

GERTRUDE VANDERBILT WHITNEY AND AUGUSTA SAVAGE

A TALE OF TWO SCULPTORS

At first glance, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942) and Augusta Savage (1892–1962) are the oddest of couples, the strangest of bedfellows. The disparity holds true as one learns more about these female American sculptors who lived worlds apart (both socially and economically) and whose works, purely by chance, have lately been crisscrossing the eastern half of the U.S. in museum retrospectives dedicated to each of them. Yet the biographies of this pair — one an heiress-patron who became an artist herself, the other an artist-prodigy who became an influential member of the Harlem Renaissance — have several crucial elements in common.

To be sure, each lived and worked in New York City in the early to middle years of the 20th century, embracing various degrees of realism and helping other artists realize their potential. But what makes a truly meaningful pairing of them possible is that each, because of who she was, had difficulty being taken seriously as an artist in the first place. Indeed, each emerged from cultural milieus whose denizens were not expected to become artists at all, and often were roundly discouraged from doing so.

Savage's father, in the artist's own words, "licked [her] four or five times a week, and almost whipped all the art out of [her]" when, as a child, she fashioned farm-animal figures out of her Florida hometown's red clay. This Methodist minister, who also made his living as a carpenter, fisherman, and farmer, preached that the Bible forbade "graven images." Besides, the Savage family was poor; their children were expected to aspire to simple wage-earning work. Yet those pressures paled in comparison to the indignities of racial discrimination



Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in her studio with *Buffalo Bill — The Scout*, c. 1924, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming, MS6 William F. Cody Collection, P.69.0517



Augusta Savage with her sculpture *Realization* in 1938, photograph taken by Andrew Herman, Federal Art Project, Works Progress Administration, gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in., Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 86-0036

that Savage faced as she sought to realize her dream of an artistic career — and not just in the South.

As for Whitney, even today it is easy to think condescendingly of her as a dilettante when we learn she took up a chisel to "express" herself. Because she famously founded Manhattan's Whitney Museum of American Art, some might wonder if supporting other artists with "real" talent should have been enough for a rich lady like her. What's



GERTRUDE VANDERBILT WHITNEY (1875–1942), *Home Again*, modeled 1916–19, cast 1919, bronze, 15 1/4 x 9 x 4 in., private collection

year, thanks to the two traveling retrospectives, museum-goers have been able to do some catching up and judgment-making of their own.

THE BOHEMIAN MRS. WHITNEY

More than 75 years have passed since a museum mounted a solo show devoted to Whitney's art. That occasion was her memorial exhibition in 1943, and the venue was her own Whitney Museum of American Art at its original location, 10 West Eighth Street in Greenwich Village. The recent, nearly 50-piece retrospective, *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney: Sculpture*, was organized by the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach and curated by Ellen E. Roberts. It has already been on view at its originating institution and at the Planting Fields Foundation in Oyster Bay on Long Island. Through July 21, it can still be enjoyed at the Newport Museum of Art in Newport, Rhode Island, where Whitney's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt II, built a summer "cottage" in 1893–95. Their daughter was in her late teens when the family moved into The Breakers, the renowned, 70-room Renaissance-style palazzo set on expansive grounds facing the Atlantic Ocean. Born into a fortune made in railroads and shipping, Gertrude grew even richer at age 21 when she married Harry Payne Whitney — scion of another Gilded Age clan — who was known for his prowess not at business but at polo, thoroughbred racehorse breeding, yachting, and quail-hunting.

The couple and their three children lived in Manhattan at 2 West 57th Street, opposite her parents' mansion. In 1904 they got a country house of their own — a bequest from Harry's father. This Tudor-style mansion designed by McKim, Mead & White stood on a 1,000-acre estate in Old Westbury, Long Island, complete with a mile-long racetrack and stables that could accommodate 84 horses. And yet, Whitney wrote later, "I longed to be someone else..."

Frustrated and restrained by family and society, she also suppressed herself, claiming as a young woman that she "would rather die than show [her] real feelings." But Whitney became fascinated by the "bohemian" way of life she observed during her frequent trips to Europe. Already an amateur visual artist, as well-bred ladies were taught to be, she was encouraged by the artists she admired to take it further. In New York, Whitney enrolled at the Art Students League and bought a small studio at 19 MacDougal Alley in Greenwich Village, prompting the imprecise newspaper headline "Daughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt Will Live in Dingy New York Alley." She built herself a second studio on the Old Westbury estate and hired assistants. She also

opened the Whitney Studio Club at 147 West 4th Street, intended as a meeting place for local artists like Robert Henri, who painted her portrait odalisque-style in 1916.

