

Season 8, Episode 15 The Monumental Imagination of Augusta Savage Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor: A Podcast from The Smithsonian, with support from PRX. I am Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Palm trees bent nearly to the ground in the winds that tore through Southern Florida that morning in September 1928. Curtains of rain poured from the sky. The storm surge ripped down dykes and overflowed dams, flooding city after city in its path. By the time the Category 5 Okeechobee hurricane passed, thousands of homes were torn down to their foundations.

Tess Korobkin: This hurricane kills almost 2000 people. It's one of the deadliest hurricanes up to that point in the United States.

Lizzie Peabody: Tess Korobkin is a professor of American Art at the University of Maryland in College Park. She says 1000 miles north of the hurricane, a woman named Augusta Savage was sitting safely in her New York apartment when she got a message. Her brother had been killed in the hurricane, her family's home destroyed. And with nowhere to go, her entire extended family was headed north to stay with her.

Tess Korobkin: The way she puts it is that, "The Red Cross bundled up the whole family and sent them on to me here."

Lizzie Peabody: Augusta was in her mid-30s. She had moved to New York City with the hopes of becoming a famous sculptor. When her family arrived in her tiny Harlem apartment, she was on deadline, applying for a coveted fellowship to study art in Paris. Nine people living in such close quarters could have derailed her work. Instead, it inspired her. She asked her young nephew, Ellis, to stand in the kitchen and got to work. Later, Savage said...

Tess Korobkin: "I brought some materials, set a dry good box on the living room table, stood my nephew alongside the table, and worked practically all night until we were both exhausted, went back at it again in the morning."

Lizzie Peabody: When she finished, she stood back and looked at the sculpture she had just created.

Grace Yasumura: It's this really intimately rendered portrait of a young boy who we encounter at a moment of quiet, reflective pause, as he gazes off to his right at something that we can't see, that's sort of out of our frame.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Grace Yasumura, Assistant Curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. She says Savage inscribed the title of the piece on the base of the sculpture, Gamin. Grace Yasumura: Which comes from a French word, which is often used to describe streetwise children.

Lizzie Peabody: Even though Savage's nephew was the model, the sculpture represented a universal child from the streets, forgotten by society, left to fend for himself. And looking into the sculpture's eyes, you feel like you know him.

Grace Yasumura: And I think that's what gives this portrait a real palpable sense of intimacy and sort of immediate connection and warmth.

Lizzie Peabody: What Savage didn't know then was that the violent storm that had altered so many lives in Florida was about to change one more, her own. So this time on Sidedoor, we bring you the story of Augusta Savage, an artist with a monumental imagination and a dream of celebrating African American figures through public sculpture, at a time when there were none. But the monuments she left behind might not be what you would expect. That's coming up, after the break.

[MUSIC]

Karen Lemmy: Savage always says, "While other kids were making mud pies, I was making ducks."

Lizzie Peabody: This is Karen Lemmy, Curator of Sculpture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. She says Augusta Savage grew up in a deeply religious family in Florida, the seventh of 14 children. And when her father saw her sculpting animals from the red clay she found near their home, he punished her for creating false idols. Savage wrote that he quote, "Almost whipped all the art out of me."

Karen Lemmy: Her father tried to prevent her from making these things.

Lizzie Peabody: But she didn't stop. Instead, she hid her art from her father, leaving her sculptures outside to be dissolved by the rain, melting back into the earth. She got used to seeing her creations disappear as though they had never existed. But it never deterred her. That wasn't her style. Her friends described her as an indomitable force.

Karen Lemmy: She married at, I think, age 15. And had a child, her only child, Irene, at age 16.

Lizzie Peabody: But even as a young mother, she stoked the flames of her desire to be an artist, taking art classes and always sculpting, honing her craft, never losing sight of her dream, even when her husband died, leaving her a widow in her 20s. But as she approached her 30th

birthday, she realized she would never be a successful sculptor in Florida. So, she left her teenage daughter Irene in her mother's care and headed for The Big Apple.

