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Turning Discarded Items Into Art About Race in America

**ART & DESIGN**

# Augusta Savage's Rural Escape and Clementine Hunter's Murals

By EVE M. KAHN MARCH 24, 2016



"Gamin," a painted plaster sculpture by Augusta Savage. Augusta Savage, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

## An Artist's Retreat From a Harlem Harasser

The sculptor Augusta Savage abruptly left her home in Harlem in the early 1940s for a drafty farmhouse in Saugerties, N.Y. The reasons for her departure are only now becoming public.

The historian Jill Lepore, in her book due out this spring, "[Joe Gould's Teeth](#)," reveals archival evidence that the writer Joe Gould, considered at the time to be a harmless eccentric, harassed Savage, who was known as Miss Savage. He called her, insulted her, followed her to parties and told people that she had agreed to marry him. She complained to friends; he told them that she was lying.



“He berated her for betraying his secrets,” Ms. Lepore writes. A mutual friend of the two later recalled that Miss Savage, as a black woman, “hesitated to take court action.”

She left New York City around the time that Mr. Gould became the subject of a 1942 profile in *The New Yorker* by Joseph Mitchell. It portrayed Mr. Gould as a party crasher who imitated sea gulls and was working on an encyclopedia of overheard conversations. Ms. Lepore said that Mr. Gould was the original focus of the book, but “there was a real turning point” as she discovered how he had sabotaged Miss Savage. She became the book’s heroine

Miss Savage was a Florida native who moved to New York in 1921, before turning 30. She had already been widowed and divorced, and had a teenage daughter, Irene. “She told people that Irene was her younger sister, pretended that she was a decade younger than she was, and never admitted to her first two marriages,” Ms. Lepore writes.

Miss Savage and Mr. Gould met at a poetry reading. He “fell in love with her at first sight,” he later wrote. She ran art schools, befriended Harlem Renaissance intellectuals and produced realistic portraits in stone, wood, clay, plaster and bronze. She won grants to travel in Europe, and her works were displayed at prominent exhibitions, including the 1939 World’s Fair.

She apparently destroyed much of her own paperwork. “She didn’t want her story to be told,” Ms. Lepore said.

When Mr. Gould recorded his infatuation in his notebooks, Ms. Lepore writes, “he always erased her name.”

In Saugerties, Miss Savage eked out a living, raising chickens and pigeons and tending to mice in a research laboratory. The lab’s owner, Ms. Lepore writes, “provided her with clay, year after year, so that she could still make art.” After nearly two decades in rural obscurity — and soon after Mr. Gould died at a psychiatric hospital — she returned to New York City, where she died in 1962, at 70.



Her art is now attracting much attention. In 2014, the [Dixon Gallery & Gardens](#) in Memphis devoted an exhibition to her best-known sculpture, “Gamin,” a portrait bust of a boy. Her works have appeared in surveys of African-American art, including the display of Bill and Camille Cosby’s collection at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art. They have been acquired by the [Newark Museum](#); the Smithsonian [American Art Museum](#); the [Norton Museum of Art](#) in West Palm Beach, Fla.; the [Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens](#) in Jacksonville, Fla.; the [Mint Museum](#) in Charlotte, N.C.; and the [Schomburg Center](#) for Research in Black Culture in Harlem.

The art historian [Theresa Leininger-Miller](#), who is completing a biography of Miss Savage, wrote an essay about her for a recent book, “[Women Artists of the Harlem Renaissance](#).” The [Staten Island Museum](#) is developing an exhibition for 2018 with works by three New York sculptors who thrived in the 1920s and ’30s: Miss Savage, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Anna Hyatt Huntington.

[Michael Rosenfeld Gallery](#) in Manhattan has sold Miss Savage’s sculptures to museums and has a few in its inventory (each priced at tens of thousands of dollars). A terra-cotta portrait of a baby’s pillowed head was most likely made in Saugerties. A version of “Gamin” bears a past owner’s inscription: “Bought in Harlem from Negro artist.”

Fakes of her work are surfacing. “Provenance is critical” in evaluating authenticity, Mr. Rosenfeld said. His wife, Halley K. Harrisburg, the gallery’s director, said that rescuing the legacies of underappreciated artists like Miss Savage is “unbelievably rewarding.”

Karlyn Knaust Elia owns the former Savage property in Saugerties; her grandfather, Herman Knaust, was the lab owner. When Miss Savage visited the Knausts, “she gave poetry readings and recited Shakespeare sonnets from memory,” Ms. Knaust Elia said. A few of her possessions have survived, including a Remington typewriter.

The studio, a former chicken coop, will be rebuilt with salvaged material. There are also plans to reconstruct the pigeon barn. The site will be used for artists’ residencies.