</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 47 | [Chapter 65] Sapote Amarillo, <i>Lucuma salicifolia</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 48 | Nahautl Plant Names, Nahautl Words in Text |
| Box 1, Folder 49 | Converse Manuscript (Incomplete, 21 Chapters Missing) |
| Box 1, Folder 50 | Edits |
| Box 1, Folder 51 | [Black Binder #1] Research Notes and Bibliography |
| Box 1, Folder 52 | [Black Binder #2] Research Notes and Field Notes for <i>Erythrina</i> |
| Box 1, Folder 53 | [Green Binder] Research Notes |
| Box 1, Folder 54 | Notes |
| Box 1, Folder 55 | OLC [Notes and Correspondence on Manuscript Drafts] |
| Box 1, Folder 56 | Extra Material |
| Box 1, Folder 57-58 | Notes for UC Herbarium and Record Book |
| Box 1, Folder 59 | Miscellaneous Items |
| Box 1, Folder 60 | Catalago de los Dibujos de Plantas Mexicanas de Olivia Converse, Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin 1946 |

Publications

Box 1, Folder 61 **Exposicion de Dibujos de Plantas Mexicanas 1946**

Box 1, Folder 62 **Collecting Permit and Identity Card 1939**

Scope and Contents note

Includes photo of Converse.

Box 1, Folder 63 **Published Journal Cover and Obituary 1948-1973**

Scope and Contents note

Obituary appeared in Macpalxochitl Boletin Mensual de la Sociedad Botanica de Mexico , June 1973.

Box 2 **Notebooks--6 bound and spiral**

Photo_box 1 **Photographs**

Scope and Contents note

1 box of photographs of varying sizes. There is one complete set plus a partial second set of 4 x 5 photos of her drawings; additional 5 x 7 photographs of her drawings; and photos of various trees and flowers. There is also a photo of Olivia Converse and two photos of unidentified women.

Drawings

Scope and Contents note

One oversize box contains sketches, drawings in various stages, and paintings of plants and mockups for the cover of the book. The other box contains 84 finished pencil drawings.

Box 3

Miscellaneous Artwork

Box 4

Original Drawings