

Great Moments in Art Education History

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Augusta Savage was a fearless African American sculptor, who wouldn't let the tribulations of her life stand in the way of her artistic endeavors. Born in Grove King Springs, Florida in 1892, she was a sculptor, art teacher, and community art program director during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s. Savage, being the seventh of fourteen children, had an abusive father who didn't approve of her interest in the arts at a young age. Starting at just age fifteen, Savage married three times, keeping her last name from her second marriage, and having a daughter named Irene Moore from her first husband. Her family moved to West Palm Beach in 1915, and Savage didn't sculpt for a few years due to a lack of access to materials. Four years after her sculpting hiatus, she was gifted some clay to create with. With this clay, she created figurine sculptures and entered them into the West Palm Beach County Fair. The sculptures won multiple prizes, and even a ribbon of honor. Feeling motivated to succeed in her art career, she then moved to Jacksonville Florida where she saw more professional opportunities were awaiting her.

Unfortunately, she didn't find much success in her art in Florida, so she ventured onto New York City. She left her daughter behind in the care of her parents for the time being. As it's hard to even imagine in our day and age, she stepped foot in 'The Big Apple' with a mere \$4.60 to her name. Fueled by the fire inside her to become a well-known artist, she enrolled in school at Cooper Union, excelling and impressing professors left and right. "Savage was so well-received at Cooper that she was given a scholarship to help support herself." (FL Department of State). This helped to set her path in her art career, both as an African American woman and as an artist.

Savage was no stranger to racism and inequality as an African American woman, and this was also becoming an issue for her in the arts community. She had been selected, along with a group of 99 other artists in the American Arts Community, to attend a summer semester outside of Paris, France. Although she was among the most talented in our country, she was denied because of her race. She was judged and cast aside, regardless of the immense amount of talent that she had to provide to the program. An American artist and fellow sculptor, Hermon A. MacNeil, was the sole member of the committee that openly denounced the decision. MacNeil invited her to study with him, in an attempt to make reparation with the artist. Soon after this, she married for a third and final time, with her husband sadly dying the following year.

The 1920s are when her artwork started to pick up, and she started to make her name known. “Savage received commissions to sculpt portrait busts of W.E.B. Du Bois and black nationalist Marcus Garvey; both pieces were hailed for their power and dynamism.” (Britannica). Her portrait bust of a young boy, titled *Gamin*, earned her a Fellowship to study in Paris from the years 1929-1931. Unfortunately, this period is when the Great Depression hit. Due to the state of the country financially, art sales became almost nonexistent. She also was facing personal issues, as her family was coping with devastation, “After her father became paralyzed and a hurricane destroyed her parents' house, she moved her family into her small apartment in New York.” (Florida Department of State). Savage started teaching art to make money and feed her creative side, and during this time in Harlem, she founded the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts. Two years later, she was chosen to be in the National Association of Women Artists, making her the first African American elected to join the association.

Following her successes during the beginning of the Great Depression, she took on the role of director of the Harlem Community Arts Center, where she became well known for fighting for inclusion for black artists. She was commissioned to create a piece for the World's Fair in New York, where she would create a sculpture titled The Harp. Following all of her accomplishments in the art community, she retired from the arts in the 1940s and retreated to a farm in the Catskills. The small town of Saugerties, where she called her home after her retirement, homes the Augusta Savage House and Studio and can be visited to see both her home and studio.

Augusta Savage was a vision for African American Women in the arts in the United States. Her fearless determination to succeed has paved the way for artists since her time. Although she was well-traveled and a talented artist, “She believed that teaching others was far more important than creating art herself” (Britannica). To this day, her incredible legacy continues to be a leading force of inspiration in the art community, as a pioneer for standing up against sexism and racism to succeed in her dreams as both an artist and an educator.

REFERENCES

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