Karen Lemmy: She arrives in New York, I think, really eager to see what's possible.

Lizzie Peabody: New York in the 1920s was like something she could never have imagined.

Grace Yasumura: Often, historians think of it as this blossoming, this groundswell explosion of culture, of poetry, of prose, jazz, dance, opera.

Lizzie Peabody: This is the Smithsonian's Grace Yasumura again. What she's describing is the Harlem Renaissance.

Grace Yasumura: The scholar, the critic, the historian, Alain Locke, is often referred to as the "Dean" of the Harlem Renaissance. And he described it as a spiritual coming of age when Black people in the United States moved from a social disillusionment to racial pride. And so, this was a moment of profound, civic political activism.

Lizzie Peabody: But even though it was named after Harlem, the Renaissance wasn't confined to New York.

Grace Yasumura: This was happening in cities across the nation, in Chicago, in Cleveland, Los Angeles. Basically, the cities that were shaped by the Great Migration.

Lizzie Peabody: Starting around 1910, millions of African Americans headed North and West to escape oppressive Jim Crow laws in the South. A cultural awakening followed the great migration. And Savage was now at the heart of it all. Not long after arriving in New York, Savage got accepted to Cooper Union University.

Grace Yasumura: Which is an art school in New York. And she goes there on a scholarship. She finishes the program in three years. It's a four-year program.

Lizzie Peabody: And that's not all. While at Cooper Union, she was accepted to study for a summer in France at the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts. This was huge for Savage. Europe was the epicenter of sculptures and monuments, and she had monumental dreams.

Karen Lemmy: And she's on a path for going to Fontainebleau.

Lizzie Peabody: But then, out of the blue, the school retracts her acceptance. In a letter to one of her advisors, the chairman of the school's selection committee explains why.

Louis Belpaire: "To be perfectly frank with you, we did learn that Miss Savage was of the colored race and the question was put before our Advisory Committee who strongly felt that in a school such as Fontainebleau School, it would not be wise to have a colored student."

Karen Lemmy: I think they're upset with themselves for having not thought about Augusta Savage's race before looking over her application.

Louis Belpaire: "Among the 200 students to be enrolled, a number come from the southern states. And from the time they embark on shipboard, they are not only thrown in close contact with each other, but must room together. The same is true at the school itself, where all the students mess at the same tables. You can readily see that disagreeable complications would arise and the applicant in question would perhaps suffer most from these complications. Hoping you will try to understand our position. Very sincerely, Ernest Piexotto, Chairman."

Karen Lemmy: They're kind of positioning this as, sorry you can't come, but actually it's in your best interest. We really have your interest at heart, Miss Savage. Don't come. It's going to be bad. You really don't want to be here.

Lizzie Peabody: How did she react?

Karen Lemmy: Oh, I think reasonably infuriated.

Lizzie Peabody: In response, Savage wrote a letter to The New York World.

Karen Lemmy: And she writes, "I hear so many complaints to the effect that Negroes do not take advantage of the educational opportunities offered them, for how am I supposed to compete with other American artists if I am not to be given the same opportunities?"

Lizzie Peabody: Her story made national headlines. America was exporting its racism abroad. Famous leaders from the Harlem Renaissance came to her defense, but Fontainebleau refused to reverse its decision, and ultimately the moment passed. Savage had missed her window to study in France. So, she stayed in New York and began to carve out a name for herself in the tight-knit arts community there. She sculpted busts of many of the same Harlem Renaissance leaders who had spoken up for her, including the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois and the activist, Marcus Garvey. She befriended them and became deeply engaged in the activism, art, and politics of Harlem. But that dream of Paris.

Karen Lemmy: Paris was never going to go away. Europe in general was on her horizon. And it was just a matter of time and how she got there.

