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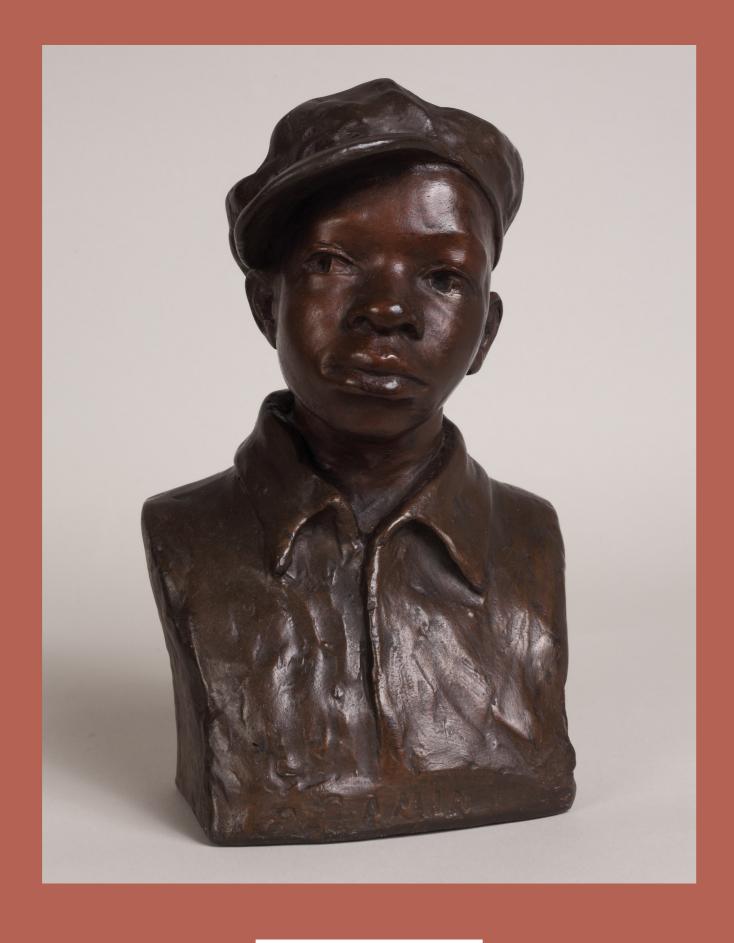
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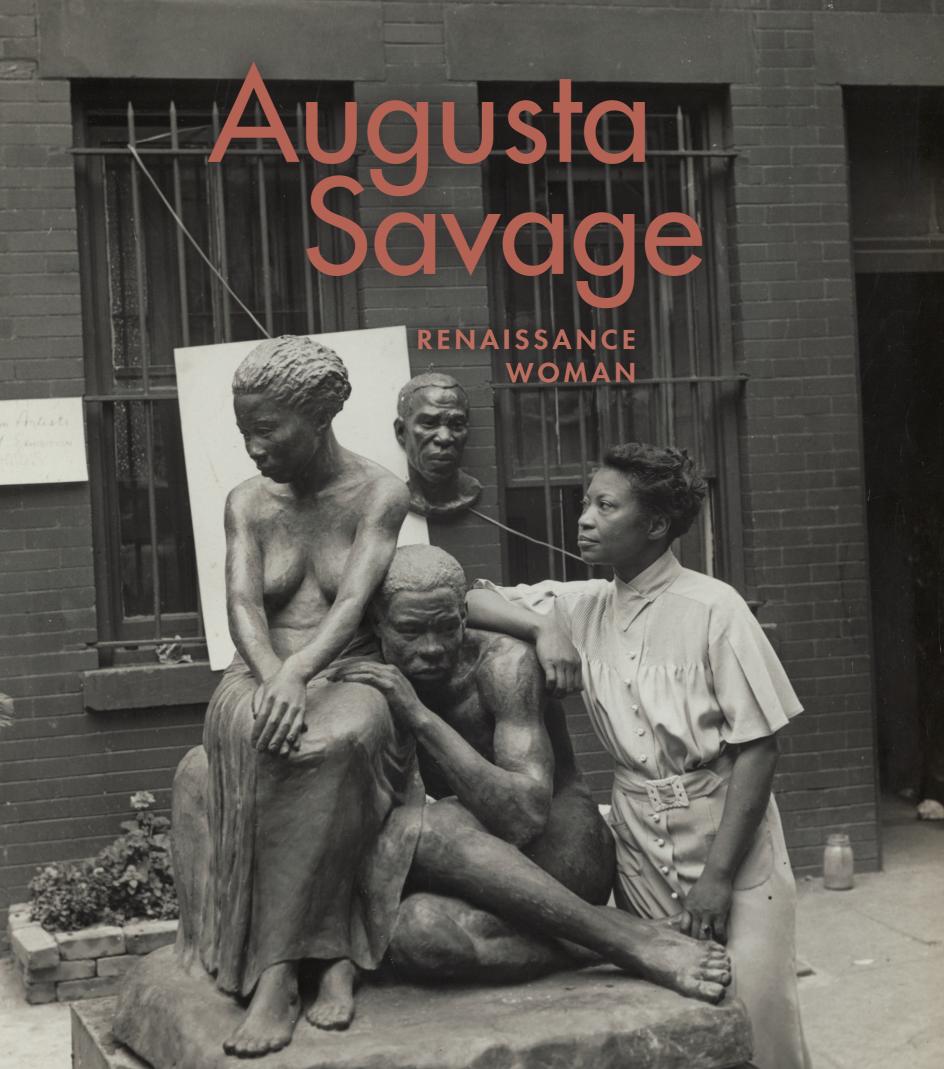
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Augusta Savage