Among Whitney's early pieces were a traditional bronze bust of her husband, a plaster bust titled *Spanish Peasant* (actually modeled by a studio assistant) that was exhibited the Paris Salon in 1911, and a figurine in bronze of her daughter Barbara at age 10, fetchingly posed with hands in her pockets. (All three appear in this year's exhibition.) Through her impressive connections, Whitney received her first public commissions, including a fountain sculpture for the Pan-American Building in Washington, D.C., and one for that city's Arlington Hotel. The latter, *Aztec Fountain* (or *Fountain of El Dorado*), was reproduced in various sizes and

more, sculpture was once strenuously defended as a male-only domain. Both Whitney and Savage would have been held back for that reason alone. As it turned out, each rebelled successfully against potentially soul-stifling stereotypes.

And yet, from the mid-1940s — following Whitney's death and Savage's retreat to obscurity in rural New York State, to say nothing of realism's descent into critical disfavor — the artistic endeavors of both women were essentially forgotten. Only now are they being rediscovered and reassessed by both academics and institutions. In addition, Savage is now fetching big prices at auction as museum curators and private collectors realize that a truly American art collection cannot be considered complete or significant unless it includes works by African Americans. This

materials, one cast being submitted to the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, where it won a medal.

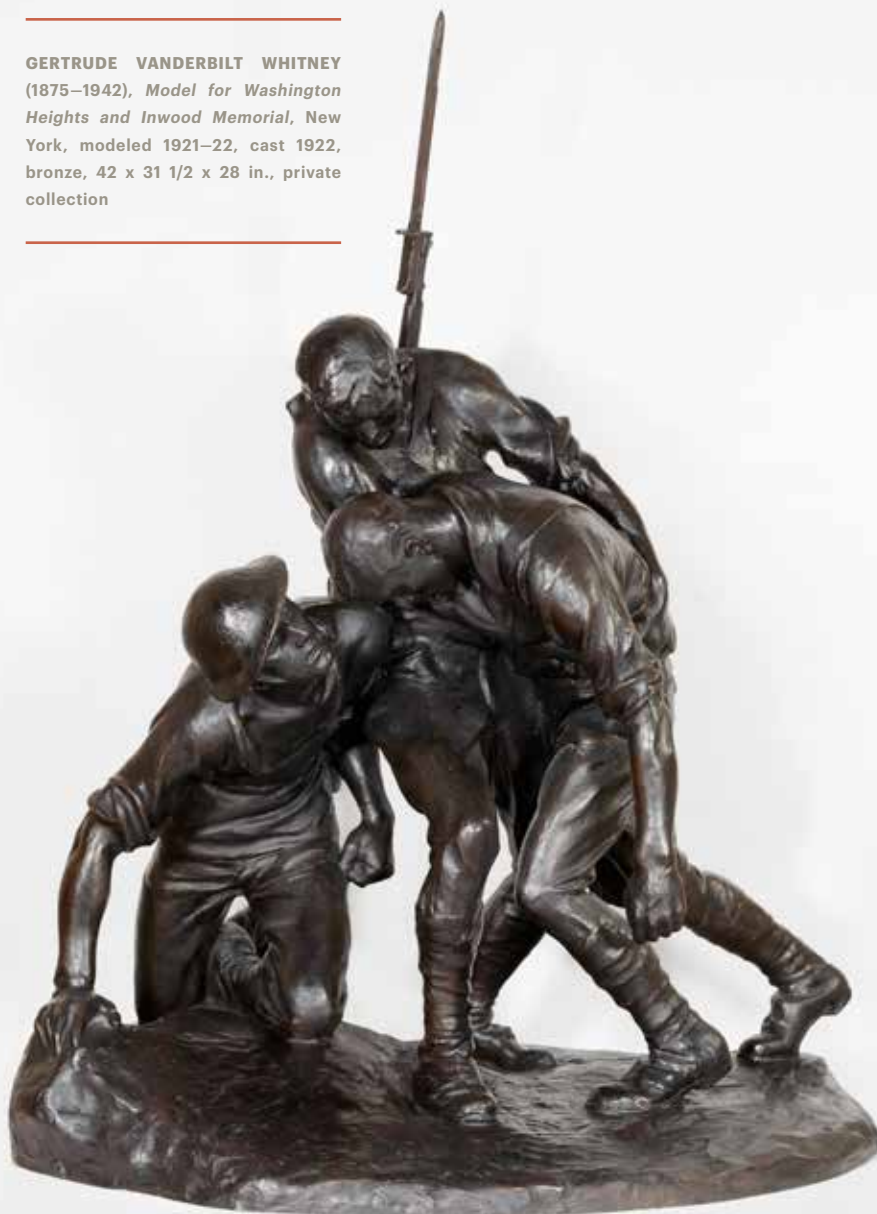
One could say, however, that Whitney's professional career actually began with a 1914 commission she won in an open competition. Her task was to design a memorial to the men who died while helping women and children to safety from the RMS *Titanic*. Like many people of her class, Whitney lived a thoroughly documented life, so we are fortunate to have studies and sketches — both drawn and modeled — as well as historical photographs for nearly every major work she completed, including this one. That's especially fortunate because the 13-foot-tall granite *Titanic Memorial* — a partially nude male figure with arms outstretched in the manner of a crucifix — is situated well out of the way, at Fort McNair, a U.S. Army post in Washington overlooking the Potomac River. (The memorial was moved from a far more visible spot along the Potomac when the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts was built in the 1960s.)

