

THE ARTS



**Leaders in All
Walks of Life**
FIFTY YEARS OF WOMEN AT BOWDOIN

Bowdoin Women and the Arts

We asked our alumnae:

How did participating in, experiencing, and shaping the cultural life at Bowdoin impact your time at the College and your subsequent life and work?

Their responses follow.

Bowdoin Women and the Arts



1851–1852

Harriet Beecher Stowe writes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a Bowdoin faculty wife. She and husband Calvin Stowe also actively shelter those escaping from enslavement on the Underground Railroad at their Brunswick Federal Street home.

“Although I did not take any art classes while at Bowdoin, I benefited from the College’s vibrant campus art offerings. Dance, theater, visiting and campus music groups, and the art museum collections primed me for looking for creativity wherever I went. Most of my work was in southern Africa where people with so few material goods are determined to see the beauty around them. A cappella music that seems to spring from the air, storytelling that conveys their oral histories, and beautiful traditions of dance are part of what made my time in Africa so extraordinary, and the Bowdoin campus experience prepared me to open up to these experiences with open arms.”

CALLIE CURTIS '72



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

1927

Brunswick women and Bowdoin faculty wives begin participating in productions of Masque and Gown, the College's student-run theater organization, deepening the roles of women in the Bowdoin community.

“Theater at Bowdoin was challenging and rewarding. I made great friends and cherish the memories. I also credit theater at Bowdoin with helping me find my voice as a writer, a performer, and an advocate.”

MARY JO GORMAN KEANEY '86



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

1971

Susan Vick, lecturer in theater, is hired.

A “woman of many firsts”: first woman to earn an MFA in directing at SMU, first woman to earn a PhD in theater at the University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign, and first woman to be named Teacher of the Year at WPI, Worcester, Massachusetts.

“I was one of the first women with a faculty appointment. As a recent MFA from SMU in Dallas, Texas, in 1971 I was hired as a “lecturer” to direct an *already begun* production (designed but not cast) of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (arguably his worst play)... I stayed two semesters and, with glee, I put *Arsenic and Old Lace* onstage my second semester. It went really, really well and featured ladies from the Brunswick community as the aunties. Onward.”

SUSAN VICK



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

1971

June Vail, instructor
in dance, is hired.

“I began teaching dance classes in modern dance technique, choreography, and dance history as the first Bowdoin women were admitted in the fall of 1971. These women were pioneers. But in fact, about one third of the thirty or so dancers were men—musicians, visual artists, filmmakers—who, along with the women, wanted to try out movement as a new creative medium... Early dancers enlivened the studios and stages and beyond: performances on the Quad, in the Brunswick Post Office, and in and out of elevators in Coles Tower.”

JUNE VAIL, PROFESSOR OF DANCE EMERITA



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

1972

First female a cappella group, Miscellania, is founded.

“In the first half of the 1980’s, prominent female leaders in the arts emerged, unapologetically, all over campus. Cynthia Hoehler ’82 was a critical catalyst in the solidification of Miscellania as something more than a shadow of the long-established Meddiebempsters. Central to that identity was the musically rigorous, yet highly empathetic conducting of Meryl “Beanie” Atwood ’83. Under Beanie, Miscellania crossed over from standard harmonies into something closer, at times, to guerrilla performance art, breaking out in the dining halls or even the Quad. She was aided and abetted by the wit and vocal agility of Susan Abbatista ’83, whose range of style and octave was matched in scope by the comic brilliance of her timing.”

CHERYL FOSTER ’83



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

1974

The Film Society is
founded by tenured
Associate Professor
Barbara Kaster.

“I came to Bowdoin in 1973 but exchanged to Wellesley my junior year. I had yet to have a female professor and the influence of fraternities on campus life felt limiting, detrimental. On my return to Bowdoin, I joined the Film Society and sat in Sills Hall watching any film on offer most Friday nights. I produced my first film in Barbara Kaster’s film course. In 1982, after getting my MFA in film, Barbara went on sabbatical and I took her place teaching the very course that altered my college experience. I still recall Barbara in the audience on awards night, at the end of my teaching semester. She beamed to see the work of students—many of them women by then. And I felt, at last, that Bowdoin was becoming the college I wanted to go to.”

LISA MCELANEY '77



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

1981

Women's Resource Center begins programming a community-wide women's cultural event series.

“By the time I matriculated in the fall of 1982, the programming-for-change template had been laid by the founders of the Women's Resource Center and included one very large concert production per year. From '82-'86 we continued to program concerts of women artists—all feminist and many queer. We continued to use this programming template... These concerts and events drew audiences from a broad regional area to the College and really tipped the balance of campus activity towards female-centered celebration for the night. We were part of a bigger feminist movement that helped us keep our experience of being on the margins of Bowdoin in perspective and contributed to culture-shift in the longer run.”

BRIDGET SPAETH '86



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

1984

Fashion designer
Ruthie Davis graduates.

“When I entered Bowdoin, I hoped to major in both art and biology but it became evident very quickly that science labs and studio classes were an impossible scheduling mix. I managed to take a few studio art classes (design, drawing, printmaking, architecture) and several music history classes. Some were memorable for what I learned and created. Others were memorable for the idiosyncrasies of the professors...”

CHERYL COFFIN '75



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

1987

Dance becomes
established as academic
curriculum.

“Despite some Sisyphean challenges, in 1987 we established an academic curriculum for dance. In 1994 the College inaugurated the Department of Theater and Dance. In 2000, nearly thirty years after the first dance courses, we set up a departmental home with studios and offices in the renovated Memorial Hall and Pickard and Wish Theaters. And in 2013 the College inaugurated the Edwards Center for Art and Dance. Making dances and making art are now integral to the liberal arts curriculum.”

JUNE VAIL, PROFESSOR OF DANCE EMERITA



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

1994

Department of
Theater and Dance
inaugurated.

2000

Poet, critic,
and performer
Claudia La Rocco
graduates.

“... I was courted by Bowdoin as an applicant with an independent study portfolio in painting; I was complimented that Bowdoin admissions took the time to consider the portfolio and may have had a faculty person consult with them. I arrived on campus at a time when the visual arts department was in what seemed to be disarray... The only tenured faculty member in the visual arts department painting program had a reputation for a predator’s eye (and—historically—hand) toward women students. I navigated to stay safe within the classroom (and 24/7 studio spaces) and finished the degree [early]. This false control certainly devalued my sense of accomplishment and celebration of what the degree could mean. My Bowdoin education was truly and quantifiably not a co-equal education.”

BRIDGET SPAETH '86



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

2014

Edwards Center for Art and Dance opens, named in part for Blythe Edwards, wife to Bowdoin's thirteenth president, Robert Edwards, who oversaw the renovations of Memorial Hall and Pickard Theater and was a strong advocate for the arts.

“People often ask me what it was like being at a school with such a disproportionate male/female ratio, and I realize now I never fully sensed the imbalance, and that was in part because of dance. Through dance I connected with a wonderful, supportive, creative community of mostly women, and formed some of my closest and most enduring friendships.”

ANONYMOUS, CLASS OF 1978



Bowdoin Women and the Arts

2020

Creation of the Black Lady Art Group, a student-run organization to create a safe space for producing and exploring artistic practices as Black women.

“It’s something that I knew I needed, but I didn’t know how badly I needed it. To be able to create with other Black women who understood how we were navigating the space and to be able to talk about things that you can’t really talk about at Bowdoin or even in the art classroom—I’ve never had that before.”

DESTINY KEARNEY '21, ZOOM INTERVIEW PRINTED IN THE *ORIENT*, DECEMBER 2020