RENAISSANCE WOMAN

This is a timely, visual exploration of the life, art, and lasting legacy of Augusta Savage (1892–1962). An outstanding sculptor associated with the intellectual and cultural awakening known as the Harlem Renaissance, Savage overcame poverty, racism, and sexual discrimination in pursuit of her goals. Creating new visions of Black identity in her work, she was also an activist, campaigning for equal rights for African Americans in the arts.

Born just outside Jacksonville, Florida, Savage left the South to pursue new opportunities. She took classes at Cooper Union School of Art in New York City, and in 1929 won an award to study in Paris. Returning to Harlem, she opened a studio, and also offered art classes. She was one of the founders of the Harlem Artists' Guild and was made the first director of the federally supported Harlem Community Art Center. Through her leadership there, Savage had an impact on two generations of Harlem artists, among them Charles Alston, William Artis, Romare Bearden, Robert Blackburn, Selma Burke, Ernest Crichlow, Gwendolyn Knight, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Marvin Smith, and Morgen Smith—all represented in this book.

This ground-breaking volume features illustrations of over forty works by Savage, her students and contemporaries, as well as essays by three outstanding scholars, archival materials such as letters and rarely seen photographs, and an extensive bibliography.

Front cover illustration:

Andrew Herman (active 1930s – 1940s)
Federal Art Project, Works Progress Administration
Augusta Savage with her Sculpture "Realization," 1938
Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library Photographs and Prints Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, 86-0036 (fig. 16)

Back cover illustration:

Augusta Savage (1892–1962)

Gamin, c. 1930

Painted plaster, 9½ x 6 x 4 in.

The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens Purchased with funds from the Morton R. Hirschberg Bequest, AP.2013.1.1 (plate 4)



Bn

REZ

Augusta Savage

RENAISSANCE WOMAN



Augusta Savage

RENAISSANCE

WOMAN

Jeffreen M. Hayes

With contributions by Kirsten Pai Buick and Bridget R. Cooks and an Introduction by Howard Dodson



Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida in association with D Giles Limited, London

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The exhibition was curated by Jeffreen M. Hayes, Ph.D.

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Statement about language

In this publication, the term *Black*, capitalized, is used to refer to a group of people of African descent who live in the United States but do not identify solely as American. The term includes within its scope the larger African Diaspora and acknowledges that Black culture exists outside of the Americas. *White* is capitalized for consistency and to ensure one group is not privileged over another.

