

***THE CAPTURED RUNAWAY, WILLIAM GALE'S 19TH CENTURY
ABOLITIONIST PAINTING
ACQUIRED BY BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART***



Brunswick, ME—February 2, 2022—The Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA) announced that it has acquired William Gale’s 1856 painting *The Captured Runaway* from the London-based Ben Elwes Fine Art. The work demonstrates the intense Victorian-era interest in the abolitionist movement, and an awareness—even across the Atlantic—of the ongoing legal conflicts over slavery in the United States. In this case, Gale’s work responds to the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, nicknamed the “Bloodhound Law,” which overrode state laws to legalize the extradition of Southern runaway slaves and require Northerners to support these extraditions. However, despite the strong political and social interest in the issue—supported by Britain’s elimination of slavery across its empire in 1834—there are few known examples of artists directly engaging in abolitionist political themes in the format of large-scale, formal paintings. *The Captured Runaway* is now featured in the Museum’s Bowdoin gallery as part of the installation,

“Re|Framing the Collection: New Considerations in European and American Art, 1475-1875.”

“This painting of a runaway enslaved woman is an important addition to our collection, supporting the role that visual images played in the campaign to end slavery,” said Frank Goodyear, Co-Director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. “Abolitionist writer Harriet Beecher Stowe authored her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* here in Brunswick, while her husband taught at Bowdoin, and the impact of her book on the anti-slavery movement was as profound in England as it was in the United States. There are clear thematic connections between Gale’s work and Stowe’s novel, and the abolitionist message here is both unmistakable and still powerful more than a century later.”

Anne Collins Goodyear, Co-Director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, added: “William Gale’s painting contributes significantly to our ability, as an art museum on a college campus, to teach about the transnational abolitionist movement. Though the Museum’s collection includes a significant array of abolitionist prints and photographs, as well as 19th century works by African-American artists such as Joshua Johnson and Edmonia Lewis, paintings that were intended to support the anti-slavery movement are exceedingly rare. Likewise, while images illustrating the theatre of the slave auction were common, there are fewer depictions of the individual experiences and challenges of runaway or captured slaves. As we continue to think about diversifying our collection, this work is a compelling addition, tackling an important subject that has powerful resonance today.”

The Captured Runaway shows a mixed-race African-descended enslaved woman handcuffed to a bounty hunter, pausing on their journey South to return her to her “owner.” The center of the work is Gale’s light-complexioned slave (often referred to in this period as a “quadroon”); she wears the striped cotton dress and red turban often used to illustrate the enslaved. The woman sits on a U.S. Mail sack, with a piece of nibbled bread on the floor next to her. Shrouded in light that draws the viewer’s attention, the woman’s upward-cast eyes may have been intended by Gale to deliver a subtle Christian message, mirroring the evangelical tone sometimes associated with the anti-slavery movement, and suggesting that woman is less concerned with earthly matters.

The bounty hunter, seemingly asleep, wears a raccoon coat and hat; on the table is his open hunting knife, a plug of tobacco, an empty glass and a bottle, an open compass and the unfurled poster offering a reward for the return of the slave. A pair of moccasins and a beaded pouch hanging above the table raise further questions about his pursuit and persecution of the vulnerable. To the right are his rifle and gunpowder horn, emphasizing the brutality of his activities. The man’s dog, embodying the odious “Bloodhound Law,” rests on the floor under the table, here transformed from the symbol of kind fidelity often seen in Victorian genre paintings into an emblem of the chase. All of these elements signal to the viewer that this malefactor is making the long return journey south with his prize. Another important component of Gale’s dramatic scene: the suggestion that escape could again be possible, as the man sleeps but has left his knife within her reach.

The Victorians were at once horrified and politically engaged by real and fictionalized stories of fugitive slaves bravely attempting freedom. Gale’s decision to depict his runaway as light-skinned—much as Stowe did in her novel—also fits the concerns and interests of the period. An acknowledged trope, the “tragic mulatta” figure was intended to convey that slavery was ultimately an illegitimate power that threatened white people themselves. At the same time, it can also be seen to reinforce false notions of racial difference that rendered those of African descent as perpetual others, while elevating the importance of those with lighter skin.

William Gale was born in London in 1823; he died in 1909. A member of the Pre-Raphaelite school, Gale was a prolific artist whose work was regularly shown; from 1844 to 1893, he exhibited over 100 works of art at the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibitions, including *The Captured Runaway* in 1856. Like many of his contemporaries, Gale also ventured to the Middle East and the Holy Land, making two trips—in 1862 and again in 1867—from which he found an array of subject matter for his works. His output included biblical and mythological subjects, landscapes, and portraits, though this is his only known work on the abolitionist movement. Gale’s works are in the collection of the Tate, the Glasgow City Art Galleries and Museums, and Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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

###

For more information, please contact:

Suzanne Bergeron

Bowdoin College Museum of Art

207-725-3124

sbergero@bowdoin.edu

Sascha Freudenheim

PAVE Communications & Consulting

917-544-6057

sascha@paveconsult.com