

EXPLORE WITH THE COLUMBUS MUSEUM

Making History: Celebrating Black Achievement



Augusta Savage, *Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Harp)*, ca. 1939, Cast white metal with bronze patina, 10.75"x9.62"x4", Collection of The Columbus Museum

Take a moment to look closely at the sculpture above. What do you see? List five words or phrases about any property or feature of the artwork. Challenge yourself to be descriptive.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Look again. What does it make you wonder? Write down one question you have about the artwork.



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(Continued)

In 1939, African American sculptor Augusta Savage was commissioned by the New York World's Fair to create a sculpture symbolizing the musical contributions of African Americans. Initially inspired by Black spiritual hymns, Savage chose to not only title, but also model her sculpture after the poem "Lift Every Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson. Its subtitle, "The Harp" was added when the fair's commissioning committee changed the sculpture's name in an attempt to minimize its racial overtones. How do you think this change impacted people's interpretation of the piece? Do you think this action was fair? Why or why not?

The poem, "[Lift Every Voice and Sing](#)" was written in 1900 by the educator, diplomat, and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson. Also known as the Black National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" became a rallying cry for black communities and, in 1919, was adopted as the official song of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Its message of resiliency in the face of overwhelming and persistent adversity regained popularity during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Read the first four lines of the first verse:

*Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise,*

How do you see these lyrics reflected in Savage's sculpture? Why do you think she chose this poem to inspire her commission for the New York World's Fair?

At 16 feet tall, the original sculpture was Savage's largest work. Unfortunately, it was demolished shortly after the fair ended because Savage did not have the funds to either cast it in metal or store it. However, Savage had permission to make small replicas and sell them as souvenirs at the fair. The piece depicted here is a replica. As you looked closely, did you notice how the figures are arranged to resemble a harp? The choir robes worn by the 12 stylized Black singers represent the strings of the harp, while the arm and hand represents the sounding board, and the kneeling man the foot pedal.

Born in Green Cove Springs, FL in 1892, Augusta Savage was not only an artist, but also an educator and devoted civil rights activist. Through her art she combatted the rampant stereotyping of her race during the Jim Crow era (1877-1968) by accurately representing the facial characteristics of African Americans. As an educator, Savage believed that her greatest achievement was inspiring aspiring artists to develop and own the talents they possessed. To support this belief she offered free art classes out of her studio in Harlem, NY. And, as an activist, she fought to grant commissions to Black artists through the Federal Art Project (1935-1943), and to have African American history included in public murals. To learn more about Augusta Savage, visit <https://tinyurl.com/37tk7aff>.

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Now it's your turn! As an artist, educator, and community activist Augusta Savage worked tirelessly to advocate for causes that mattered to her. Think of a specific issue or problem that is important to you. What can you, or others in your community, do to create change? Use the space below to design a work of art that stands out, speaks up, and encourages people to get involved.

Go further! Create an object label for your work of art that elaborates on the issue you are addressing. What is it? Why is it important? How can people learn more?