"Black Spartans (1907-1948)" represents ongoing research in SJSU Special Collections & Archives identifying documentation of Black experiences throughout SJSU history. This exhibit is the first of several instalments. Much of the information we have comes from the Spartan Daily student newspaper and the La Torre yearbooks. With too few exceptions, Black Spartans’ stories are not told in their own words but from the perspectives of their majority white classmates. This is reflected in the language and focus of the articles. We invite you to read critically.

The Black Spartans featured in this exhibit pursued their educational goals while contending with institutionalized racism and other major crises of the 20th century: two World Wars, the influenza pandemic of 1918, and polio. Locally, “the deed to virtually every home in San Jose” included restrictions against Black and Asian residents known as “restrictive covenants” (Spartan Daily, February 16, 1948, page 2). On campus, blackface and minstrel shows were a regular part of student events.

"Black Spartans (1907-1948)” is an invitation to the community to join us in surfacing these stories, ensuring these histories are preserved and presented in a way that honors these students’ lives. Contact us at special.collections@sjsu.edu to participate.

Carli V. Lowe - University Archivist
Kate Steffens - Special Collections Librarian

The “Black Spartans (1907-1948)” exhibition is a homage to Black culture and history at San Jose State University and the Bay Area at large. Until recently, the significance of Black bodies in Bay Area history (as well as U.S. history) was overlooked. Unless it was associated with the struggles of civil rights leaders, athletes, or celebrity-personas, the story of a graduate from a state school wasn’t valued because we weren’t part of the mainstream culture. As a Black Spartan myself, I was deeply connected to these individuals that started out just like me. I saw a reflection of myself and my community throughout the process of making these mixed media portraits and came to realize how important it is to know your history because it becomes a catalyst for knowing who you are.

My work explores the intricacy of identity and the role culture, tradition, and history play. These portraits are embodiments of our Black Spartans, they are visual representations of the colorful and captivating lives they led. Through this work, I hope to influence other artists and individuals to take part in researching and finding out the infinite layers of what it means to be Black. Our history is beyond our struggle. We are the blueprint.

Yeab Kebede
‘22 Digital Media Arts

Artist Statement

Exhibit Curators Statement
Originally from Oakland, Roger Romine attended Oakland Technical High School and Salinas Junior College before transferring to San Jose State College, which he attended from 1941-1942. He was active in track, and as Chairman of the college YWCA-sponsored Cosmopolitan Club. He studied both Architectural Drawing and Bacteriology, as well as taking civilian pilot training classes. Romine left school to serve in World War II as a First Lieutenant in the Army Air Force, and was one of the first Black officers commissioned from Oakland. He received his training at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, making him a member of the famed Tuskegee Airmen. While serving, he was a member of the first all-Black fighter group in the AAF, and was credited with destroying three Nazi aircraft. Romine passed away in an accident while serving, on November 16, 1944. He was the first member of his Negro Mustang Fighter group to receive a posthumous award of the Distinguished Flying Cross.
Roger Romine comes to San Jose State from Salinas Junior College, showing himself to be a strong competitor in the high jump track and field events.
Spartan Daily

October 16, 1941

Roger Romine and his classmate, Ellen Okagaki, serve as Chairs of the campus Cosmopolitan Club. The Club holds events that include speeches and slideshows from San Jose State students, staff, alumni, and faculty. These events are often led by Romine. Okagaki is later noted as one of many Japanese students who are incarcerated during World War II (Spartan Daily, May 29, 1942).
After leaving San Jose State to serve in World War II, Roger Romine is spotlighted in the Spartan Daily for his heroic actions during the war.
Roger Romine is tragically killed in the line of duty in 1945. He is posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.
Roger Romine is honored for his service in World War II.