Augusta Savage's Sculpture "Gamin"

Submitted by Aleen Epstein, docent May 2009

"Gamin," modeled in 1930, was an instantaneous hit when it was installed in the gallery of American Art at The Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, NC. This small (9 1/4 inch) sculpture is a plaster version of the original life-size bronze bust "Gamin" of 1929.The term was given to street urchins who were often the subjects of paintings and literature in the 19th century. Reputedly, this street-smart 12 year old boy lived in Harlem and was the sculptor's nephew, Ellis Ford. He surely fits the profile of many preadolescent urban ghetto youths. The personality captured in the work is common during the rebellious, frequently uncomfortable, stages of their lives. Though only 12, wearing a "bebop cap," he appears ready and willing to face the future, despite his look of typical boyhood defiance.

The sculpture was painted to resemble the original, after having been modeled in clay and cast in plaster. We notice the boy's prominent ears, deeply set eyes, and broad features. The open collar of his wrinkled shirt and crumpled cap add to its immediate appeal. Unfortunately, only a few of Savage's works of art have been fully realized, this being one of them.

Augusta Christine Savage[1] lived from Feb. 29, 1892 until 1962. She was born in Green Cove Springs, Florida, near Jacksonville, along with 13 other children, to the family headed by an impoverished Methodist minister Edward Fells and his wife Cornelia. At the age of six she began modeling clay figures, much to the dismay of her father. Green Cove Springs was a brick-making town, with plenty of clay. While quite young, Augusta developed her skill of modeling ducks, pigs, and chickens, but her enthusiasm led her to

1. Savage married three times. Her first husband (1907), and father of her only child, Irene, was John T. Moore, who died several years later. She retained her second husband's (1915) surname after their divorce. He was James Savage. In 1924, Robert L. Poston, who was an associate of Marcus Garvey, became her third and final husband. He died a year later. Regenia A. Perry, *Free within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art,* National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1992 155-157

skip school often. Her father accused her of forming graven images, thereby breaking a commandment, and repeatedly beat her for her interest in art.

She gained the admiration of her high school teachers and principal who recommended that the school board pay her $1 a day for teaching modeling during the last six months of her senior year. Thus began Augusta's lifelong interest in teaching.

Seeking a teaching career, she attended the Tallahassee State Normal School (now Florida A & M University,) but transferred to Cooper Union in New York City in 1921 for more serious art training. Savage was one of the first women to study sculpture there. Her instructors at Cooper Union recognized her promise which led to the school's board of trustees giving her financial support.

During that same period of her life, she studied African art at the New York Public Library where a librarian told friends of the library to consider commissioning a portrait bust of W.E.B. DuBois. The result is now considered the leader's finest portrait in existence. Greatly needed financial help resulted from commissions for portraits of other African American leaders, including Marcus Garvey. Her career was fostered by the climate of the Harlem Renaissance.

The artist Augusta Savage overcame the heavy burdens of racism and sexism and gave generously of her time to inspire many of the advancements that were made by African-American artists during the Depression. She helped many African Americans enroll in the art project of the works Progress administration (WPA). Along with other artist-educators, she documented the accomplishments of talented artists, thus securing WPA commissions for them. She inspired many artists, including Norman Lewis and Jacob Lawrence, to develop their talent, and considered their work as showcasing her talent as well.

Savage's career began to flourish during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930's. She enjoyed a fine reputation as a sculptor, artist, and community art program director, but though brilliant and friendly, she proved to be fierce and difficult at times, even for her friends.

She twice won a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship to study in Paris, and successfully exhibited there. After her return to New York in 1932, she soon became the first African-American member of the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors. Savage was commissioned by the New York World's Fair of 1939 to create a sculpture symbolizing the musical contributions of African Americans. "The Harp" was her largest work and her last major commission. Unfortunately, World War II intervened and a series of frustrations virtually caused her to end her career. The Harlem Community Art Center, which she had directed, had to close when federal funds were cut off. Depressed by the loss of her job and the failure of her attempts to establish art centers, she moved to a small town in upstate New York to be near her daughter and her family. She died in relative obscurity on March 26, 1962.

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