Front Cover:

Andrew Herman (active 1930s–1940s)
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The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Purchased with funds from the Morton R. Hirschberg Bequest, AP.2013.1.1 (Plate 4)

Frontispiece:

Morgan Smith (1910–1993) and Marvin Smith (1910–2003) Augusta Savage, Harlem Sculptress for World's Fair, c. 1938 Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Photographs and Prints Division, Morgan & Marvin Smith Photograph Collection, 81-0163

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Augusta Savage: A Gallery of Their Own

Bridget R. Cooks

Then Augusta Savage opened her art gallery, the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art, on June 8, 1939, she was proudly marching into uncharted territory. The Chicago Defender announced the event with great acclaim, recognizing it as "the first art gallery in America devoted to the exhibition and sale of the works of artists of the Race." Indeed, Sayage's Salon was the first gallery of its kind in the nation and opened in Harlem as the logical next step in the sculptor's career as an artist, educator, and activist. The Defender article about the new gallery was accompanied by a large collage of five photographs representing Savage's contributions. Titled "Lift Every Voice and Sing....." the collage featured a photo of Savage ecstatically lifting a small dog; an in situ photo of her most well-known sculpture, The Harp (1939; Figs. 6-7, Pl. 11) a massive, sixteen-foot-high sculpture of a robed choir in sona; a photograph of her now-lost female figurative wood sculpture Envy (n.d.; Fig. 41.); the animated bronze Green Apples (1928) of a young boy in an urgent situation; and her clay bust of James Weldon Johnson (c. 1939; Pl. 13), poet and author of "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Savage's clearly focused vision for the gallery is quoted:

I have long felt that Negro artists, in the course of our development have reached the point where they should have a gallery of their own—one devoted to the exhibition and sale of Negro art. The Salon of Contemporary Negro Art will attempt to fill that need. We have made every effort to make this one of the finest galleries in the country. It will be beautifully appointed, well lighted and ideally situated. It is designed to meet the needs of the most exacting taste. It is our plan to hold a series of one-man and group shows that will make this gallery a mecca for all art lovers.²

Savage spoke as gallery director and president of the Salon's corporate sponsorship.³ The founding of a gallery along racial lines was a tradition of the mainstream art world, which regularly practiced the exhibition and sale of art exclusively by Whites without accountability or explanation. Knowing this, Savage's establishing of the Salon was a radical act—an acknowledgment of the art world's racially exclusive rules, and a presentation of evidence that exposed those rules as racist and inherently antidemocratic. At the opening event, which was attended by over five hundred guests, Savage explained, "We do not ask any special favors as artists because of our race. We only want to present to you our works and ask you to judge them on their merits. We accept your verdict on this basis and gladly rise or fall on our merit."⁴ Savage was determined to provide exposure for the gallery's stable of thirty multigenerational artists, which included Meta Warrick Fuller, Richmond Barthé, Marvin and Morgan Smith, Gwendolyn Knight, Norman Lewis, Beauford Delaney, Georgette Seabrooke, Loïs Mailou Jones, Selma Burke, and Ernest Crichlow, among others.⁵

At this point in her career, Savage had already found and tested the permitted limits for a Black woman sculptor in America. After being awarded a scholarship to attend Cooper Union in New York for art training, she won a scholarship in 1923 to continue her studies at the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts. While making her arrangements for her stay in France, she was notified that the American admissions committee of eight male architects, painters, and sculptors would not allow the French government to give the opportunity to Savage because she was Black. The committee argued that their decision of denial was made for Savage's own good and also to ensure that the White recipients would not feel uncomfortable living as peers with a young Black woman. Savage persevered. She used the Black press to make her position on the refusal widely known. In a precise and direct statement, Savage explained:

I hear so many complaints to the effect that Negroes do not take advantage of the educational opportunities offered them. Well, one of the reasons why more of my race do not go in for higher education is that as soon as one of us gets his head above the crowd there are millions of feet ready to crush it back again to that dead level of commonplace thus creating a racial deadline of culture in our Republic. For how am I

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to compete with other American artists if I am not to be given the same opportunity? I haven't the slightest desire to force any question like that of "social equality" upon any one. Instead of desiring to force my society upon ninety-nine white girls, I should be pleased to go to France on a ship with a black captain, a black crew and myself as sole passenger, if on arrival there I would be given the same opportunities for study as the other ninety-nine girls; and I feel sure that my race would not need to be ashamed of me after the final examinations.⁷