World War I was the tragic inspiration for some of Whitney's best-known works. These include *His Last Charge*, *His Bunkie*, *At His Post*, *Home Again*, and other realistic bronzes based on her experiences caring for wounded soldiers at a Red Cross facility in Paris and in nearby Juilly, where she established her own hospital. Whitney also created monumental memorials to the same horrific war. One, dedicated to the American Expeditionary Forces, was designed for the French port of Saint-Nazaire, where some of those troops landed in 1917. Whitney's doughboy, sword in hand and balanced on the outspread wings of an American eagle, stood there for 16 years until it was destroyed by the Nazis. (This memorial was rebuilt in 1989.) A second example, her *Washington Heights and Inwood Memorial*, went up in 1923, where Broadway and St. Nicholas Avenue converge at West 168th Street. Dedicated to that community's war heroes, it remains there. Represented by a bronze model in this year's retrospective, it depicts a trio of doughboys, two supporting a third wounded in battle, plus 20 plaques engraved with the names of the dead.

Arguably Whitney's most popular work is in Cody, Wyoming. This is a larger-than-life-size equestrian sculpture of William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody (1846–1917). William R. Coe, a Long Island neighbor who was a Western Americana enthusiast, and Mary Jester Allen, the New York-based niece of Buffalo Bill, convinced Whitney to take on the job. One could consider Whitney and Allen as kindred spirits, considering that each founded a museum. Allen's, formerly the Buffalo Bill Museum, has been folded into a complex known as the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. (Another of its units is the Whitney Western Art Museum, established by Gertrude's son Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney in 1959.) Today his mother's bronze *Buffalo Bill — The Scout*, erected in 1924, is a can't-miss destination for every visitor to Cody.

Whitney never did abandon her place in the American aristocracy, despite the psychic pain it had caused her. In 1929, as a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, she designed a sculpture of the organization's four founders installed alongside D.A.R. Constitution Hall, not far from the White House. Her small bronze *Daphne* (1933) portrays the Greek nymph morphing into a laurel tree to foil her pursuer, the god Apollo. Today we might like to see this motif as a nod to Whitney's own liberating transformation. To be sure, her final public project centers on

GERTRUDE VANDERBILT WHITNEY
(1875–1942), *Model for Washington
Heights and Inwood Memorial*, New
York, modeled 1921–22, cast 1922,
bronze, 42 x 31 1/2 x 28 in., private
collection



freedom. Created for the New York World's Fair of 1939, *To the Morrow* (now called *Spirit of Flight*) features two nudes — male and female — and three massive wings perched atop "a section of a rainbow" (Whitney's phrase) that rises 26 feet. Conceived to soar above the crowds, this Art Deco vision coated in platinum leaf was one of many sculptures commissioned for the fair, including a more modestly sized — though no less noteworthy — undertaking by Augusta Savage.

RENAISSANCE WOMAN, RACE WOMAN

The exhibition *Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman* presents approximately 20 works, a similar number of archival items that explore Savage's legacy as a teacher and activist, as well as two dozen works by artists she inspired, among them Jacob Lawrence, Gwendolyn Knight, Romare Bearden, and Norman Lewis. Organized by the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens in Jacksonville, Florida, where the project originated, it is being hosted by the New-York Historical Society through July 28, then will travel to the Palmer Museum of Art at Pennsylvania State University in State College (August 24–December 8).

