

“The Harlem Renaissance: Rebirth of African-American Arts”

Westbury Arts Remembers

Augusta Savage

1892 – 1962



Sculptor, Arts Educator, Social Activist, and Harlem Renaissance Leader

“From the time I can first recall the rain falling on the red clay in Florida. I wanted to make things. When my brothers and sisters were making mud pies, I would be making ducks and chickens with the mud.”

— Augusta Savage

Augusta Savage was a gifted sculptor who fought poverty, racism and sexism to become a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance, the period of African American cultural ascendancy in New York City during the 1920s and '30s. Her sculptures celebrate African American culture, and her work as an arts educator, activist, and Harlem Renaissance leader accelerated social change. While many of her wonderful sculptures are lost to time or exist only in photographs, due to her financial inability to cast her work in bronze, she has emerged as a brilliant artist with extraordinary talent.

Today, Savage is considered responsible for battling to secure a place for African American women in the art world.

Born in Florida and named Augusta Christine Fells, she was the seventh of 14 children born to Edward and Cornelia Fells. Her hometown was known for its brick making and had ever-present deposits of red clay. At an early age, Augusta showed a talent for making objects out of the clay she found readily available. Her father, who was a Methodist minister, disapproved of the making of "graven images" which were, in his mind, prohibited by the Bible's 10 Commandments. Savage once said that her father "almost whipped all the art out of me." In spite of her father's objections, Savage continued to make sculptures. When she turned 15, her family moved to West Palm Beach. At her new school, Augusta's artistic ability was quickly recognized by her teachers. In her senior year, the school's principal hired her, paying a dollar a day to teach clay-modeling lessons.



At the age of 16 Augusta married her first husband John T. Moore. The couple had a daughter who they named Irene Connie Moore. When her husband died a few years later, Augusta remarried. Her marriage to James Savage, a carpenter and laborer, soon ended in divorce, but Augusta chose to keep his last name. Savage moved to New York City in the early 1920s. She arrived in New York with \$4.60, found a job as an apartment caretaker, and enrolled at the Cooper Union School of Art, which had long been tuition-free and founded on the principle that education be "as free as air and water." The school also gave her a scholarship to assist with living expenses. Savage excelled, finishing her course work in three years instead of the usual four.

In 1923, Savage applied to a special summer program to study art in France but was rejected because of her race. She took the rejection as a call to action and sent letters to the local media about the program selection committee's discriminatory practices. Savage's story made headlines in many newspapers, although it was not enough to change the group's decision.

Living and working from a small studio apartment, Savage's reputation as a portrait sculptor soon brought her commissions to produce busts of prominent personalities such as W. E. B.



Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Savage was one of the first artists who consistently dealt with black physiognomy. Her best-known work of the 1920s was *Gamin* (French for "street urchin"), an informal bust portrait of her nephew, Elis Ford. A photo of *Gamin* made the cover of *Opportunity* magazine. The magazine caught the attention of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which granted Savage a scholarship of \$1,800 to study in Paris. Her dream of studying in Europe was finally realized.

Savage returned to the United States during the midst of the Great Depression and struggled to find work as a sculptor. Unfortunately, portrait commissions were hard to obtain, so she began to teach art and, in 1932, established the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts. At her studio, Savage taught many promising young African American artists, including Jacob Lawrence and Norman Lewis, and lobbied the Works Projects Administration (WPA) to help her students find work during this time of economic crisis. Regarding her work as an arts educator, Savage said,

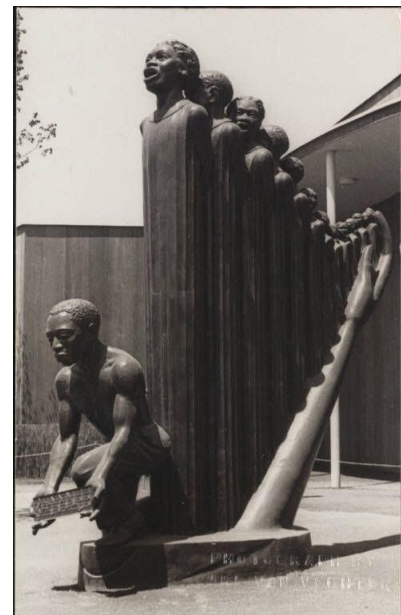
"I have created nothing really beautiful, really lasting, but if I can inspire one of these youngsters to develop the talent, I know they possess, then my monument will be in their work."