Perhaps out of guilt, committee member and sculptor Hermon MacNeil offered to tutor Savage in the United States.⁸ The Fontainebleau decision discouraged Savage from participating in the normative process of developing her skills abroad, even after proving herself at home. Her talent and her Blackness were perceived as irreconcilable partners by the gatekeepers of the arts. Persistent, Savage began a pattern of working around obstacles that prevented her from fulfilling her potential. After being awarded a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship in 1929, Savage was finally able to study sculpture in Paris.⁹ She returned to New York and shortly after founded the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in 1932. The studio became a training ground for dozens of future artists and the base for what would become the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art.

Nineteen thirty-nine was a pivotal year for Savage. She was given a solo exhibition at Argent Gallery in New York and premiered her monumental sculptural group *The Harp* at the New York World's Fair (Figs. 6–7, Pl. 11). *The Harp* proved to be the pinnacle of Savage's career, and made history as the first artwork commissioned for the fair by either a woman or an African American. However, by opening the Salon that same year, Savage was not only building on the achievements of her career, but also on the careers of her fellow African American artists as a whole. In late 1937, the Museum of Modern Art had organized the first solo show by an African American artist: *Exhibition of Sculpture by William Edmondson*. The exhibition was part of a series in which MoMA, under the curatorial direction of Alfred Barr, sought to establish ancestral sources for its definition of modern American art. Edmondson, who had not received any formal art training and did not consider himself an artist, was selected to represent the kind of primitive soul that MoMA, the nation's tastemaker for modern art, desired as exemplary of an

American past. With its focus on Edmondson's simple limestone sculptures, MoMA presented African American artists as perpetually filling a position of the past, rather than actively participating in the present, as if no development of artistic technique or artistic vision had taken place for thousands of years. The museum's conflation of Edmondson's artistic style, race, and rural environment supported racist norms about Blackness and aesthetics as incompatible with the standards of the fine-art world.

A year or so later, the Baltimore Museum of Art offered a different framework for understanding Blackness and art. Instigated by community interest in seeing Negro contributions to the arts, and supported by the Harmon Foundation, which bankrolled most of the visual-art activities during the Harlem Renaissance, on February 3, 1939, the museum opened a group exhibition that featured up-and-coming artists. Contemporary Negro Art was a show that dared to recognize African American artists, mounted at a critical moment when the conditions of their inclusion in the art world had not yet been fixed by tradition. The goal was to reflect the wishes of Baltimore's broader public and present Black artists as the contemporary, living artists they were. In this way, the exhibition was an exercise in democracy. As philosopher and Harmon Foundation advisor Alain Locke explained in his foreword to the exhibition catalogue:

Art in a democracy should above all else be democratic, which is to say that it must be truly representative. Step by step, happily sometimes by strides, we are approaching such democracy in American art.... I think, we have the promising prospects of a more democratic and representative art because of our now generally accepted objective to have American art fully document American life and experience, and thus more adequately reflect America.¹⁰

Based on Savage's 1923 response to the Fontainebleau admission committee, it is possible that she supported Locke's ideas of democracy and the opportunity for Negroes to be selected for inclusion in a blatantly anti-Black art world. Further, she shared an appreciation for the selected artworks, and mentored several of the artists in Baltimore's landmark exhibition—including Charles Alston, Louise E. Jefferson, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and Richard Lindsey—by helping them find opportunities for exposure that were not as readily available to her. Although

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the title of the exhibition and the name of Savage's Salon overlap, the two were not formally connected. However, Savage did include one artist from the Baltimore exhibition, painter Rex Gorleigh, in the inaugural show at her Salon, even though Savage's work had not been part of the Contemporary Negro Art presentation.

As engaged as she was in the contemporary Negro art scene in 1939, Savage seems to have been not as optimistic as Locke was about American ideals and the lived realities of Blackness in the art world. The words she spoke at the opening of the Salon indicate her belief in constructing a Black infrastructure—one that would support a gallery for Black artists. In this way, the Salon would serve as a Black alternative to a mainstream institution that had only recently recognized Black artists and temporarily presented them in segregated galleries. 11 Nevertheless, with the opening of the Salon, Savage articulated her choice in the mainstream museum debate between Negro artists as ancestral sources or active players in the art scene.

