

'Augusta Savage' exhibit propels Cummer to explore Jacksonville's racial history

Oct 11, 2018, 12:37pm EDT

The highlight of the year at the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens has arrived: one of the most significant exhibits organized by the museum in its history, "Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman."

Exhibits at the Cummer usually run for 12 weeks. This one will run for 20 weeks, from Oct. 21 to April 7, 2019.

Developed by the Cummer staff and guest curated by art historian and curator Jeffreen Hayes, the exhibit will feature 50 works assembled from 21 public and private lenders.

Savage was a Green Cove Springs native who became a noted Harlem Renaissance leader, educator, artist and activist after moving to New York City. She was the first African-American woman to open her own gallery and to be elected to the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors.

Her studio in a Harlem basement became a teaching ground for a number of highly respected artists, including Gwendolyn Knight, Jacob Lawrence, William Artis and Norman Lewis.

To see what local artists are saying about the exhibit and its impact on Jacksonville, click here. To read more about the historic woman behind the art, click here.

The Cummer exhibit explores Savage's legacy, looking at her activist work, her use of art to empower an oppressed community and her impact on the Harlem Renaissance. Among the works featured in the exhibit is "The Diving Boy," which Ninah Cummer contributed long ago to the Cummer's founding collection.

"It was a perfect storm of factors that solidified our interest in her," said Cummer interim Director Holly Keris. "I would challenge anybody, after hearing her story, not to find one piece of it that is somehow relatable to a personal experience."

The exhibit is momentous for the museum not only because of its run time. An additional asset in book form – an exhibit catalogue – will be created to memorialize the exhibition and further expand on its context. Because of the expense, catalogues are not created for every museum exhibit. And once the Savage exhibit's run in Jacksonville is complete, the exhibit will become the first Cummer-curated exhibition to travel nationally to New York, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

Keris said that the scope of the exhibit is intentional and significant: nearly 75 percent of the museum's resources for a year's worth of exhibits is being spent on "Augusta Savage."



JAMES CRICLOW

Dr. Jeffreen Hayes, Guest Curator of the Augusta Savage exhibit was on hand at the Cummer Museum and spoke to assembled guests about the artist and her work recently.

Doing an exhibit of this scale is not routine, and creating an advisory committee to proactively reach out to cultural organizations to partner with isn't routine, either. The advisory committee is an additional measure the Cummer has added to Cummer-curated exhibitions in recent years, to make sure each exhibit is presented in an inclusive light and to increase engagement.

"The Cummer is well-established as a leader in the arts in this community," said James Richardson, board trustee and advisory committee member. "This exhibit can help propel us to the next level. We all would want to see the Cummer as a regional, maybe even national museum. This brings some panache to that."

Keris said the cost of the catalogue was covered by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation for American Art. Additional funding came from the National Endowment for the Arts and a \$10,000 Sotheby's Prize, an annual award to encourage museums to break new ground and facilitate exhibits that explore under-represented parts of art history. "Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman" won one of three runners-up awards.

The usual donors and presenters also support the exhibit, and the museums hosting "Augusta Savage" will pay a rental fee, which which will cover about a third of the total expenses of the exhibit.

"Augusta Savage" has been a long time coming: guest curator Jeffreen Hayes spent more than three years researching, developing and assembling the exhibition. The former director of the museum, Hope McMath, originally engaged her for the idea and helped put the wheels in motion for the exhibition. After McMath left the Cummer in 2016, the project continued.

"A lot of the work Augusta Savage made only exist in photographs. The sculptures were destroyed," Hayes said. "That's one of the challenges putting together a show highlighting this sculptress. She was really active between the 1920s and 1940s, so a lot of the works are from then. We're showing that and also the work of her students."

Hayes, who has been personally inspired by Savage for much of her artistic career, said that it was important to highlight her because many black female artists "tend to be a footnote in our history, not getting the same level of scholarship that their male counterparts received."

It was important to her, she said, to bring Savage to the contemporary movement, where black women are seen at the forefront of the charge.

"We often are always looking outside of our own community for those who are making an impact," Hayes said. "I love the fact that [this exhibit] is happening in Jacksonville near where she was born. I have really enjoyed digging into her life and trying to piece together a story that highlighted her not only as an artist and an educator but also a human being."

Local artist Princess Simpson Rashid said that the exhibit proves there is "room for everybody," and that talking about Savage in this exhibition is "a way to correct her being overlooked."

"As a young person deciding if I was going to be an artist, Augusta Savage was one of the people who was an anchor for me," she said. "Having someone from the area elevated like this – and rightly so – and supported by this institution is what we all dream of."

The exhibit will run from Oct. 21 to April 7. For more information, go to the Cummer's website here.

Dahlia Ghabour

Reporter

Jacksonville Business Journal

