

Speaking of Africatown: A Case Study in Art, Conversation, and Community

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Abstract: In planning an exhibit for the McCall Library gallery space, we selected a collection of drawings made by an artist with roots in the Africatown area of Mobile. As we considered how best to engage our multiple constituencies with this exhibit, we sought a way to allow the community from which the artwork originated to frame the interpretation and discussion surrounding it.

This project exemplifies efforts to make connections across campus and the local community. With the exhibit as a focal point, we began by seeking input from campus partners. Together with the chair of the African American Studies program, we invited Ms. Lorna Woods, a local historian and storyteller from Africatown, with the goal of amplifying the impact of the exhibited artwork. Asking a member of the Africatown community to speak her experience in her own voice represented a conscious effort to avoid bias in the interpretation of the exhibit. Students who attended the event were given a reflection question that asked them to consider the talk, the context of the artwork, and the role of archives in preserving this heritage. This allowed us to gather qualitative feedback alongside our demographic data. This project serves as a small case study in outreach methods and assessment with multiple methods of measuring success. At the same time it reflects an intentional effort to allow a community with a unique and important history to represent itself.

About the Author:

Deborah Gurt is Assistant Librarian and Processing/Digital Archivist at the Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the University of South Alabama. A graduate of the University of Michigan (BA Honors) and Rutgers University (MLIS), she also holds an MA in Jewish Studies from Gratz College. Gurt has recently completed the Georgia Archives Institute and is pursuing a research and practical agenda focused on increasing diversity in archival representation and usage.