Despite Savage's talent and planning, the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art closed within three months of its opening. 12 Although the First Annual Exhibition was cause for celebration, ultimately Savage's vision did not have the necessary support to be successful. To sustain the gallery, Savage needed a network that included artists, collectors, and a dedicated audience who would contribute to the consistent creation, sale, and growing discourse of art by Negro artists. Scholar and curator Kellie Jones explains that building an art world capable of supporting Black artists requires the establishment of a multifaceted system to develop and maintain it. Her analysis of how Black artists enjoyed some art-world success in the 1960s through 1980s traces the concerted efforts of many artists, patrons, and curators, working both together and separately to make spaces for Black artists to be creative and visible. Jones asserts, "The key was not only for galleries and eventually African American museums to support black artists but to develop in individuals the desire and ability to collect art."13 Although Savage was an accomplished artist and educator, with the ambition to establish the Salon, the gallery did not have an honest chance for survival without the cultivation of a network to support it.

The Salon of Contemporary Negro Art was thus both a triumph and a disappointment. Savage did succeed in creating a space dedicated to the promotion of Negro art—a project that was overdue—and yet her efforts were premature. A gallery that would demonstrate democracy in the American art world should have already



existed, but the lack of a broader commitment to Negro artists quickly sabotaged Savage's dream. Looking back at the two known photographs from the opening night of the *First Annual Exhibition*, the stilled moments seem telling. In one image, Savage giggles in conversation with one of the tuxedoed guests (Fig. 10). Her smile radiates above a large corsage that drapes over her light-colored strappy gown with an oversized dark bow. The interracial crowd suggests the fulfillment of her goal of "a mecca for all art lovers." In the second picture, Savage's smile is subdued; she appears pleased, but the looks on the faces of all the other guests suggest suspicion and contempt (Fig. 11). These two photographs are not enough to provide an accurate account of the night's event or the thoughts of the many people who attended. Still, knowing the fate of the Salon, it is difficult not to

Fig. 10

Morgan Smith (1910–1993) and
Marvin Smith (1910–2003)
Augusta Savage with civic leader
Channing Tobias, writer Max Eastman,
artist Selma Burke, and composer W. C.
Handy at the opening of the Salon of
Contemporary Negro Art, sponsored by
the Augusta Savage Studios, June 7, 1939
Gelatin silver print, 81/4 x 101/4 in.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Photographs and Prints Division, Augusta Savage Portrait Collection, 04-55-05

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notice the difference in the mood between the two photographs, and the remarkable contrast in facial expressions in the second photograph. Savage's quiet smile reads as hopeful, but her distance from the crowd also suggests alienation. The combination of both interpretations testifies to her courage to do something new, even if it meant standing on her own.

Though Savage was not the first Black artist to open a gallery, she was the first Black woman to do so. ¹⁴ She foregrounded the establishment of significant galleries by Black artists in the Black Power era in New York and Los Angeles, such as Brockman Gallery (1967) by Alonzo and Dale Davis; Gallery 32 (1968) by Suzanne Jackson; Cinque Gallery (1969) by Romare Bearden, Ernest Crichlow, and Norman Lewis; Acts of Art (1969) by Nigel Jackson; and Just Above Midtown (JAM; 1975) by Linda Bryant. Through her Salon, Savage challenged exclusive American art galleries and museums to recognize the work of Black artists. She made their art available to the public, easily accessible to anyone willing to look. Founding the Salon was one of her contributions to artistic excellence through self-determination.

