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Tufts Anti-Racism Initiative: Public Art

Portraiture commissions, replacing portraits with historic exhibitions about underrepresented communities at Tufts, and artists in residence are among recommendations



"Art is a declaration of our values and a meaningful way to understand ourselves and our history as a dynamic rather than static entity," said Marty Ray and Dina Deitsch. Photo: Alonso Nichols

By News Staff

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On July 8, 2020, President Anthony Monaco announced the creation of a new strategic initiative (<https://president.tufts.edu/tufts-as-an-anti-racist-institution/>) aimed at making Tufts an anti-racist institution. As part of this effort, five workstreams (<https://now.tufts.edu/articles/road-eradicating-structural-racism-tufts>) were charged with identifying structural racism throughout the university's academic and administrative enterprise and outlining the steps necessary for eradicating it.

Following a presentation of their findings and recommendations (<https://president.tufts.edu/tufts-as-an-anti-racist-institution/>) at a Town Hall for faculty and staff on Feb. 12, *Tufts Now* spoke with workstream leaders about what they found, what's been done so far, and what to expect in the next phase of work.

Tufts Now asked Marty Ray, chief of staff, and Dina Deitsch, director and chief curator of the Tufts University Art Galleries, to share takeaways from the Public Art workstream's report. The full reports (<https://president.tufts.edu/tufts-as-an-anti-racist-institution/>) for all five workstreams are available on the Office of the President's website.

***Tufts Now*: What are the major findings and recommendations of the group?**

Marty Ray and Dina Deitsch: The Public Art Committee (PAC) was tasked with thinking critically about whose history and images are displayed throughout our campuses. To do so, we embarked on a public art audit to consider the impact of artwork in our public spaces. The objective of this initiative is to ensure that our public spaces reflect present values of diversity, equity, and inclusion as it conveys the rich history of Tufts University.

Our starting point was fairly direct: representation matters, and impacts feelings of inclusion and exclusion—and more so, can remain a stark reminder of biases from generations past unless we remain proactive and engaged. Art is a declaration of our values and a meaningful way to understand ourselves and our history as a dynamic rather than static entity. As such, it must be reflective of our community today.

We first looked at what was on view on campus—starting with the Medford/Somerville campus, which has the most artwork—and working outwards to the Boston, SMFA, and Grafton campuses. In this first pass, we looked at artworks that featured people. What was the visual characteristic of those subjects specific to race and gender? Who are we seeing on walls throughout campus from meeting and ceremonial rooms to our libraries and lobbies? Within that group, we focused more specifically on the Campus Collection of Portraits—images of historic figures from Tufts' history that included former presidents, deans, faculty, and alumni.

We then looked at this group for their visual demographics to understand the overall story of who was being presented, with ongoing research into the why. In addition to looking at artworks, we also looked at the artists behind each artwork both on view and in the Tufts University Permanent Art Collection to understand too which artists we are supporting—then and now.

A complete breakdown of artworks by the numbers can be found in the full report (<https://president.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/PUBLIC-ART.pdf>). The numbers are not surprising, but they make it clear that we do not have a visual record that reflects the diversity of our community now—and even from the past.

There simply is not an accurate nor racially diverse group of figures on display on campus or in our holdings at this moment. Key recommendations were designed to change our visual landscape at every level—from our symbolic spaces of power such as the Coolidge Room to the public, student-facing areas on campus to even our

digital sphere. Specific details can be found in the full report on the president's website (<https://president.tufts.edu/tufts-as-an-anti-racist-institution/>), but our top-level recommendations include:

- Repairing the visual record: portraiture commissions
- Coolidge Room: Replace portraits with historic exhibitions about underrepresented communities at Tufts
- Campus-wide community commission/artist-in-residence
- Digital portraiture project
- Diversify the campus environments: increase public art program with temporary projects: outdoor murals and alumnae lounge

Most public art on display at the Medford/Somerville campus is by white male artists and, more often than not, portrays white men. What can be done to counteract that?

First and foremost, we need to acquire and commission new work that portrays our BIPOC community—both past and present. With a deeper selection of artworks, we can reconsider how each space is presented and, even more so, adjust our relationship to portraiture as a vehicle for telling our institutional history.

Our strategies are not about hiding our history, but being more public and forthcoming—re-installing portraits so they are integrated throughout the campus accompanied with robust historical labels and context; digitizing the collection so that works that are not on view are made publicly accessible online and on monitors throughout campus; and reinstalling the Coolidge Room portraits with an archival exhibition about the legacies and histories of the Black community here at Tufts.

Most notable are portraits of 11 past presidents of Tufts—all white males—that have historically been in the Coolidge Room in Ballou Hall. What's wrong with keeping the past presidents in the Coolidge Room? What is being recommended to do with that collection?

