



The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



"The Harp" (1939)

August Savage, The Harp Sculptress



In 1937, celebrated African-American Sculptress, Augusta Savage was commissioned by the New York World's Fair to create one of 110 murals to be on display at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Augusta Savage, born Augusta Christine Fells, February 29, 1892, was an artist, educator, civil rights activist and community leader. Augusta was intensely involved in the Harlem arts community, and a longtime member of the "306

Group"— so named for the art studio at 306 West 141st Street, where Savage exchanged techniques and ideas with black artists such as Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Morgan and Marvin Smith.

Throughout the early 1930s, Augusta sculpted portrait busts of many African-American leaders, including NAACP leader, James Weldon Johnson, who wrote the lyrics of the anthem "Lift Every Voice and Sing." For the World's Fair piece she chose to commemorate the musical contributions of African-Americans, and "Lift Every Voice and Sing" was her inspiration and the subsequent name of her finished artwork. However, before its reveal, World's Fair officials changed the name of the sculpture to "The Harp."

The sculpture, in the shape of the so named musical instrument, depicted a group of twelve African-American choir singers in graduated heights. The strings of the harp are formed by the folds of choir robes, symbolizing the strings of the harp. Positioned in front of the singers is a man, kneeling with his arms extended, holding sheet music, representing the foot pedal of the harp. An outstretched arm extends from the base of the harp upwards while a large hand, representing the hand of God, cradles the furthest and smallest singer. The singers are the instruments of God. The sculpture was sixteen feet high and made of painted plaster. "The Harp" was the most popular and most photographed work at the fair, boasting five million visitors. Small metal souvenir copies were sold, and many postcards of the piece were purchased. A small bronze version of the original sculpture is held by New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Augusta did not have funds to have "The Harp" cast in bronze or to move and store it. So, like the other temporary installations at the fair, the sculpture was destroyed at the close of the fair.



Much of Augusta's work was in clay or plaster, as she could not often afford bronze. One of her most famous busts is titled "Gamin" which is on permanent display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.; a life-sized version is in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. At the time of its creation, Gamin, which is modeled after a Harlem youth, was voted most popular in an exhibition of over 200 works by black artists.



Though her art and influence within the art community are documented, the location of much of her work is unknown. In 1945 Augusta moved to Saugerties, New York. She taught art to children and wrote children's stories. Augusta Savage died of cancer on March 26, 1962, in New York City.

"The Harp" faced Rainbow Avenue from the garden adjacent to the Contemporary Arts Building at the New York World's Fair 1939.

