

# The Clerk's Black History Series



**Debra DeBerry**  
Clerk of Superior Court  
DeKalb County



## Selma Hortense Burke

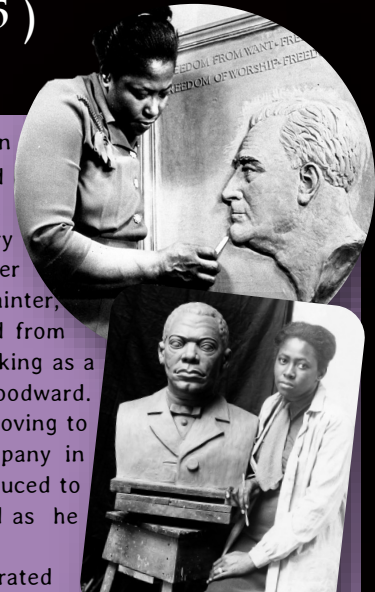
(December 31, 1900 – August 29, 1995)

"American Sculptor"



**Selma Hortense Burke** was born on December 31, 1900, in Mooresville, North Carolina to a local AME Church minister, Neal Burke, and Mary Jackson Burke. Selma was the seventh of ten children and attended a one-room segregated schoolhouse. Her love of sculpture started at a very young age where she molded clay found on the riverbanks, nearby. While her mother insisted she focus on a formal education, her grandmother, a painter, encouraged her to pursue her artistic expression. In 1924, Selma graduated from the St. Agnes School for Nurses at Winston-Salem University. She began working as a nurse and in 1928, she married her childhood friend, Durant Woodward. Unfortunately, Woodward died less than a year later of blood poisoning. After moving to New York in 1935, she worked as a private nurse for the dowager heiress of the Otis Elevator Company in Cooperstown. It was during this time that she met Jamaican writer and poet, Claude McKay and was introduced to the transformative energy of the Harlem Renaissance. The volatile relationship with McKay was short-lived as he often destroyed Selma's sculptures if they didn't meet his standards.

Selma began to teach for the Harlem Community Arts Center under the leadership of celebrated African-American sculptress, Augusta Savage. Around the same time, she worked for the Works Progress Administration on the New Deal Federal Art Project and sculpted a bust of Booker T. Washington that was given to Frederick Douglass High School in Manhattan in 1936. Selma traveled to Europe twice, studying in Vienna, Austria and Paris, France. While in Paris she met famed artist, Henri Matisse, who praised her work. When she returned to the United States, she opened the Selma Burke School of Sculpture in New York City and completed her Master's Degree in Fine Arts at Columbia University in 1941. Selma, feeling a sense of duty to her country, joined the U. S. Navy during WWII. Unfortunately, while she was driving a truck in the Brooklyn Naval Yard, she injured her back and was hospitalized. It was during her hospital stay, she entered a national competition to create a profile of President Franklin D. Roosevelt by the Fine Arts Commission in Washington, D.C. Selma was awarded the commission over 11 other competitors, three of whom were also black. She initially tried to create a portrait of the president from newspaper photos, but couldn't find a clear image, so she boldly wrote the president and requested a private sitting. President Roosevelt agreed, and on February 22, 1944, Selma Hortense Burke, the little girl from Mooresville, North Carolina, sketched the sitting president's portrait with charcoal on brown butcher's paper. From that sketch, she sculpted his likeness on a plaque. Her finished bronze plaque listed four freedoms above Roosevelt's face: freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom of worship, and freedom of speech. On September 24, 1945, six months after President Roosevelt's death, Burke's portrait was revealed to the public. The portrait she created was adapted by the mint and is currently on United States dime.



Selma Burke with her portrait bust of Booker T. Washington, 1936

In 1946, Selma opened the Selma Burke Art School, also in New York. In 1949 she married Herman Kobbe, a famous architect, and moved with him to an artist's colony in New Hope, PA., where she opened the Selma Burke Art Center, in Pittsburgh, PA. When Kobbe died in 1955, Selma continued her work and became active with the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, appointed by, and serving under, three different governors. Governor Milton Schapp proclaimed June 20, 1975, to be Selma Burke Day in Pittsburgh in recognition of her contribution to the arts in Pennsylvania. Selma Burke continued as an arts administrator and also taught in the Pittsburgh Public Schools for 17 years.



At age 92, Burke worked with children from East Hills Elementary School in an art class.

At the age of 80, in 1980, Selma produced her last monumental work, a statue of Martin Luther King, Jr., that graces Marshall Park in Charlotte, North Carolina. She was an honorary member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and received many other awards and honors including lifetime achievement awards from the Women's Caucus for Art, in 1979. She received the award from President Jimmy Carter in a private ceremony in the Oval Office. She also received a Candace Award from the National Coalition of 100 Black Women in 1983 and the Pearl S. Buck Foundation Women's Award in 1987. Selma Burke continued encouraging and inspiring young people to participate in the arts, well into her 90's. Dr. Selma H. Burke died of cancer, August 29, 1995, at the age of 94 near her retirement home in New Hope, Pennsylvania.