Savage was one of the founders of the Harlem Artists' Guild, aiming to address the "cultural, economic, social, and professional problems" facing African American artists. The guild laid out three main goals in its constitution: to encourage young talent, to foster a relationship between artists and the public, and to improve artists' standards of living and opportunities. Her work with the guild led to her being selected as the first director of the WPA's Harlem Community

Center. In mid-decade, she became the first African American artist to join what was then known as the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors. Augusta Savage was fast becoming a leading figure in New York's community of black artists.

Savage's last significant commission was to create a sculpture to be exhibited in the court of the Contemporary Arts building at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Taking inspiration from James Weldon Johnson's song "Lift Ev'ry Voice" (also known as the "Black national anthem"), she created a 16-foot-tall sculpture, made from plaster, entitled "The Harp." This sculpture depicted a group of twelve singing African American youth in graduated heights as its strings. The sounding board was formed by the hand and arm of God, and a kneeling man holding music represented the foot pedal. "The Harp" was universally



celebrated by art critics and fair visitors alike. It became one of the Fair's most photographed objects. Sadly, no funds were available to cast the sculpture in metal and it was destroyed when the fair closed; smashed by clean-up bulldozers. The loss to our cultural heritage is heartbreaking.



The Harlem Artists' Guild disbanded in 1941 and the following year the WPA funding from the federal government ended and the Harlem Community Center closed. Saddened by the loss of her job and the collapse of her attempts to establish art centers, Savage withdrew to the small town of Saugerties, in New York's Catskill Mountains in 1945 to live with her daughter and her daughter's family. Augusta Savage spent most of her remaining years in the tranquility of life in a small-town. She spent her time teaching children in summer camps, dabbling in writing, and continuing with her art as a hobby. Although her artistic production decreased, she found peace and seclusion.

She died in relative obscurity on March 26, 1962, following a long bout with cancer. While she was all but forgotten at the time of her death, Savage is remembered today as a talented artist, activist, and arts educator, serving as an inspiration to the many that she taught, helped, and encouraged.

To Learn More

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2. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Artists, Augusta Savage
<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/augusta-savage-4269>
3. Florida Dept. Of State, Division of Cultural Affairs, Artists Hall of Fame, "Augusta Savage"
<https://dos.myflorida.com/cultural/programs/florida-artists-hall-of-fame/augusta-savage/>

4. My Modern Met, "How Augusta Savage, a Black Art Teacher and Sculptor, Helped Shape the Harlem Renaissance," By Kelly Richman-Abdou, July 18, 2020
<https://mymodernmet.com/augusta-savage/>
5. NPR, "Sculptor Augusta Savage Said Her Legacy Was the Work of Her Students," July 15, 2019, by Susan Stamberg.
<https://www.npr.org/2019/07/15/740459875/sculptor-augusta-savage-said-her-legacy-was-the-work-of-her-students>
6. NY Historical Society, Exhibitions, "Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman," May 3 - July 28, 2019
<https://www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/augusta-savage-renaissance-woman>

VIDEOS

1. YouTube, "Augusta Savage "The Harp" 1930's African American Sculpture, New York World's Fair 1939 – 1940"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&app=desktop&v=ILpqM0cYZgE>
2. Vimeo, "Meet Augusta Savage the Most Important African-American Sculptor."
<https://vimeo.com/209768542>
3. Sinclair Community College, "Black History Moment: Augusta Savage" February 5, 2019 , script and narration by DeShawna Yamini
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1066080896930458>