

Entertainment & Life

Catalog for Cummer show paints a fascinating picture of Savage

By Michael Hoffmann / For the Times-Union

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AUGUSTA SAVAGE: RENAISSANCE WOMAN

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DGiles Ltd., 156 pages, \$43 hardback

“Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman” is the title of a handsome catalog that accompanies the upcoming exhibit by the same name at the Cummer Museum. The exhibit and catalogue will elucidate and burnish Savage’s growing reputation among art historians as a pivotal figure of the Harlem Renaissance: sculptor, arts educator, arts impresario, gallery owner, and woman of color who “made a way” in spite of the significant racial and gender barriers of the time as well as personal and family crises.

The Cummer Museum exhibit will be a homecoming of sorts for the native Floridian, who was born and lived until age 15 in Green Cove Springs where she got clay from a local brick factory to mold animals familiar to her. Ninah Cummer herself purchased the two pieces owned by the museum: “Gamin,” 1928, Savage’s breakthrough bust of her young nephew, and “Diving Boy,” a bronze from 1939 that deploys techniques she owned after an extended wanderjahr in Europe and two decades in the mad atmosphere of interwar Harlem.

Jeffreen M. Hayes is the special curator for the exhibit, and she contributes an essay to the catalogue, “Love, Labor, Legacy: Augusta Savage’s Art,” which posits Savage as a “race woman,” female counterpart to “race men” of that day like

James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey — who not coincidentally sat for busts by Savage. They were New Negroes who embraced their color, their heritage and their “folk.”

Bridget R. Cooks contributes “Augusta Savage: A Gallery of Their Own,” which traces Savage’s indefatigable efforts to put her work and that of other black contemporaries before the public eye, creating or organizing spaces for aspiring black artists to work and exhibit; offering free group art lessons to all age groups, and utilizing the black press to spread the word that the “Third Generation” since Emancipation was flowering. Works by a number of artists that she mentored are in the show and appear in the catalogue in color plates, including pieces by Jacob Lawrence and his wife Gwendolyn Knight, Norman Lewis, William E. Artis, Marvin and Morgan Smith, and Ernest Crichlow.

Kirsten Pai Buick contributes “Monu*ment*ality: Edmonia Lewis, Meta Fuller, Augusta Savage and the Re-Envisioning of Public Space.” Buick places Savage’s sculpture and ethos alongside two contemporary black female sculptors, Edmonia Lewis (1844-1907) and Meta Fuller (1877-1968). Specifically, Buick compares and contrasts three pieces: “Forever Free” (1867) by Lewis; “Spirit of Emancipation” (1913) by Fuller, and Savage’s 1938 masterpiece “Realization” (which survives only as a photograph). The three sculptures reflect an evolving black zeitgeist as the gains of Reconstruction gradually were stolen, lynching was institutionalized in the South, and waves of Southern blacks streamed north and west to escape Jim Crow, disfranchisement and poverty.

Howard Dodson, a former director of the Schomburg Center, contributes a useful introduction that provides historical context for Savage’s career as artist, teacher, and institution builder. Dodson details her successes and failures in accessing both white and black patronage — as crucial to Savage’s career as it was to that of her Harlem friend Zora Neale Hurston from Eatonville.

Savage arrived at the pinnacle of her public success during the 1939-40 World’s Fair when she became the sole African American female artist to receive a commission. She created “The Harp,” inspired by Jacksonville’s James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson’s anthemic “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” “The Harp” was abandoned after the World’s Fair closed because Savage could neither afford to cast in bronze nor to put in storage the 16-foot-tall plaster piece.

The small bronze model of “The Harp” that appears in the Cummer Museum exhibit was made as a souvenir for purchase at the world’s fair. The catalogue has 20 plates of the Savage pieces that appear in the museum exhibit, but some of her best work was lost because of recurring economic hardships and appears only in catalogue photographs. (It comes as no surprise, then, that teaching and mentoring became Savage’s solace.)

The publisher of the catalogue, DGiles Ltd., is a London publishing house known for producing beautiful arts books, and *Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman* does not disappoint. It has color plates of the exhibit’s works by Savage and her circle, including both her mentees and close contemporaries like Romare Bearden, Robert Blackburn, Charles Alston, and Selma Burke; many archival photographs; correspondence between Savage and W.E.B. DuBois, and a comprehensive bibliography. The introduction and essays also incorporate color plates and photographs.

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