Lizzie Peabody: And then, in 1928, hurricane Okeechobee hit southern Florida sending her family North. She stood her nephew in the kitchen and created the sculpture, Gamin. Savage submitted that sculpture for another fellowship, this time to study in Paris for an entire year. And when the committee sent their decision back, Savage said...

Tess Korobkin: "They came. They saw. I conquered. They said she can have the scholarship, and that is how I went to Paris for my first year."

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Lizzie Peabody: Tess Korobkin again. She says Gamin changed the trajectory of Augusta Savage's career.

Tess Korobkin: It's an absolute watershed moment.

Lizzie Peabody: Because it got her finally to Europe, just in time for Statuemanía. Really? It was called Statuemanía?

Tess Korobkin: Yes. The kind of second half of the 19th century in Paris is this explosion of public statuary in that city.

Lizzie Peabody: She was a sculptor in a city obsessed with statues. In Paris, Savage also found a supportive expat community of African American artists. A whole new world of opportunity opened up.

Tess Korobkin: It's the first time she's able to work with African models, and really think a little bit about portraying stories that speak to the kind of African diaspora. So, there's been some really interesting work about these sculptures that we only know now through photographs in which she's making a series of what appear to be African Amazon women, right? These kind of heroic figures that comes out of her time in Paris.

Lizzie Peabody: After three years in Paris, Savage returned to America with a fresh perspective and a new goal. She was ready to change the landscape of American public sculpture.

Tess Korobkin: She proposed, in fact, four monuments over the course of the 1930s into the early '40s to a whole range of different Black American subjects.

Lizzie Peabody: But was America ready for the radical imagination of Augusta Savage? We'll have more on that, after the break.

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Lizzie Peabody: In 2021, a nonprofit art studio called the Monument Lab conducted an audit of 50,000 monuments across America. It published its findings in a report called the National Monument Audit.

Tess Korobkin: The National Monument Audit tells us that we have a landscape dominated by the celebration of war and weaponry, the celebration of white masculinity. It didn't have to be that way.

Lizzie Peabody: Tess Korobkin says there's a common excuse for why most of our monuments honor the lives of men and military figures, that nobody wanted monuments to honor women or racial minorities,

Tess Korobkin: Or there was no one to build them or no one thought of them. We know that that is not true.

Lizzie Peabody: And we know, because back in the 1930s, Augusta Savage had ideas. She didn't need a monument audit to tell her what she saw every day, that even in Harlem, America's largest Black community, there were no public memorials to honor African Americans. And she wanted to change that.

Tess Korobkin: She wants to create sculptures that portray mostly Black subjects in realistic depictions, right? Almost to the point where the sculpture seems to come alive.

Lizzie Peabody: This realism like the style she used for her sculpture, *Gamin*, was an important part of her vision. Because up to that point in American history, African Americans were often dehumanized in mainstream images portrayed as caricatures, like the Mammy and Sambo stereotypes from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Savage returned to the US from France prepared to take on this challenge, to bring Black representation to American statuary. But she arrived to find the country radically changed from the America she left. The Depression was in full swing, art sales dried up, so she turned instead to teaching.

Grace Yasumura: So, in 1932, she launches the Savage Studio Arts and Crafts program. And initially, this is, I think, happening in a basement. She is funding this herself.

Lizzie Peabody: Over time, she also founded the Gallery for Contemporary Negro Art and became the first director of the Harlem Community Art Center. And Grace says this is often where people misunderstand Savage's story. They see an artist teaching and think she isn't creating anything.

Grace Yasumura: I think often when art historians have narrated the lives of artists, it's like, "Oh, well, they started as a teacher. But once they had enough money, they stopped." And they didn't have to teach anymore, and they could just focus on their art career. And that sort of makes this look like teaching is something you pass through until you become like an established artist.

Lizzie Peabody: But this wasn't just a way to make ends meet. Savage was giving young artists the guidance and support she had craved and never gotten as a child. By creating her schools, she was sculpting the future generation. And as the country emerged from the Great Depression and into the New Deal era, a flurry of public works projects started popping up around the nation, and Savage saw an opportunity. She designed four proposals for public monuments, including this one.

