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Right On Time

Augusta Savage's Deep Legacy



Unidentified photographer, *Augusta Savage* (1930). Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL

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A century ago, black artists, historians and thinkers employed creative means to expand the notion of Americanness by arguing for their inclusion into a country that had only 53 years before abolished the enslavement of black people or people of African descent.

Being free from legal bondage and being able to move about the country opened up the possibility, and the necessity, of redefining one's identity within an American context. Artists were central to this shaping and defining, and one such artist,

Augusta Christine Savage was at the forefront of this period, which became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Savage was born Augusta Christine Fells in Green Cove Springs, Florida, on 29 February 1892. "I was a leap year baby," she would say. "And it seems to me that I have been leaping ever since." Savage grew up in north and south Florida, and made sculptures from a young age, using the red clay on her family's farm. Her father was religious and did not approve of her making or pursuing art because he believed the sculptures to be graven images.



Augusta Savage, *The Diving Boy* (c.1939). The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida

In 1907 she was briefly married to a man named John T Moore, with whom she had a daughter, Irene Connie. Moore died shortly after her birth. She married James Savage in 1915 and, though they divorced in the early 1920s, kept his surname.

Early Recognition

Her father would change his mind about her art after two formative events, both of which happened before Savage finished public school. In 1915, George Graham Currie, the superintendent for the West Palm Beach County Fair invited her to sell her sculptures at the event. Her first experience in selling work was a huge success—attendees purchased her work and she received a special prize of \$25 and an honor ribbon. After Savage's successful introduction as a professional artist, Currie commissioned a portrait bust of himself. This early recognition of her artistic skills suggested to her father not only her innate talent but also her ability to find patrons willing to support her career.

In 1921, at the age of 29, she moved to New York to pursue an education in fine arts at Cooper Union, specifically sculpture. She was so talented that she was moved to the top of the waiting list for admission, receiving an acceptance letter the day after meeting with the principal of Cooper Union, Kate L Reynolds. Savage completed her four-year degree in three and was swiftly awarded a prestigious scholarship by the new Ecole des Beaux-Arts at Fontainebleau in France. The award, sponsored by the French government, provided travel and study for 100 women artists. An American selection committee (the American Committee of Eminent American Architects, Painters and Sculptors—which was comprised entirely of white men) was in charge of choosing the awardees.

Rejected Because of Skin Tone

Unbeknownst to them, they had selected a black woman—Savage. Once they learned that she was black, her scholarship was rescinded on the account of the fact that Southern white women should not be expected to share travel accommodation with a black woman. With the committee’s decision to strip Savage of a scholarship she had earned, these men upheld the notion that black artists were inferior and furthered the ideology that white womanhood should be protected at all costs.



Augusta Savage with her sculpture *Realization* (1938) Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL, Photographs and Prints Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Savage did not take the rejection lightly. She took pen to paper, submitting a letter to the editor of the *New York World* newspaper, writing: “I hear so many complaints to the effect that Negroes do not take advantage of the educational opportunities offered them... For how am I to compete with other American artists if I am not to be given the same opportunity?” She continued: “I don’t much care for myself because I will get along all right here, but other and better colored students might wish to apply sometime. This is the first year the school is open and I am the first colored girl to apply. I don’t like to see them establish a precedent.”

Even though she was denied the opportunity at Fontainebleau, Savage would travel to Paris in 1929 on a Julius Roswenwald Fellowship, studying sculpture and exhibiting at the Salon d’Automne. She also received a Carnegie Foundation grant to

study in France, Belgium and Germany. She returned to New York in 1932 and exhibited at the Salons of America Spring Salon at the Anderson Galleries.

The same year Savage established the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in Harlem. This continued her commitment to art. She taught young people, adults and emerging artists, free of charge. Artists moving to Harlem were told to seek out Savage and her studio, as it was the art center in Harlem.

Among the artists she taught were William Artis, Selma Burke, Ernest Crichlow, Gwendolyn Knight and Norman Lewis. Savage also employed her students at her studio and later at the Harlem Community Art Center, a Works Progress Administration-funded art project.

While she was teaching and creating opportunities for her fellow artists, Savage continued to make art, primarily portrait busts. Her focus on portraits of black individuals is one of her most important contributions to the Harlem Renaissance, visual culture and art history.

Restoring Dignity

American visual culture at the time portrayed black people in derogatory ways, with exaggerated physical features—oversized lips and noses, bug-eyed—as primates, and in disheveled or tattered clothing. Savage's portraits countered this visual narrative with humane and realistic images of the sitters. One such sculpture, *Gwendolyn Knight* (1934-35) exemplifies the care she took in depicting black people. Knight (1913-2005) was one of Savage's students who became an artist and educator and married the artist Jacob Lawrence.



Augusta Savage, *Gwendolyn Knight* (1934-35, recast 2001). Walker O Evans Collection of African American Art

Savage's portrait bust captures a young woman at the beginning of her adulthood, pondering her future as her eyes look slightly down. Savage depicts her sitters with graceful lines and important defining characteristics. In this case, Knight's bun,

which connects her to the world of dance: she was also a dancer and taught it informally.

A little-known sculpture, *Realization* (c.1938) may be the work that symbolizes Savage's significance to American art and visual culture. Created towards the end of the Great Depression, the work was a life-sized figurative sculpture depicting a seated black woman, partially clothed, with a nude black man crouching next to her. Given the period of the work, it is quite possible that Savage was expressing the realization that America may never fill its promise to the Negro.

The body language of each figure: drooping shoulders and looking slightly down lets the viewer know the pair are experiencing emotional pain. The woman's stoic expression is a form of armor, while the man's wrinkled forehead signals his concern. There are three gestures expressing a glimmer of hope and comfort: the man's hand on the woman's thigh, the couple leaning into each other, and the woman's hands place on top of one another. So many human emotions in one work. This is Savage's gift: presenting the realities of a group of people seen as less than human.

Exclusion is as much part of the artistic fabric of America as the battles for progress, justice and freedom to express oneself. Savage, who spoke out early and often in her career, is a model in a moment of uncertainty. She was a beacon for many Black Harlem residents and artists trying to find their way in an American life.

Savage used many of her tools to chip away at racism: making space for artists, teaching, and perhaps most importantly, sculpting images of blacks in a moment when the community needed to see themselves as they saw themselves. Savage, as a humanist and artist, saw the beauty in all. This is her lasting legacy for generations to come.