

Augusta Fells Savage: Her Life and Accomplishments

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Biographical Information

Augusta Savage was born Augusta Christine Fells in Green Cove Springs, Florida on February 29, 1892. She was a widely known American sculptor and educator during the Harlem Renaissance who battled racism to secure a place for African Americans in the art world.

The daughter of Edward Fells, a laborer and Methodist minister, and Cornelia Murphy, Augusta was from a poor family of 13 children and began sculpting as a young child out of the red clay in her own backyard. She loved sculpting so much that she sometimes skipped school to go to the clay pit, risking the ire of her strict father, who didn't approve of her making images of "God's creatures" out of clay. After moving to West Palm Beach around the age of 15, Savage's talents were noticed by her new principal, who allowed her to teach clay modeling classes at the school. Savage (then Fells) married John T. Moore at a very young age (at age 15) and was widowed not long after. Her only child, Irene was born of this union. She later married James Savage and this is the name she retained for the remainder of her professional career.

Achievements

In 1919, Savage was granted a booth at the Palm Beach County Fair, where she was able to earn money for her clay sculptures and awarded a \$25 prize and ribbon for most original exhibit. This success brought her more recognition and she sought out commissions for work in Jacksonville, Florida, before departing for New York City in 1921. There she presented a letter of recommendation from county fair official George Graham Currie to sculptor Solon Borglum to allow her to study under him. Though Borglum declined to take her as a student, he did encourage her to apply to Cooper Union, a tuition-free school in New York City. She was accepted, and was able to get a job as an apartment caretaker to cover her living expenses. Three

months later, though, she lost this job and would have been unable to continue had it not been for the Cooper Union Advisory Board who voted to supply funds to meet Savage's living expenses. This was the first time the school had ever sponsored a student. She studied under sculptor George Brewster, and due to her advanced skills, she was able to complete the four-year course of study degree in just three years. In 1923, Savage applied to study in France in a summer art program. Although highly qualified, she was turned down for the program because of her race. Some accounts say that it was because of the protests by other Americans that would be attending, other accounts say that it was the decision of the international committee. This rejection, based solely on her race, deeply upset Savage, and sparked the beginning of her many public fights for equal rights. Her protests concerning this incident got press coverage in the United States and overseas. It also garnered her a reputation as a bit of a “troublemaker.” Eventually, the sole supportive committee member on the international committee, sculptor Hermon Atkins MacNeil invited her to study with him.

After completing her studies at Cooper Union, Savage worked hard to support her family who had moved to New York. Her family had suffered devastating tragedies – her father had had a stroke and her family’s home in Florida had been destroyed by a hurricane. It was at this time that she received a commission to do a bust of W.E.B. Dubois from the Harlem Library. Recognition from this garnered her other commissions including one for a bust of Marcus Garvey and one of William Pickens Sr., a key figure in the NAACP. In 1925, Savage won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, but she was not able to attend because she could not raise the money for travel and living expenses. When it became known in the African American community about Savage's talent and financial struggles, fund-raising parties

were held. People from Harlem and Greenwich Village, and African-American women's groups and teachers from Florida A&M all sent her money for studies abroad. In 1929, with help from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, Savage was able to realize her dream – to study abroad. She attended a leading Paris art school, the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and studied with Felix Benneteau and sculptor Charles Despiau. Savage was able to exhibit her work and won awards in Salon d'Automne and exhibited at the Grand Palais in Paris. She was also able to research sculpture as she toured the cathedrals and museums of France, Belgium, and Germany.

Awards/Contributions

After her study abroad, Savage returned to New York in the middle of the Depression. Work was difficult to obtain especially for artists. In 1934 became the first African-American artist to be elected to the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors. She then started the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts, located in a basement on West 143rd Street in Harlem. Savage opened her studio to anyone who wanted to paint, draw, or sculpt. Her many young students would include many future nationally known artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and Gwendolyn Knight. Another student was the sociologist Kenneth B. Clark, whose later research contributed to the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. She also helped found the Harlem Artists' Guild, which led to her being appointed as the first director of the Harlem Community Art Center sponsored by Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1937. The WPA was one of many government-sponsored programs which were designed to help those struggling financially during the Depression. Savage was instrumental in getting the WPA to include black artists in its Federal Art Project. During her time as the director of the Harlem Community Art Center, Savage was

commissioned by the New York World's Fair of 1939 to create a sculpture symbolizing the musical contributions of African Americans. Feeling that Negro spirituals and hymns were at the heart of African American culture and pride, she chose the lyrics of James Weldon Johnson's poem *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, as her inspiration. *The Harp* was Savage's largest work and her last major commission. The sculpture portrayed a group of twelve black singers in graduated heights that symbolized the strings of the harp. The sounding board was formed by the hand and arm of God, and a kneeling man holding music represented the foot pedal. No funds were available to cast *The Harp* in metal, nor were there any facilities available to store it. Consequently, after the fair closed, it was destroyed as was all the art. Savage struggled to establish and maintain forums for African American students to continue studying the arts, but funds were scarce.

Conclusion

Augusta Fells Savage believed that teaching others was far more important than creating art herself, and used these words to explain her motivation: "If I can inspire one of these youngsters to develop the talent I know they possess, then my monument will be in their work. No one could ask for more than that." (Davis, *Contributions of Black Women to America*, 1982) There is a public high school in Baltimore, Maryland, the Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts named in her honor, her home in New York, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Augusta Savage House and Studio. She was also inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame in the spring of 2008 and in her birth place, there is a Community Center named in her honor.

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