Tess Korobkin: The sculpture that she first calls *After the Glory*, and it's a widowed mother, a child, and a grandmother. It's three figures. And it's a World War I memorial.

Lizzie Peabody: The three figures in the memorial were African American women, but Savage saw them as universal figures.

Tess Korobkin: That could represent all women, all mothers, all mourning mothers, right? That this could be war mothers writ large. And this kind of idea of experimenting with the faith in the Black image as a conveyor of universal values.

Lizzie Peabody: It's while she's designing and proposing these public monuments that she catches a big break. Augusta Savage was one of only four women and the only African American artist commissioned to create something for the 1939 World's Fair in New York.

Karen Lemmy: It's called the *World of Tomorrow*, the fair is. It's literally a world stage.

Lizzie Peabody: This was likely going to be the largest audience Savage would ever have. And on this stage, she was going to show the world the power of a sculpture honoring African American culture. She started crafting a ginormous harp, like the instrument, but the frame was a gigantic hand lifting upward towards the heavens. In place of strings were a chorus of singers that got larger as they descended down the slope of the arm.

Karen Lemmy: And it's a larger than life sculpture. So, there's these beautiful photographs of Augusta Savage working on the harp in two pieces. And she's standing in between the figures who are the choir strings, and she's like the same height as them.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow.

Karen Lemmy: Right? So just to give you a sense of the scale, this is a very tall sculpture.

Lizzie Peabody: 16 feet tall, almost the height of a two-story home. She titled it, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. It was made of plaster, but Savage painted it to look like it was carved from Blackstone.

Tess Korobkin: We have some footage, color footage of the 1939 World's Fair where we see all of these white sculptures all over the fairgrounds, right? And it is Savage's sculpture that is the kind of exception as this monumental black object.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow.

Tess Korobkin: In which she's honoring, right? The African American national anthem, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. So, it's a real statement of power.

Lizzie Peabody: In a sea of white sculptures, Savage's solitary Black monument made the statement she intended. It was a monument to Black culture when no others existed.

Grace Yasumura: Her work was one of the most popular. It was seen by 5 million visitors. And there were souvenirs made of it and collected.

Lizzie Peabody: Visitors struck by the sculpture could buy a miniature version of it, a statuette to take home with them, and many people did.

Karen Lemmy: We also have some evidence that it was an important site at the fair, especially for Black American visitors. So, there's a beautiful photograph of this group of visitors posing with the harp. And we can think about that kind of celebration of this object to be photographed with it. It gives us just a glimpse of its kind of power as a public monument.

Lizzie Peabody: But after the fair ended, Savage found herself in a difficult situation. She was unable to raise the money to cast the temporary plaster sculpture into a more permanent material, and she couldn't afford to store it.

Grace Yasumura: This was an incredibly compelling, monumental sculpture, which unfortunately, was destroyed after the fair.

Lizzie Peabody: Like the clay sculptures of her childhood, Savage watched the monument she had crafted so carefully return to nothing. And this was the closest she ever came to creating a permanent public monument. In the end, all of her ideas for public monuments failed to be built for one reason or another. Lack of funds, endless bureaucratic red tape, other artists playing gatekeeper.

Karen Lemmy: It's really hard to know what the precise story of the demise is in each case.

Tess Korobkin: I think it's that, the kind of institutionalized racism, right? Of the mobilization of resources and permission to erect public statues, means that these processes often don't come to fruition.

Karen Lemmy: We know that her career starts to, I don't want to say decline, but it takes a turn, a quieter turn. There's sort of a retreat from the spotlight after the fair. There are different stories about what happened there. One of them I think, has to do with the kind of end of the Works Progress Administration and the rise of a kind of anti-communist surveillance state in the early '40s.

Lizzie Peabody: Many of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance were "leftists" seen by Washington hardliners as communist sympathizers. This created the impression that the Works Progress Administration or WPA was funding communist artwork.

