In supporting students who explore our institutional history and special collections, we find that their research must often extend beyond our collections in order to include persons of color in the picture.

The Maryland Institute College of Art was founded in 1826, in Baltimore. In at least one way, the history of MICA parallels the history of Baltimore; specifically, the history of segregation and discrimination against people of color, which continues to this day.

In two cases that I'll share, we had student interns who processed collections and did research to create library exhibits, in which we clearly needed to create a broader picture of the historical context to include African Americans when that information was not evident in our collections.

A third case focuses on a body of research and artwork created by a student whose subject/s were part of MICA history, but barely or not at all represented in the college’s archives. It was only by going out to other resources in the area that they built a better picture of the people they wished to document, and, in the process, created an information resource that will add great value to our collections.

MICA Archives photograph. Students and teachers in the Main Building court, ca. 1908.
In 2017, I supported intern opportunities for students to work with special collections, for academic credit supported by faculty in the department of their choosing.

The first student I worked with was Shelby Stierhoff in Summer 2017. She worked on processing records of exhibitions at MICA, and developed an exhibit in the library with highlights from the first 100 years of exhibitions at the Institute, up until the school's centennial in 1926 (exhibit archive).

Photograph by Meredith Moore.
The most prominent exhibitions in the 19th century were mechanics fairs, which ran almost continuously between 1848 and 1878. These fairs were somewhat akin to the world’s fairs of the same time period, though at a smaller scale. There would be a great variety of instruments, machinery, patented inventions on display, along with an equally great variety of handmade items.

The city of Baltimore at that time had a sizeable Black population - 27,000 in 1860, of whom 90% were legally free. In her research to present documents of these events, Stierhoff was curious to discover whether Blacks were able to participate in the mechanics fairs.

Photograph by Meredith Moore.
(exhibit archive)
Nothing in the prospectuses say that only whites are permitted to exhibit...

MICA Archives document. Exhibition prospectus, 1862.
Stierhoff found just one reference to a black person exhibiting in the exhibition of 1854. Broadening her search beyond documents in our collection, she searched the online archives of the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper and found reference to there being one day for the 1848 exhibition that was open to people of color. We worked together to arrange these documents in the exhibit cases to include contextual information about the city’s black population around that time.

Photograph by Katherine Cowan.
MICA Archives document. Exhibition catalog, 1854.
The next intern who worked with me in Fall 2017 was Xi Karen Wang. She did a preservation survey and inventory of 2 collections of fashion designs and drawings by MICA alums. One was fashion designs by Tom Drew, who became a prolific designer in New York and taught at FIT, and the other was fashion illustrations done by Katherine Soper for the Hutzler’s Brothers department store in Baltimore.

In one of our display cases we had an overview of their work. In the other display case we developed a thematic exhibit about collegiate fashion in the mid 20th century, something in which both artists participated (exhibit archive).

Photographs by Meredith Moore.
We had many publications illustrating Tom Drew’s work: Vogue, Mademoiselle, Women’s Wear Daily; but none of them showed the clothing worn by women of color. So we went beyond the collection to choose images from Ebony Magazine that showed college women of color in the styles we wanted to include.

Photographs by Meredith Moore.
(exhibit archive)
Looking in the online archive of the *Baltimore Afro-American* we discovered that, at the time of this illustration by Katherine Soper, Hutzlers department store was one of several in Baltimore that did not permit African Americans to try on clothing, nor to return clothing once purchased. This earned the store an “onion” in the newspaper’s demerit and award system, while several other stores that did not discriminate were awarded an “orchid.” Again, we used documents from the broader community to highlight this discrimination that was not documented in the collections.

Photograph by Meredith Moore.  
(exhibit archive)
The last case I'll share today involves MICA history, again, and concerns people of color who did or did not attend the school, whose stories are told barely-to-not-at-all in the institution’s archives, and the present-day MICA student who set out to exhaustively collect all of their stories to create a new archive.

In the 1890s, black students were, briefly, admitted to the Maryland Institute, and then excluded by the end of that decade.

At the time, Baltimore city councilmen could appoint students from their wards to attend MI on scholarship and in return the school received an appropriation of $6000 per year. A black councilman appointed several black students, among them was Harry T. Pratt, who is known as the first black student at the school (there were a few others, not as well known). The school decided to admit them, and Pratt finished with honors. The school reported a loss of 100-some white students, who withdrew in protest of the racial integration. The school decided to no longer admit black students, and the next student who was appointed and tried to enroll was denied admission. His family brought suit against the school, leading to a lawsuit through which MI defended its right to exclude blacks, and won. From 1897 until 1954 (Brown v. Board of Education) each prospectus catalog of MI stated “Reputable white students only are admitted.”

