

THERE IS A WOMAN IN EVERY COLOR: BLACK WOMEN IN ART
TO OPEN IN FALL 2021 AT BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

Brunswick, ME—May 12, 2021—This fall, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art will present *There Is a Woman in Every Color: Black Women in Art*, a new exhibition examining the representation of Black women in the United States over the past two centuries. Drawing on more than sixty works of art, historical objects, and artist books both from the Museum’s collection and on loan, the show will confront the history of marginalization and make visible the presence of women of color in the history of American art. The show will feature works by a number of important 20th and 21st century artists, including: Elizabeth Catlett, Alma Thomas, Carrie Mae Weems, Betye Saar, Faith Ringgold, Kara Walker, Mickalene Thomas, Ja’Tovia Gary, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Nyeema Morgan. Supporting these works are a selection of artifacts and ephemera, as well as 19th century works of art, that highlight the continuity of experiences of Black women in America.

There Is a Woman in Every Color will open at Bowdoin on September 16, 2021 and run through January 30, 2022. After premiering at Bowdoin, a condensed version of the exhibition will travel to three additional venues, with support provided by the Art Bridges Foundation, which is dedicated to expanding access to American art across the country. The presentation at Bowdoin coincides with the 50th anniversary of the College’s decision to accept women in 1971, and will be supported by programming exploring the role of women on campus and as alumnae over the past half century—including many working in the arts.

“We are proud to celebrate a milestone in co-education at Bowdoin College with this penetrating and ground-breaking exhibition—organized by a Bowdoin alumna— that explores questions concerning the representation and visibility of women, especially women of color,” said Anne Collins Goodyear, Co-Director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. “We are grateful for the work of Elizabeth Humphrey on this enlightening exhibition, which draws in important parts of Bowdoin’s history while also tackling issues that cut across America and American history.”

Frank Goodyear, Co-Director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, also noted that “As a museum that serves both academic and public audiences, this exhibition supports our teaching mission, and also underscores our role as an important public presenter of a diverse array of art for students, specialists, and general public of northern New England. It is therefore particularly noteworthy that more than forty of the objects featured in *There Is a Woman in Every Color* are drawn from our own collection, and the majority of those acquired since 2014, reflecting our concerted focus on expanding and diversifying the Museum’s collections, along with our exhibitions and programs.”

The title of the exhibition is inspired by African-American artist Elizabeth Catlett’s work *There is a Woman in Every Color*, 1975. Through its doubling of a Black woman and its inclusion of multicolored women, the work testifies to the multiplicity of women’s voices, which is one aim of this exhibition. Curated by Bowdoin College alum Elizabeth Humphrey, the Museum’s Curatorial Assistant and Manager

of Student Programs, *There Is a Woman in Every Color* is constructed around six thematic sections: portraiture; the Black female nude; documented histories; labor; artistic exploration; and the influence of literature.

By beginning with portraits, viewers start with the foundational issue of visual representation of Black women from the 19th century and moving into the present. These works will also help audiences understand the ways in which Black women were categorized and assessed, as well how they chose to represent themselves, where and when they could. For example, the folk artist William Matthew Prior's 1843 painting *Mrs. Nancy Lawson*—one half of a pair of portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Lawson—depicts her as the proper and prosperous wife that she was. However, the work also draws on the same conventions of dress, pose, and demeanor that Prior would likely have used with any sitter of the period—conventions defined by Lawson's white peers. Moving into the modern and contemporary era, by contrast, Mickalene Thomas's 2016 *Tell Me What You're Thinking* takes the opposite approach, embracing and centering the personality of the Black woman in the photograph, with a distinctive style and setting.

In the second section, on the Black female nude, the works explore the ways in which artists—especially male artists and, too commonly, white male artists—have fetishized the Black (female) body. Contrasting photographs by Bill Witt and Deana Lawson illustrate this dynamic clearly. Witt's 1948 photo *Black Nude and Radiator* features a Black woman with her body in profile, leaning against a white painted radiator set between two white, shaded windows. Yet the woman is unnamed, and her face is turned away from the camera—perhaps from shame, or maybe because her identity was not considered relevant. Nearly six decades later, photographer Deana Lawson's work *Sharon* (2007) might at first seem like a repetition of Witt's earlier work: it features a Black woman standing nude against a radiator, in profile, in a room with white shaded windows. Yet Lawson's work confidently upends the gaze-at-the-nude approach of Witt's work: her model is named in the title of the piece, *Sharon*—and Sharon looks confidently back at the camera, an active participant in her own portrait.

The third section and fourth sections look at the lived experiences of Black women as captured in photography and material culture, and both historical and contemporary labor roles often occupied by Black women. A pair of items from the Bowdoin Special Collections & Archives address both the labor and representational issues at the heart of how Black women were often depicted. As one example, the *Narrative of Phebe Ann Jacobs, Or "Happy Phebe,"* written by Mrs. T.C. Upham in approximately 1850, tells the story of Ms. Jacobs (1785-1850), an enslaved person who was brought to Brunswick, Maine by the family of Bowdoin's then-president. The title of the small booklet already conveys the author's assertive assumptions about the status of this woman, who had been enslaved since birth—evoking stereotypes of Black people as "happy" with their subservient place in the world. This is compounded by the drawing on the same page of a small, fenced cottage, with the caption "My little house has become a *palace*." Shifting from the narrative to the more tactile recall of Ms. Jacobs' labor is the presentation of the thimble she used for her sewing work, for the benefit of the Allen family.

The last two sections focus on modern and contemporary art, and in particular works by Black women artists. In the fifth section, objects demonstrate how women artists approached their artistic practices, and underscores the importance of historical representation in this context. Works such as LaToya Ruby Frazier's photograph *Grandma Ruby and J.C. in Her Kitchen 2006* or Faith Ringgold's 1996 lithograph

The Sunflower Quilting Bee At Arles place Black women in images as in control of their situation, across a range of times, places, and contexts. The final section further highlights works by Black women artists who draw inspiration from literature in a variety of forms, whether from English poetry, 19th century American novels, short stories by Zora Neale Hurston, or major newspapers. Additionally, many artists in this section work in the art book tradition, bring their own perspective and creative approaches into this format.

“It is my hope that this exhibition will encourage audiences to engage with artists often overlooked in the canon of American art, providing space for their works to stand on the equal footing they so deserve” said Elizabeth Humphrey, the exhibition’s curator. “In developing this exhibition, the Museum has recently acquired several works to address gaps in our collection that this exhibition made visible. I am pleased that this exhibition will travel with the support of Art Bridges. Sharing this exhibition with communities outside of Maine helps broaden the reach of the artists represented and allows other audiences to engage in discourse around Black women’s experiences in the arts.”

Bowdoin College Museum of Art

The Bowdoin College Museum of Art is the cornerstone of the arts and culture at Bowdoin. One of the earliest collegiate art collections in the nation, it came into being through the 1811 bequest of James Bowdoin III of 79 European paintings and a portfolio of 140 master drawings. The collection has been expanded through the generosity of the Bowdoin family, alumni and friends, and now numbers more than 20,000 objects, including paintings, sculpture, works on paper, decorative arts and artifacts from prehistory to the present from civilizations around the world. www.bowdoin.edu

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