Karen Lemmy: There's this kind of broader effort on the part of conservative politicians to dismantle the WPA and the infrastructure of the Harlem Renaissance.

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Lizzie Peabody: In other words, the pressure cooker politics of the red scare frayed relationships. Goodwill turned to bad blood. Funding dried up. The momentum of the Harlem Renaissance screeched to a halt. And Savage left for Upstate New York.

Karen Lemmy: She's close to 50. Remember that she had become a mother at age 16. She's only got one daughter. And some of the stories I've heard is that she wanted to reconnect more closely with Irene.

Lizzie Peabody: Savage reunited with her daughter, Irene, in rural Saugerties, New York. She got a day job tending to mice at a nearby research lab, but she still made time to teach art to children. And in 1962, she died of cancer at the age of 70.

Karen Lemmy: When Savage dies, she's with Irene. That relationship of mother and daughter holds.

Lizzie Peabody: Some have called Augusta Savage one of America's most influential 20th century artists. But for someone so influential, very few of her sculptures actually exist today.

Karen Lemmy: A lot of things are lost. A lot of things are, they just weren't preserved, or she couldn't afford to ship them to a safe place like from Paris back to New York. So, I think she left behind an incomplete but incredibly compelling record of her own work.

Lizzie Peabody: Savage's Gamin sculpture is on permanent display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. And miniature statuettes of Lift Every Voice and Sing have been collected at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, passed down in families who attended the 1939 World's Fair, and took a piece of that experience home with them. Augusta Savage tried to take our society to a place we're just now getting to, nearly a century later. A landscape of monuments that celebrate our shared humanity and reflect all Americans. And while today, we can't stand beneath the World War I monument honoring grieving widows, Savage left behind another legacy. This one isn't cast in bronze or carved in stone. It's the artists she taught in her schools.

Tess Korobkin: I think it's probably hard to overestimate her impact as an educator in the '20s and '30s. Almost every major artist of the next generation from Norman Lewis to Jacob Lawrence, William Artis, Morgan and Marvin Smith, the list goes on and on, are people who came to the idea of making art by finding themselves at Augusta Savage's schools.

Lizzie Peabody: Savage herself said, "I have created nothing really beautiful, really lasting, but if I can inspire one of these youngsters to develop the talent I know they possess, then my monument will be their work."

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Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor: A Podcast from the Smithsonian, with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: There's so much more to learn about Augusta Savage. We'll have a ton of stuff in our newsletter, including the National Monument Audit, pictures of Savage's sculptures, and so much more. You can subscribe at si.edu/sidedoor. And seriously, check out Gamin next time you visit the Smithsonian American Art Museum. You will not be disappointed.

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Lizzie Peabody: For more stories of important women in history, be sure to look into the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative. To learn more, go to womenshistory.si.edu. Or join the conversation using #BecauseOfHerStory on social media. And remember, you can find us @SidedoorPod on Twitter and Instagram. Or you can email us at sidedoor@si.edu.

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Lizzie Peabody: For help with this episode, we want to thank Karen Lemmy, Grace Yasumura, and Tess Korobkin. Special thanks to our French voice actor, Louis Belpaire, merci beaucoup.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Fact checking by Adam Biznow. Episode Artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from our colleagues at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This is our last show of the year and the season, but don't despair Sidedoorables. We'll have plenty of fun and educational stories on our feed in the meantime. And we'll be back with a whole new badge of episodes toot sweet. Sorry, all this talk about France. I just couldn't help myself.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening, and see you next season.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Just in time for Statuemanía. Sorry, do you want me to do it exactly?

Speaker 6: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Speaker 6: Well, no. No, that was good.

Lizzie Peabody: Just in time.

Speaker 6: But you can try one channeling your inner Hulk Hogan maybe.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay.

Speaker 6: Roar even like that. Do flex your muscle.

Lizzie Peabody: Statuemanía. Okay.