

Archival Resources on the Web

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Art in the Archives of Oberlin College: A Virtual Exhibit Produced during the Pandemic

By Anne Salsich, Associate Archivist, Oberlin College Archives

When Oberlin College sent its students, faculty, and staff home in mid-March of 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the archives staff was required to identify projects for remote work on short notice. As the associate archivist, my work primarily entails processing collections, managing the digital archive and the finding guide delivery database, and creating digital exhibits and collections. With remote access to the digital archive, I had an opportunity to create a new virtual exhibit from home.

While archives are not museums, they are often the keepers of visual works considered of enduring historical value to their institutions. For roughly 14

years, our department has used CONTENTdm to offer a brief catalog of over 450 artworks and objects in the College Archives for quick access, but few beyond our staff made use of it. In *Art in the Archives of Oberlin College* (<https://libraries.oberlin.edu/archives/exhibitions/art-in-the-archives-of-oberlin-college>), selected visual works are presented in an attractive format with high-quality images, historical context in accessible prose, and links to related collections and sources. Upon its launch in January 2021, the college's Communications Office expressed interest in developing an article on the exhibit, rather than simply announcing it as department news.



Landing page of exhibit

Art in the Archives of Oberlin College, designed in Scalar and published in January 2021, showcases artworks and textiles with deep stories informing Oberlin’s rich history: of early postsecondary coeducation and the admission of Black students, antislavery efforts, education in Asia, leadership in world affairs after World War I, an eclectic and notable built environment, and excellence in teaching and learning on campus. With one exception, a public sculpture, the works featured are housed in the College Archives.

Having used Scalar, a web authoring platform, for two previous virtual exhibits (*Oberlin’s Namesake* <https://libraries.oberlin.edu/archives/exhibitions/oberlins-namesake> and *The Oberlin Sanctuary Project*

<https://libraries.oberlin.edu/archives/exhibitions/the-oberlin-sanctuary-project>), I was able to get into the project quickly. The platform does not require coding skills, but the user’s guide provides instructions on customization if desired. Scalar projects can be visually stunning if the images and layouts are compelling. Layouts are easily made using simple templates. Images of less than 2 MB can be downloaded, and several metadata schemas are built in. After the images are downloaded and described, they can be placed on a page in relationship to the text using one of several page format options, enabling the placement and size of visuals for maximum aesthetic effect.

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ART IN THE ARCHIVES OF OBERLIN COLLEGE

Media file

FIDAC Medal, front

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Citations of this media

Inline media

—from "FIDAC Bronze Medal"

Details

Scalar URL	https://scalar.oberlincollegelibrary.org/archives-art/media/fidac-medal-front (version 4)
Source URL	https://scalar.oberlincollegelibrary.org/archives-art/media/FIDAC_medal_front.jpg (Image/JPEG)
dcterms:title	FIDAC Medal, front
dcterms:source	Oberlin College Archives
dcterms:creator	Desgrey, Georges Ernest (French)
dcterms:format	4 1/4" diameter, 3/8" thick
dcterms:medium	bronze
iptc:DateCreated	20210115
iptc:TimeCreated	130147+0000
dcterms:type	peace medal
dcterms:provenance	Oberlin College Special Collections
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Media page that appears after clicking an image

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...of World War I combat are depicted, with a trench, disordered barbed wire fence, and a dominant cloud of poisonous gas. The artist cast his name or initials on both sides of the medal. It rests in the original red box stamped with the FIDAC seal, padded and lined with velvet and satin.



St. George and the Dragon by Raphael, c. 1506
Source: National Gallery of Art

The FIDAC was an international federation of World War I veterans



FIDAC Medal, reverse
Source: Oberlin College Archives

understanding and friendship," as stated on the accompanying certificate (no longer extant).

working to promote a proactive peace, having fought in the first worldwide conflict with unprecedented wartime deaths. In this medal the dragon can be interpreted as the forces of evil and war, while the female warrior represents the determination of the Allied powers to win the battle for peace.

The federation held its 17th annual congress on September 19, 1936 in Warsaw, at which the medal was awarded to three colleges, Oberlin College among them. Oberlin President Ernest Hatch Wilkins (served 1927 to 1946) received the medal, awarded for the College's "programme of which contributed greatly to international

Text with image layouts. Moving the cursor over the image brings up option to see metadata.

The chapters include "Architecture in Visual Works," "Drawings and Prints," "Paintings," "Photographic Objects," "Sculpture," and "Textiles." Many of the works had never been presented in an exhibit before; three were recent accessions. One example of a recent gift is an embroidered Chinese robe received in January 2020. It is emblematic of the college's long and continuing history of involvement in Asia. It was a gift from H. H. Kung to the executive secretary of the

Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association (OSMA) in the 1950s. Kung received his early education from Oberlin missionaries in Shanxi Province, China, just prior to the Boxer Rebellion. He came to Oberlin for his BA and went to Yale for an MA in economics. After 20 years as principal of the Oberlin schools in Shanxi, he served in the highest positions of government and finance in China from 1928 to 1939, continuing his close relationship with OSMA in China and at Oberlin.



Chinese Robe from H. H. Kung as seen on a featured work page

Another notable work with international significance in the textiles section of the exhibit is a gift from the Emir Faisal of the Arab Kingdom of Syria to Oberlin's president, Henry Churchill King. Woodrow Wilson had appointed King as a coleader of the King-Crane Commission in the Middle and Near East just after World War I. The commission was charged with gathering petitions for self-governance from the peoples of the former Ottoman Empire to present at the Paris Peace Conference. The two garments, given by a daughter of H. C. King, were worn at a feast given for

the commission by Prince Faisal at his home outside Damascus. These fragile garments cannot be exhibited in an open library space, given the lack of adequate security and the special exhibit furniture and lighting they would require. This is a case in which the archives holds unique materials that can only be exhibited in a museum setting or online. The garments and many other works in the virtual exhibit were treated by the Intermuseum Conservation Association in Cleveland between 2008 and 2020 with endowed funds.

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ARCHIVAL RESOURCES ON THE WEB—Continued

Lauren White, Assistant Editor

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With the start of the 2020–2021 academic year, the college staff returned to campus (some only a few days a week) with regular testing and stringent protocols for distancing and mask wearing. However, the libraries remain closed, likely through the summer of 2021. It is a challenge to serve the college and community without an open reading room. With this new virtual exhibit, we hope to engage college and other visitors in exploring artworks with significant back stories that inform Oberlin’s unique history. When the campus is fully open again, we can draw on the virtual exhibition to develop physical installations, with iPads for visitors to access *Art in the Archives of Oberlin College*.

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