GERTRUDE VANDERBILT WHITNEY (1875–1942), *Daphne*, 1933, bronze, 54 1/2 x 19 x 12 in., private collection



GERTRUDE VANDERBILT WHITNEY (1875–1942), *The Kiss*, 1936, stone, 39 1/2 x 19 5/8 x 16 1/2 in., private collection



It will conclude its run at the Dixon Gallery & Gardens in Memphis (January 19–March 22, 2020). Curated by Jeffrey M. Hayes, the show is more than a retrospective of Savage's career. As Hayes writes in her catalogue essay, Savage's example as a "race woman" — one who advocated and worked for the betterment of the black race — should serve as "a voice from the past who speaks to the present ... about the powerful potential ... of the marginalized to produce change."

Born Augusta Christine Fells, the seventh of 14 children, in Green Cove Springs, not far from Jacksonville, Savage once told an interviewer,

"I was a leap year baby, and it seems to me that I have been leaping ever since." Leap into life, she did. When she was 16, she met and married her first husband, John T. Moore, after her family had moved to West Palm Beach. Within a year she gave birth to her only child, Irene. When Moore died a few years later, Augusta married James Savage, a carpenter and laborer, whose name she would retain even though the marriage soon ended in divorce.

During high school, with her talent already locally recognized, Augusta was paid to give art lessons to her fellow students. In 1919, she



GERTRUDE VANDERBILT WHITNEY (1875–1942), *Gwendolyn*, 1933–35, marble, 21 1/4 x 21 1/2 x 10 in., Mrs. Whitney Tower

enjoyed some real though minor commercial success, winning a \$25 prize for the figural sculptures she displayed at a county fair. Emboldened, she moved to Jacksonville (the “Harlem of the South”), where she planned to support herself by sculpting portrait busts of prominent blacks in the community. When that idea failed, she left her daughter in her parents’ care and moved to New York City, arriving with exactly \$4.60. She found a job as an apartment building caretaker and enrolled at the Cooper Union School of Art, which then offered tuition-free education to select students. She completed the four-year course in three, and soon won commissions to sculpt portrait busts of nationally significant black people, including W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey.

In 1923, Savage married her third husband, Robert L. Poston, an associate of Garvey, who, like him, believed in establishing an African homeland for all people of African descent. That same year, she was awarded a summer scholarship to the Fontainebleau School of the Fine Arts in Paris, but the offer was rescinded when the selection committee discovered she was black. Only a year into their marriage, Poston died aboard ship while returning from a Garvey mission to Liberia. Widowed again, Savage never remarried. And there was more hardship to come. After a hurricane destroyed her parents’ Florida home, she invited the extended family, including her stroke-paralyzed father, to live with her in New York.

Savage continued to create art in the midst of these personal trials and while earning money working in a steam laundry. By the time the Harlem Renaissance peaked in the late 1920s, she was set to enjoy a big break. It came when *Gamin*, a life-size painted-plaster bust of a boy — with an affecting smile and his cap set at a jaunty angle — caught the attention of several influential people. Among them were leaders of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which awarded her a fellowship to study abroad. (One of the first Rosenwald fellowships enabled the black singer Marian Anderson to launch her career. One of the last was awarded to the writer James Baldwin.) And so, in 1930, Savage headed to Europe at last. She

won a second fellowship extending her stay there for a year, and then a Carnegie Foundation grant for eight more months of study and travel.

The model for *Gamin* has recently been identified by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which owns an example, as Savage’s “little nephew,” Ellis Ford, one of the family members who came to live with her. Bad fortune, it seems, had morphed into good, albeit with the aid of much sweat and virtuosity. Further research by Jeffrey M. Hayes has unearthed Savage’s remembrance from a 1935 interview: “I bought some materials, set a dry goods box on the living room table, stood my nephew alongside the table, and worked practically all night, till we were both exhausted.”

Savage returned from Europe in 1932, finding New York severely hobbled by the Great Depression. For the next decade, she taught art as much as she made her own, including *Laughing Boy* in marble, the bronzes *Untitled (Girl with Pigtails)* and *The Diving Boy*, and *Portrait Head of John Henry* in plaster, inspired by the legendary black steel-driving folk hero. In 1935, Savage helped the historian-collector Arturo Schomburg and others co-found the Harlem Artists Guild. As she told him, she wanted the world “to see Harlem through Harlem’s eyes.” Two years later, Savage was appointed director of the Harlem Community Art Center in partnership with, and funded by, the Works Progress Administration.