Fig. 11

Morgan Smith (1910–1993) and Marvin Smith (1910–2003) Augusta Savage with guests at the opening of the First Annual Exhibition of the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art, in Harlem, New York, June 7, 1939 Gelatin silver print, 81/4 x 101/4 in.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Photographs and Prints Division, Augusta Savage Portrait Collection, 04-55-04

Notes

- 1 "Artists Get New Inspiration from Augusta Savage Who Opens Gallery to Sell Their Work to the Public," Chicago Defender, June 10, 1939, 13.
- 2 "Artists Get New Inspiration," 13.
- 3 "Artists Get New Inspiration," 13. The
 Defender specifies the sponsoring
 organization as a "\$10,000 corporation" that
 includes Brooklyn realtor Kenneth W. Smith as
 secretary-treasurer and producer George W.
 Lattimore as vice president of Augusta Savage
 Studios, Inc.
- 4 Juanita Marie Holland, "Augusta Christine Savage: A Chronology of Her Art and Life 1892–1962," in Augusta Savage and the Art Schools of Harlem, ed. Deirdre L. Bibby, exh. cat. (New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 1988), 18; "World's Fair Art Salon," unidentified clipping, Augusta Savage Papers, box 2 scrapbook, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
- 5 Holland, 18. The full roster in the inaugural exhibition included John Atkinson, W. F. Davis, Edgar Evans, William Farrow, J. Solace Glenn, Rex Gorleigh, Grace Mott Johnson, Lawrence Jones, Ronald Joseph, Elba Lightfoot, Francisco P. Lord, George Murray, Sara Murrell, Frederick Perry, Robert Pious, Savage, Earl Sweeting, James Lesesne Wells, and Ellis Wilson.
- 6 In an interview at Savage Studios dated June 20, 1935, Savage states, "I got a letter from the committee saying they were awfully sorry I did not let them know that I was colored, as they had not made any arrangements
- for colored students." See Augusta Savage, interview by the Federal Arts Commission, the artist's studio, June 20, 1935, Augusta Savage Papers, box 1, folder 2, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. In a letter from committee member Thomas Hastings to W. E. B. Du Bois in response to the latter's inquiry about Savage's refusal, Hastings offered no apology for the decision, saying, "I believe it is needless for me to say that I personally would have no sympathy with keeping Miss. Augusta Savage away from the Fontainebleau School of Arts because of Negro descent"; Hastings to Du Bois, June 7, 1923, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, MS 312, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. The content of this letter and others have been previously noted by Theresa Leininger-Miller in New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922–1934 (New Brunswick, NJ; London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 170. The New York Amsterdam News reported the committee's assessment that Savage "may not enter the school because she is a Negro and because her presence there would be embarrassing to her"; "Color Line Drawn by Americans," New York Amsterdam News, April 25, 1923, 1.
- 7 Augusta Savage, "Augusta Savage on Negro Ideals," New York World, May 20, 1923, cited in Leininger-Miller, New Negro Artists in Paris, 171.
- 8 MacNeil had conflicted feelings about Black equality. Although he shared a studio with Henry O. Tanner in Paris and offered help to Savage, he went on to make a public sculpture celebrating White supremacy.

- His Confederate Defenders (1932) was vandalized with anti-racist criticism in 2015. See Polly Mosendz, "'Black Lives Matter' Painted on Confederate Monument in South Carolina," Newsweek, June 23, 2015, http://www.newsweek.com/black-lives-matterpainted-confederate-monument-south-carolina-345851.
- 9 Regenia A. Perry, Free Within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 156.
- 10 Alain Locke, foreword, in Contemporary Negro Art (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1939), unpaginated.
- 11 Savage was widowed in 1924 by Robert
 Lincoln Poston, an attorney, journalist, and
 member of the Universal Negro Improvement
 Association (UNIA) led by Black nationalist
 Marcus Garvey. Poston died on a ship returning
 from a UNIA trip to Liberia. Savage also
 engaged in leftist political and artistic activities
 in Harlem, including organizing a Marxist study
 group called The Vanguard with fellow activist
 Louise Thompson Patterson. See Kellie Jones,
 South of Pico: African American Artists in Los
 Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s (Durham, NC:
 Duke University Press, 2017), 38.
- 12 Holland, "Augusta Christine Savage," 18.
- 13 Jones, South of Pico, 180.
- 14 James Presley Ball opened Ball's Great
 Daguerrean Gallery of the West in Cincinnati,
 Ohio, in 1851. See Deborah Willis,
 "Introduction," in J. P. Ball: Daguerrean and
 Studio Photographer (New York: Garland
 Publishing, 1993), xiii–xix.

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