

African American Women Artists

By Kathy McShane – Dataw Visual Arts Club

February 2024

February is Black History Month, officially declared by President Gerald Ford. This piece is dedicated to African American women artists in honor of Black History Month.

Among the first African American women artists to receive recognition is **Laura Wheeler Waring** (1887-1948). One of the significant artists of the Harlem Renaissance, she is best known for her portraits of African Americans. Waring was among the artists displayed in the country's first exhibition of African American Art (Exhibition of the Work of Negro Artists, sponsored by the Harmon Foundation, 1927). Among her subjects were W.E.B. Du Bois and Marian Anderson. Her style was influenced by her time spent in Paris studying the work of Corot, Monet, Manet and Cézanne. Her portrait of the laundress, Anna Washington Derry (1925), is perhaps her most acclaimed work.



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The portrait below is of Marian Anderson (1944). It is part of the collection of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.



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The painting below, *Portrait of a Lady* (1947), is Waring's portrait of Alma Thomas, the second African American woman artist featured in this piece. The portrait is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Alma Thomas (1891-1978) was the first fine arts graduate of Howard University. A talented representational artist, Thomas moved toward abstraction as her career as an artist progressed. Her signature style, drawing on such influences as Henri Matisse and painters of the Washington Color School, did not fully develop until 1960 (at the age of 69). Thomas was the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York City. In 1972. Reflecting on her life, Thomas said, "One of the things we couldn't do was go into museums, let alone think of hanging our pictures there. My times have changed. Just look at me now."



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Alma Thomas, *Apollo 12 "Splash Down,"* 1970, The Studio Museum in Harlem



Alma Thomas, *Starry Night and the Astronauts,* 1972, The Art Institute of Chicago

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Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998) spent seven decades as an artist. She was the first African-American graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Jones started in textile design, and created bold, art deco influenced designs for draperies and slipcovers. She was recruited to teach at Howard University in 1930, where she became one of its most eminent professors, teaching watercolor and design, retiring 47 years later, in 1977. Married to a Haitian, Jones produced numerous Haitian-inspired oil and watercolor paintings. Her work also echoed her pride in her African roots and ancestry. Jones felt her most significant contribution to the art world was "proof of the talent of black artists." She wished to be known as an American painter with no labels.



Lois Mailou Jones, *Self-Portrait*, 1940, Smithsonian American Art Museum



Lois Mailou Jones, *Les Fétiches*, 1938, Smithsonian American Art Museum

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Gwendolyn Knight (1913-2005) immigrated to the United States from Barbados at age seven. Living in Harlem during her teen years, she immersed herself in the Harlem Renaissance. Knight studied with Augusta Savage (see below) and Lois Mailou Jones (see above). While working on the Works Progress Administration murals project, she met the renowned African American painter Jacob Lawrence, whom she married in 1941. Knight and Lawrence had an artistically collaborative relationship, taking inspiration from each other. Knight's first solo exhibition was hosted by the Seattle Art Museum in 1976.



Gwendolyn Knight, *Untitled (New Orleans Series)*, 1941, Phillips Collection, Washington DC



Gwendolyn Knight, *Diva*, 1994, Minneapolis Institute of Art

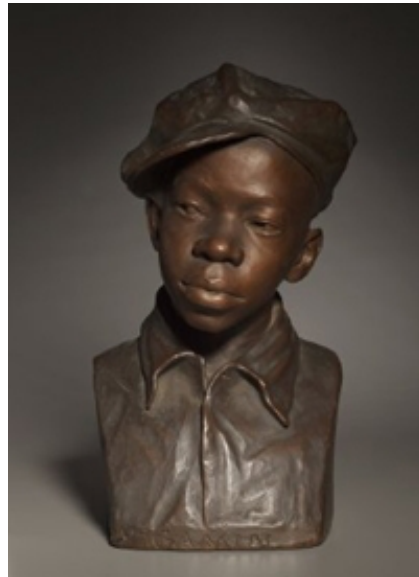
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Augusta Savage (1892-1962) was the seventh of fourteen children, born to a poor Methodist minister who strongly discouraged her interest in art. Savage once said, "My father licked me four or five times a week and almost whipped all the art out of me." During the mid-1920s, Savage earned a reputation as a portrait sculptor. Her bust of her nephew, entitled *Gamin*, won her a fellowship to study in Paris. The statue was made with white plaster covered with brown paint and shoe polish because bronze was too expensive.

Savage was commissioned to create a sculpture symbolizing the musical contributions of African Americans for the 1939 New York World's Fair. The resulting *The Harp* was inspired by the lyrics of James Weldon Johnson's poem *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. *The Harp* was Savage's most significant work and her last major commission. Unfortunately, the sculpture was destroyed by a bulldozer after the close of the fair. Approximately 70 of the 160 documented works by Savage have been lost because Savage never had the means or support to cast them in more durable material.



Augusta Savage, *Gamin*, 1929, Smithsonian American Art Museum

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Augusta Savage, *Gwendolyn Knight*, 1935, Seattle Art Museum



Augusta Savage, *The Harp*, 1939, photo from the 1939 New York World's Fair.

