

**New Digital Exhibition Examines Portrayal of African Americans in American Art,
Fifty Years After Landmark Exhibition at Bowdoin College Museum of Art**

Brunswick, Maine, October 30, 2014 – On November 11, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA) will launch an online exhibition commemorating the 50th anniversary of the landmark show *The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting*, organized by the Museum at the height of the civil rights movement in 1964. The original exhibition provided a 250-year survey of the representation of African Americans in American painting. With the digital exhibition *Fifty Years Later: The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting*, the BCMA brings a 21st-century perspective to the contextual issues related to the original exhibition—demonstrating the continual significance of art and art history as catalysts for urgent social and political dialogues, then and now.

Originally curated by Marvin S. Sadik, who went on to become the BCMA director and later the director of the National Portrait Gallery, *The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting* encompassed 80 paintings from over 50 museums and private collections across the U.S. The show was one of the first ever surveys of great American paintings that represented African American subjects. Pioneering in both scope and subject, the show was critically acclaimed at the time, drew over 19,317 visitors (well over the Museum's normal annual attendance), and attracted high-profile national attention, including visits and praise from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller. Featuring major works by artists such as Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, William Sidney Mount, and John Singer Sargent, among others, the exhibition was radical for the time and place. The rural Maine college campus was then all-male and predominately white. Through the organization and promotion of this groundbreaking exhibition, Sadik forwarded a progressive curatorial perspective that merged art history with political and social commentary.

While the exhibition was a radical undertaking at the time, fifty years later—amidst continuing demographic changes in our society—the exhibition and its art historical focus are ripe for re-examination. To mark the show's 50th anniversary, the BCMA's Andrew W. Mellon Post-doctoral Curatorial Fellow Sarah Montross, Bowdoin Assistant Professor of Art History Dana E. Byrd, and New Media and Data Visualization Specialist Jack Jen Giesecking, decided to collaborate with Bowdoin students to create a digital platform that makes it possible for the general public, students, and art historians alike to re-examine the theses, art works, motivations, and social and political contexts surrounding the original exhibition. Byrd encouraged students from her spring 2014 class "Race and Visual Representation in American Art" to develop and investigate their own research topics related to the 1964 show. Delving into Bowdoin's rich archives, the students uncovered new findings, which include the background, motivations, and ambitions of the show's young curator Marvin S. Sadik; the nuances of the original show's catalogue design by the prolific and famed visual artist Leonard Baskin; the impact of King's visit to Bowdoin's campus amid the nation's tense political and social climate; detailed provenance research of each of the 80 paintings; and an in-depth analysis of Joshua Johnson's *Portrait of a Man (Abner Coker)*, ca. 1805-1810.

“As a curator, it’s a rare and rewarding experience to re-engage with as pioneering of an exhibition as Bowdoin’s 1964 show and we hope that by sharing our new research and archival materials online, we can inspire ongoing dialogue and renewed research on this pivotal exhibition,” said Montross. “Today it would be very difficult to physically bring together the 80 incredible paintings that were included in the original show. We’re excited that through new digitization technologies, we can provide a broad contemporary audience with the opportunity to experience this groundbreaking exhibition in a new way.”

Byrd, Montross, and Giesecking worked with Bowdoin student Cody Stack ’16 to create the cleanly designed website. Alongside the online gallery of each of the 80 works in the original exhibition are excerpts of faculty and student essays, access to a digital version of the original exhibition catalogue, and links to archival material. The *Fifty Years Later* website will offer visitors the chance to revisit this seminal exhibition and explore paintings now dispersed in collections across the country. The anniversary online exhibition encourages new scholarship on the original show and hopes to foster a renewed appreciation of how the digitization of art historical resources offer distinctive frameworks to address complex political, social, and cultural issues related to art history and museum practices.

“I was blown away by the Bowdoin students’ enthusiasm and passion for this show—and the launch of *Fifty Years Later* represents a very exciting moment as their critical research into the original exhibition’s complex ‘set of players’ and political and social climates will be shared with an audience far beyond our campus,” said Byrd. “*Fifty Years Later* epitomizes the impact of Bowdoin’s newly launched Digital and Computational Studies Initiative, which works collaboratively to apply digital tools to the humanities’ materials in order to facilitate their study and analysis from new and rich perspectives,” continued Giesecking.

The website for *Fifty Years Later: The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting* will go live on November 11, 2014 and will be available to explore here: [<http://www.bowdoin.edu/art-museum/exhibitions/2014/1964-portrayal-revisited.shtml>].

In coordination with the launch of *Fifty Years Later*, the BCMA will host Bridge R. Cooks, Associate Professor in the program of African American studies and the department of art history at University of California, Irvine, for a special lecture, “Double Consciousness: Remembering Black Images in American Struggles for Freedom.” In this talk, Cooks will revisit *The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting* in the context of American struggles for racial equality through the visual arts. Sponsored by the BCMA and the Bowdoin College Department of Art History, the lecture is free and open to the public, and will take place on November 11 at 4:30 p.m. in Kresge Auditorium, Visual Arts Center. Cooks’ lecture will be streamed live on the Bowdoin College website: <http://www.bowdoin.edu/live/>.

About the Bowdoin College Museum of Art

The collections of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art are among the most comprehensive of any college museum in the United States. Collecting commenced over 200 years ago with a major gift from the College’s founder James Bowdoin and his family that included Gilbert Stuart’s magnificent portraits of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

The Museum is housed in the landmark Walker Art Building, designed in 1894 by Charles Follen McKim. Located on the historic quadrangle of Bowdoin College, the building is graced by murals by

John La Farge, Kenyon Cox, Elihu Vedder, and Abbott Thayer. A \$20.8 million renovation and expansion in 2007 provided a stunning setting for objects as diverse as monumental Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud, Iraq; European old master paintings; and works by American modernists. The Museum is the centerpiece of Bowdoin's vibrant arts and culture community and offers a wealth of academic and educational programs. The Museum is also a prominent summer venue for major exhibitions such as *Edward Hopper's Maine* (2011), *William Wegman: Hello Nature* (2012), *Maurice Prendergast: By the Sea* (2013), and *Richard Tuttle: A Print Retrospective* (2014).

Fully accessible, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art is open to the public free of charge from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday through Saturday; 10:00 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. on Thursday, and from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sunday.

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