Meanwhile, her own Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts served as a gathering place for Harlem artists, performers, and intellectuals. Gwendolyn Knight (1913–2005), who as a young painter both studied and taught with Savage, and also sat for a bronze bust, said of her mentor: “By looking at her, I understood that I could be an artist if I wanted to be.” (During this period [1933–35] Gertrude Whitney was

AUGUSTA SAVAGE

(1892–1962), *Gamin*, c. 1930, painted plaster, 9 1/4 x 6 x 4 in., Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville, purchased with funds from the Morton R. Hirschberg Bequest, AP.2013.1.1



AUGUSTA SAVAGE (1892–1962), *The Diving Boy*, c. 1939, bronze, 33 3/4 x 8 x 9 1/4 in., Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville, bequest of Ninah M. H. Cummer, C.O.602.1



executing a marble bust of another black woman named Gwendolyn, probably one of her servants.)

Savage's best-known piece, besides *Gamin*, is her largest — completed for the 1939 World's Fair. Titled *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, it was inspired by the song composed in 1905 by the brothers James Weldon Johnson (a friend of hers from Jacksonville) and J. Rosamond Johnson. Meant to symbolize the musical contributions of African Americans, *Lift* was conceived as a nearly 16-foot-tall depiction of a dozen youthful black singers arranged in graduated heights to form the strings of a harp. Cast in plaster and finished to resemble black basalt, it was bulldozed when the fair closed, like the rest of its monumental art. Some of those destroyed works were recast in more permanent forms, but Savage lacked the funds to pursue this option. Today, renamed *The Harp*, it exists only in the form of souvenir replicas, such as the version traveling with the exhibition (illustrated here).

Alas, the Harlem Community Art Center closed when the Works Progress Administration was wound down as America entered World War II. A previous setback, the failure of Savage's Salon of Contemporary Negro



AUGUSTA SAVAGE (1892–1962), *Gwendolyn Knight*, 1934–35, recast 2001, bronze, 18 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 9 in., Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art, Savannah College of Art + Design



AUGUSTA SAVAGE (1892–1962), *Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Harp)*, 1939, bronze, 10 3/4 x 9 1/2 x 4 in., University of North Florida, Thomas G. Carpenter Library, Special Collections and Archives, Eartha M.M. White Collection



AUGUSTA SAVAGE (1892–1962), *Portrait of a Baby*, 1942, terracotta, 10 x 8 1/2 x 8 in., courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York City

Art after only three months, must have discouraged her, too. Still, she continued to produce, among other pieces, *The Pugilist* in bronze, believed to be based on the black boxer Jack Johnson (1942), and *Portrait of a Baby* (1942) in red clay, a material reminiscent of that she had used during her Florida childhood. According to a recent book by historian Jill Lepore, Savage abruptly left New York because she was being harassed by a lovestruck writer, Joe Gould. She settled in the Catskill Mountains community of Saugerties, New York, where she made money doing farm work and tried her hand at children's books and other types of writing. She may or may not have continued to sculpt. When she died in 1962, she had moved back to New York to be with her daughter.

It would make for a tidy conclusion if the Whitney were one of the museums that had lately added a work by Savage to its collection. So far it has not, but those that have include — beyond the aforementioned Smithsonian — the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Cleveland Museum of Art, Seattle Art Museum, Hood Museum at Dartmouth College, Detroit Institute of Arts, and Indianapolis Museum of Art. Many of these acquisitions are, like the Smithsonian's, versions of

Gamin. Reportedly one was discovered in 1942 in a Chicago shop by the father of the person who sold it through Swann Galleries in 2009. Another bears a past owner's terse but evocative inscription that makes us long to know more: "Bought in Harlem from Negro artist." ●

Information: newportartmuseum.org, nyhistory.org, palmermuseum.psu.edu, dixon.org. On July 11 at the Newport Art Museum, Prof. David Lubin (Wake Forest University) will lecture on "Whitney at War: Healing, Death, and Memory in the World War I Sculptures." The Whitney catalogue is available from norton.org and the Savage catalogue from gilesltd.com.

JEANNE SCHINTO has written about art, antiques, history, and culture for many publications. Her essay "The Lynch Collection: An American Mosaic," appears in *A Passion for American Art: Selections from the Carolyn and Peter Lynch Collection*, the catalogue for an exhibition on view through December 1 at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.