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Faith Ringgold (1930-still active) is an American painter, writer, performance artist, and mixed-media sculptor. She is best known for her story, or narrative, quilts. She grew up in Depression-era Harlem, where an arts scene surrounded her. When no one would publish her autobiography, she turned to quilts to tell her story. Her first quilt story, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983) depicts the story of Aunt Jemima as a matriarch restaurateur and fictionally revises "the most maligned black female stereotype."



The quilt below is the first in a series of five called *Women on a Bridge*. *Tar Beach* (1988) depicts the fantasies of its heroine and narrator, Cassie Louise Lightfoot, who flies over the George Washington Bridge on a summer night in Harlem. The quilt is part of the collection of the Guggenheim Museum in NYC. The *Tar Beach* quilt was turned into an illustrated book for children in 1991. The book was turned into part of a mini-series on HBO 1999 called *Good Night Moon and Other Sleepytime Tales*, with *Tar Beach*, narrated by Natalie Cole.



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Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012) was an African American Mexican sculptor, painter and activist. The grandchild of freed slaves, Catlett was the first African American woman to earn an MFA from the University of Iowa (1940). In 1941, she moved to Mexico with her then-husband and became involved with the printmaking collective Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP). In the 1950s, the House Un-American Activities Committee investigated the TGP and Catlett specifically for her bold artwork, political activism, and communist affiliations. The United States government declared her an “undesirable alien.” In 1962, she became a Mexican citizen. Although her US citizenship was restored in 2002, Catlett remained in Mexico until she died in 2012.

Catlett recalled how the American Regionalist painter Grant Wood, with whom she studied at the University of Iowa, told his students, “Do something that you know a lot about, the most about.” Catlett said she knew most about women, black people, and working people. These themes are reflected in her work.

The artwork below, entitled *Sharecropper*, is a linocut. Created in 1952, this version was printed in 1970. While the original printings were in black and white, Catlett added color to this one at the Art Institute of Chicago.



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The bust below is of the American poet, Phyllis Wheatley (1753/55), brought from West Africa as a slave. She was the first person of African descent to write and publish a book in the English language. Catlett created this sculpture in 1972 to honor Phyllis Wheatley, specifically black women. Phyllis Wheatley is part of the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum.



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Betye Saar (b. 1926) is an African-American artist known for her assemblage and collage works of art, primarily using found objects, for which she scavenges. At 93 (2019), she had a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC. When asked why significant attention was finally coming her way, she responded, “Because it’s about time! I’ve had to wait until I am practically 100.”

Saar’s first assemblages include inserting her prints and drawings into window frames. Her *Black Girl’s Window* (1969) is an iconic autobiographical work and demonstrates her interest in addressing race and contemporary events in her art. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., her assemblages became increasingly radical. For her best-known work, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), Saar armed a Mammy caricature with a rifle and a hand grenade, transforming her from a derogatory image into a warrior against derogatory stereotypes and imagery. Saar has continued to create art into her 90s; *Gliding Into Midnight* (2019), a sculpture of a canoe filled with ceramic hands hung to hover above a diagram of a vessel used during the transatlantic slave trade, speaks to the legacy of slavery.



Betye Saar, *A Black Girl’s Window*, 1969, Museum of Modern Art, NYC

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Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA



Betye Saar, *Gliding into Midnight*, 2019, Tia Collection, Santa Fe, NM

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Kara Walker (b. 1969) is a painter, silhouettist, printmaker, installation artist, and filmmaker. About the artist, the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis) states: “Kara Walker is among the most complex and prolific American artists of her generation. She has gained national and international recognition for her cut-paper silhouettes depicting historical narratives haunted by sexuality, violence, and subjugation.” Walker’s work is certainly not without controversy. Betye Saar said, “I felt the work of Kara Walker was sort of revolting and negative and a form of betrayal to the slaves, particularly women and children; that it was basically for the amusement and the investment of the white art establishment.” (*I’ll Make Me a World: A Century of African American Arts*, PBS series, 1999).

The silhouette artwork below, entitled *Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored*, is from a 1997 installation at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.



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Fons Americanus was a sculpture of a functional fountain adorned with allegorical scenes and figures. The Tate Modern invited Walker to produce an artwork specific to the museum's Turbine Hall. The sculpture was displayed there from late 2019 to early 2020 (closing early due to the pandemic). Although the artist hoped the sculpture could live in some form beyond its stay at the Tate, it was disassembled and destroyed. The work was a fully functional fountain, 42 feet tall, and constructed of recyclable materials (cork, metal, and wood coated in jesmonite). The fountain included sculptures evocative of the Atlantic slave trade and the history of slavery in British colonies.



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Amy Sherald (b. 1973) is an American painter whose work is primarily portraits of African Americans in every day settings. Her style could be described as simplified realism. In 2016, Sherald was the first woman and the first African American woman to win the National Portrait Gallery's Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition with her painting, *Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance)*. The following year, she was selected by Michelle Obama to paint her official portrait, the first African American woman to receive a presidential portrait commission from the National Portrait Gallery. Her 2015 painting, *The Bathers*, sold at auction for over \$4 million, almost 30 times its pre-sale estimate of \$150,000 to \$200,000.



Amy Sherald, *Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance)*, 2016, private collection



Amy Sherald, *Michelle Obama*, unveiled in the 2018 National Portrait Gallery.

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Amy Sherald, *The Bathers*, 2015, private collection