While not intended as such, the installation of all 11 past presidents installed in a single room has, over time, unwittingly presented a deeply homogeneous picture of power. While historically accurate, we must consider how spaces impact our community today—what is the message being communicated to those of us who are not white men? Where do we belong? And, importantly, is that the message that one of our more ceremonial spaces should be relaying?

While the Coolidge Room will no longer house portraits of former university presidents, it remains the symbolic center of the university and its seat of power. As such, the Public Art Committee recommends that the space reflect the work happening on campus and that new installations must center marginalized voices from the university's past and present. To that end, we recommend a series of rotating exhibitions of images and objects from the University Archives that tell the story of underrepresented communities at Tufts.

The series would begin with the experiences of Black students as based on the work of Professor Gerald Gill in papers that are housed in Tufts Digital Collections and Archives (DCA) and presented in the online exhibit, *Another Light on the Hill* (<https://exhibits.tufts.edu/spotlight/another-light/feature/another-light-on-the-hill-gerald-gill-introduction>).

In addition to focusing on the history of Black students and faculty at Tufts, with time and funding for research, these exhibitions can continue to present the histories of the Identity Centers, the deeper history of the university's land and landscape, and even specific figures who have notably contributed to the diversity of campus life and scholarship.

For the 11 presidential portraits that were formerly housed in the Coolidge Room, three of them—Jean Mayer, John DiBiaggio, and Larry Bacow—will remain at Ballou Hall. The PAC recommends re-siting individual paintings when and if possible, and we are exploring these options with locations and academic departments as appropriate.

As part of a larger effort to document and contextualize artwork related to university history, we recommend creating an accompanying collection and online resource that contains all university portraits with extended texts that share the history and background of each work—both the subject/sitter and the artists.

In this way, these works will be fully accessible with additional context describing their relationship to the university's history without impacting meeting and learning in physical spaces with the capacity to grow and change, just as our community has done.

The report recommends commissioning portraits of BIPOC from Tufts. Who would be part of the decision-making about new commissioned art, including murals? Would there be community input into that selection?

For new portraits, subjects are being considered by the Public Art Committee with specific outreach to Division of Student Diversity and Inclusion and affiliated alumni groups, which will then be followed up by focus groups with staff, faculty, students, and alumni.

Artists will be selected with a smaller subset of the PAC consisting of SMFA at Tufts professors of the practice and art-affiliated staff with an equally direct focus on BIPOC and women artists. The artwork commissioning process will be overseen by PAC and Art Galleries director and staff.

We propose that the outdoor murals be developed closely with students with oversight from PAC and Art Galleries. Oversight will also include approval from the committee based on draft proposals on ideas and sketches of the final product, developing standards for murals, developing plans for maintenance and security, and an accompanying website where the full context of the mural is explained along with an artist profile.

How much money is being allocated to commissioning new artworks? How many new artworks per year would you be aiming for?

These are great questions, but the matter of resources is up to the administration. We have submitted an amount for what we feel is needed, but the final decision rests with the president and his senior team.

For year one, our goal is to commission two new portraits of historic Black Tufts figures, develop and install an exhibition for the Coolidge Room, and begin a mural project process.

Year two, we would like to bring in an artist-in-residence to work with our campus communities to develop a longer-term public artwork, continue a mural project, commission a third portrait, and launch a digital initiative.

What is the benefit of having an artist-in-residence? How will the artists be chosen, and will Tufts alumni be given preference?

As we think deeply about what representation means on campus, whose histories we are sharing, and for whom our campuses are built and designed, the visual arts are both a site of contention and repair.

It is the PAC's recommendation that we invite an artist-in-residence to work with our community of scholars, staff, students, and faculty, and with the alumni community to create a new public artwork that can help us understand our past and look towards a more just and equitable future.

This new work can take many forms—from a film to a set of images to a sculpture and performance—but it has the capacity to publicly symbolize the university's commitment towards being a truly anti-racist institution.

Artists will be considered and selected through the PAC and an advisory group of SMFA at Tufts professors of the practice. We always aim to work with alumni when we can and will aim toward considering broad inclusive projects that feel true to our community.

What exactly are you thinking for Alumnae Lounge, for example, new murals every two years?

We would rededicate Alumnae Lounge to celebrate the diversity of Tufts Alumnae through temporary alumnae artworks and to finalize the 2019 mural removals through a proactive program. Our goal is to develop projects with alumnae/i and the Alumni Association, and to commission artworks centered around Tufts' history and/or alumni.

As an indoor space, we'd advise against murals and work with alumni artists to develop and share work that can engage that space in meaningful ways (paintings, photographs, sculpture, new media, etc.) and can, in turn, enter the permanent collection and campus rotation program at some point.

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