

The Black Woman Artist Who Crafted a Life She Was Told She Couldn't Have

At the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance, Augusta Savage fought racism to earn acclaim as a sculptor, showing her work alongside de Kooning and Dalí. But the path she forged is also her legacy.

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

- 1 In 1937, the sculptor Augusta Savage was commissioned to create a sculpture that would appear at the 1939 New York World's Fair in Queens, N.Y. Savage was one of only four women, and the only Black artist, to receive a commission for the fair. In her studio in Harlem, she created "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a 16-foot sculpture cast in plaster and inspired by the song of the same name—often called the Black national anthem—written by her friend, James Weldon Johnson, who had died in 1938.
- 2 The sculpture was renamed "The Harp" by World's Fair organizers and exhibited alongside work by renowned artists from around the world, including Willem de Kooning and Salvador Dalí. Press reports detail how well the piece was received by visitors, and it's been speculated that it was among the most photographed sculptures at the Fair.
- 3 But when the World's Fair ended, Savage could not afford to cast "The Harp" in bronze or even pay for the plaster version to be shipped or stored, so her monumental work, like many temporary works on display at the Fair, was destroyed.
- 4 The story of the commission and destruction of "The Harp" and its eventual fate is a microcosm of the challenges Savage faced—and the ones Black artists dealt with at the time and are still dealing with today. Savage was an important artist held back not by talent but by financial limitations and a racist society. Most of Savage's work has been lost or destroyed, but today, a century after she arrived in New York City at the height of the Harlem Renaissance her work and her plight, still resonate.
- 5 "Imagine the power of somebody looking at 'The Harp' in its sort of monumental size for the last 70 years," Niama Safia Sandy, a curator and visiting assistant professor at Pratt Institute, said. "What could that have changed?"



Augusta Savage at work on the sculpture that would become known as "The Harp." Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "Augusta Savage with her sculpture 'The Harp'" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

"Disagreeable complications"

- 6 Savage arrived in Harlem a century ago in 1921 in the early years of the Harlem Renaissance. She applied and was accepted to the Cooper Union art school, and completed the four-year program in three years. Savage was one of 100 women awarded a scholarship to attend the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts in Paris. But when the admissions committee realized that it had selected a Black woman, Savage's scholarship was rescinded.
- 7 In a letter explaining the decision, the chairman of Fontainebleau's sculpture department, Ernest Peixotto, expressed concern that "disagreeable complications" would arise between Savage and the students "from the Southern states."
- 8 Savage did not accept the rejection quietly. "She used the Black press to make the limits that she was facing known to the larger national and international public," Bridget R. Cooks, an art historian and associate professor at the University of California, Irvine, said. "She had a real determination and sense of her own talent and a refusal to be denied."
- 9 In the years after the Fontainebleau episode, Savage was commissioned to create busts for prominent African-American figures such as the sociologist and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois and the Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey. She also created "Gamin," a painted plaster bust portrait based on her nephew that became one of her most well-known pieces, praised for its expressiveness. (It was later cast in bronze.) "Gamin" earned her a Julius Rosenwald fellowship in 1929 to travel to Paris, which had become a refuge for Black artists.

- 10 When she returned to Harlem in 1932, she opened the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts, where she taught prominent artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Gwendolyn Knight, Norman Lewis, and Kenneth B. Clark. The community-driven education that Savage championed is part of the African-American tradition, Dr. Cooks said, because Black people have historically been excluded from formal academic spaces. "But for her to open her own school is something entirely different," Dr. Cooks added. "That is becoming a business person. That's taking on a leadership role for which she doesn't have any models in terms of Black people in the art world and Black women in particular."
- 11 In 1934, Savage became the first African-American member of the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors (now the National Association of Women Artists). In 1937, she worked with the W.P.A. Federal Art Project to establish the Harlem Community Art Center and became its first director. Eleanor Roosevelt, who attended its inauguration, was so impressed with the center that she used it as a model for other arts centers across the country.



Gwendolyn Bennett, Sara West, Louise Jefferson, Augusta Savage, and Eleanor Roosevelt in 1937. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "Gwendolyn Bennett, Sara West, Louise Jefferson, Augusta Savage, Eleanor Roosevelt" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

- 12 "She created a pathway for careers for Black artists," Tammi Lawson, the curator of the art and artifacts division of the Schomburg Center said. "She taught them, she gave them the tools, and she got them work."

- 13 Sandra Jackson-Dumont, the director and chief executive officer of the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art in Los Angeles, agrees. "She, for me, represents someone who believed that she wasn't compromising her studio practice or who she was by teaching and bringing people along," said Ms. Jackson-Dumont.
- 14 Yet the later years of Savage's artistic career were marked by adversity. After taking a hiatus to work on her sculpture for the World's Fair, Savage returned to the Harlem Community Art Center to find that her job had been filled. She briefly tried to establish the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art in Harlem in 1939, but the gallery lasted only three months.
- 15 In the early 1940s, Savage abruptly left her home in Harlem for a farmhouse in Saugerties, N.Y., in the Catskill Mountains, where she continued to make busts and teach local children. In Harlem, the community art center she had founded was closed in 1942 when federal funds were cut during World War II. She died in relative obscurity in March 1962 of cancer at 70.

"A blueprint for what it means to be an artist that centers on humanity"

- 16 Jeffreen Hayes, who is now a curator and the executive director of Threewalls, an arts nonprofit in Chicago, first learned of Savage while he was a graduate student at Howard University. He was struck by this story of a resilient Black woman whose greatest works have been lost but who made a life as an artist, teacher, arts center director and community organizer against the backdrop of Jim Crow laws and the Great Depression.
- 17 "I don't think about Augusta Savage as someone who only made objects," Dr. Hayes said, but rather as someone who "has really left behind a blueprint of what it means to be an artist that centers humanity." In 2018, Dr. Hayes curated the exhibition "Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman" at the Cummer Museum in Jacksonville, Florida in order to honor her artistic legacy.
- 18 At a moment when discourse has centered on the artistic and political role of public art and monuments, the continuing absence of a work like "The Harp" becomes even more acute. Unlike paintings, which are typically housed in museums, sculptures and monuments hold an outsized symbolic value because of their presence in public life. "Your public art should align with a community's values," said James Grossman, the executive director of the American Historical Association.



Savage with her sculpture "Realization" in 1938. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "Augusta Savage with her sculpture 'Realization'" New York Public Library Digital Collections.

- 19 Recently, in the context of questions over Confederate monuments, there have been calls to recreate Savage's "The Harp" and display it at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington.
- 20 Savage viewed her own legacy with humility, putting the emphasis on the success of her students. In a 1935 interview in *Metropolitan Magazine*, she 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."
- 21 Dr. Cooks said she "would disagree" with Savage's assessment of her own work; "I think everybody would," she added. For Dr. Cooks, it's clear that Savage saw her legacy as "someone who could set up opportunities for other people who were younger than her, to have the space to build a Black infrastructure, essentially, so they could succeed."
- 22 In this sense, Savage's legacy lies as much in the life she built for herself as in the work she made for the world.