For a number of years there has been interest in this period at the college. For example, MICA published an institutional history book in 2010, which included this one page on the period. Yet the evidence of this in our institutional records is slim,
indeed! - the ledger showing the money received from the city, a board report that briefly mentions the “problem” of the black students and the white students who withdrew, an annual report mentioning the decline in enrollment, and dozens of prospectus catalogs with the statement of exclusion. All of the other information came from newspaper items or court documents from the lawsuit.

Interest about Harry T. Pratt as the first black student grew at MICA, and the school published this profile called “Harry T. Pratt: History Maker” in an alumni magazine in 2013. I helped with research for that profile, and we learned that Pratt was a remarkable and inspiring individual: an educator, activist, businessman, musician. There was no information on Harry T. Pratt in the MICA Archives, save for notice of his graduation with honors in 1895.

The college’s alumni association made plans to create a Harry T. Pratt Society for support of alumnus of color.

In Spring 2018 the school prepared to formally launched the Harry T. Pratt Society as a collaboration between the Alumni Association and the Center for Identity & Inclusion, with awards recognizing 2 exceptional students of color. For the inaugural event, I was asked to write a biography for publication on a card, and in doing so, went to the archives of the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper where I learned even more about Pratt: he was still in high school when he studied at MI, was valedictorian of his high school class and spoke at commencement, sharing the stage with Frederick Douglas.

It was around this time that I met Deyane Moses, MICA class of 2019 photography and curatorial studies student, the person who would devote the next year to creating an archive of the experiences of blacks at MICA, to include those that attended and those that could not.

Moses asked to see what documents we had in our collections about the black students at MICA in the 1890s and since. I shared the few we have, and many links and PDFs I had assembled over several years from outside sources. She took it from there, following many leads and finding new lines of inquiry. She was determined to learn and document every student who attended, to find out as much as possible about their lives after studying at MI (or not studying, as the case may be…). This research was the basis of both her Junior seminar and her Senior thesis.

Moses’s Junior seminar culminated in an exhibition called “A Negro for the Maryland Institute.” The books shown here contain documents that she was beginning to assemble, and she includes a racist image from a 1903 MI yearbook.

Another exhibition Moses produced was “Remembered + Reclaimed” which included documents of students rejected from studying at MICA along with self portraits interacting with the classical statuary that has been on display in MICA’s main building court since the building opened in 1908 -- the same court and statuary shown in my title slide.


MICA Archives photograph, ca. 1908.
Moses includes facsimiles of newspaper documents about artists like Mabel Brooks who were rejected from the school, went to study elsewhere, and became acclaimed artists. Through this work, she inserts herself as a black person into the space that was restricted for decades for people of color.

The culmination of Moses’s work for her degree at MICA is “Blackives,” an installation that presents the documents and images that she has collected to date concerning the experiences of artists of color at MICA. Along with the exhibit, she created “Maryland Institute Black Archives” (MIBA), an online collection of the documents she collected. She expanded her scope to include oral histories collected from MICA students, staff, and alumna, and portraits of current students.

Photograph courtesy of the artist.
Photograph courtesy of the artist.
The impact of this work has been huge. The importance of Moses’s exhibit was recognized by the school, and MICA’s president sent a formal memo to the community acknowledging and apologizing for MICA’s racist history, as well as this public press release; the story was picked up by local and national news outlets, including Artsy.net and Art News. The exhibit was extended, being re-installed in the Main Building.

https://www.mica.edu/mica-dna/leadership/president-samuel-hoi/memo-on-blackives-and-micas-history
A prominent art school apologized for its racist history after a student's thesis project on the subject.

The revered Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), an art school in Baltimore consistently ranked among the best in the U.S., released a memo publicly apologizing for its racist history on Thursday. The memo, written by MICA president Samuel Hensley in response to a thesis project by MICA photography student Dwayne Moon, titled “Black Lives: A Celebration of Black Histories at MICA,” and its accompanying online portal, the Maryland Institute Black Archives, which is devoted in part to telling the stories of prominent black artists who were not admitted to MICA between 1895 and 1954 because of the school’s racist policy of
Because of this publicity, the school was contacted by a Baltimore resident holding documents of the Baltimore Art Center, a MICA-adjacent art school, fully integrated, that existed near the Institute in the 1930s-1960s. Moses scanned all of this material to be included in Maryland Institute Black Archives. She intends to share with us, in analogue format, all the material that she has collected. And she plans to continue her work of contacting past students and collecting oral histories.

Moses recently shared this evocative image of the “Blackives” installation in MICA’s Main Building court (the same space shown in my title slide, occupied by white students and teachers).

While there is no neat bow with which to tie up this topic, it is a happy confluence of events that Deyane Moses had the opportunity to do this work, and that MICA has recognized and supported the work.


MICA Archives photograph, ca. 1908. Students and teachers in the Main Building court, ca. 1908.
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Many images courtesy of MICA, Decker Library, and Deyane Moses ‘19
Grateful thanks!