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Art Activity

Activist Art on a World Stage
1920-1948, Confidence and Crisis

Background Information

Sculptor Augusta Savage was a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance and the first Black woman in America to open her own gallery. Classically trained at the Cooper Union School of Art, Savage helped establish a new narrative and identity for 20th-century Black Americans. Savage created spaces for Black students in Harlem to study and exhibit art, and her own work combated the racism and visual stereotypes that were pervasive in imagery of the Jim Crow Era. Savage was one of only twelve women artists commissioned to create a work of art for the 1939 World's Fair. Her 16-foot sculpture *The Harp* drew inspiration from the song "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which is often referred to as the Black National Anthem.



Augusta Savage at work on Lift Every Voice and Sing

Unidentified photographer, Augusta Savage at work on Lift Every Voice and Sing, 1935–45, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, 1654255.

click [HERE](#) for the full resource

Task

- Students will...consider Augusta Savage's inspiration for *The Harp* by creating their own sculpture in response to a piece of music.
- Students will...analyze the connections between Savage's piece and the lyrics to "Lift Every Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson.
- Students will...then choose a song that has personal significance to them and create a three-dimensional work of art using air-dry clay.

Materials

- Pencils
- Scrap/sketch paper
- Cardboard base
- Air-dry clay (suggested brands: Sargent Art Sculpt-It and Crayola)
 - An alternative to clay is Crayola Model Magic®
- Modeling tools: plastic forks, straws, markers, scissors, popsicle sticks, paper clips, pen caps, clay modeling tools
- Small containers for water

- Invite students to examine Augusta Savage's sculpture, *The Harp*, and discuss the following:
 - What details do you notice?
 - Who are the people depicted here? How are they being depicted?
 - What other elements make up this sculpture?
 - What are the different shapes and forms that make up this piece?
 - Have students think about the individual elements of the sculpture and how those elements come together to make a larger piece.
 - How does the scale impact the way that we view the sculpture?
 - How might this piece be different if it were made in a two-dimensional medium?
 - What symbolism is Savage using in her work? What emotions does this work of art evoke?
- Now pass out the lyrics to "Lift Every Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson and discuss the following:
 - Which aspects of this song do you think most inspired Savage?
 - How did she evoke the message of the music in her piece?
 - Which elements of the sculpture are more representational? Which are more symbolic?

Steps

- How do the lyrics enhance your understanding or change your interpretation of the sculpture?
 - How might you be inspired by music in the way that Augusta Savage was? What inspiration do you draw from song lyrics?
- Give students time to brainstorm songs that inspire them or reflect their sense of identity.
 - NOTE: If possible, allow students to access the internet during this brainstorm so that they can look at lyrics and, possibly, listen to songs.
- Once students have identified a song, give them a sheet of scrap/sketch paper. Ask them to sketch ideas for their sculpture, thinking about how they could bring the music and lyrics to life in three-dimensional form. Encourage them to think about what the piece will look like from different angles.
- Give each student clay, modeling tools, and a cardboard base.
- Have students remove the clay from the packaging. Students should condition the clay by kneading it until it is smooth and soft. This makes the clay easier to work with.

Steps

- Before students begin to sculpt, they should think about how big they want their sculptures to be, and how big the different pieces of the sculpture should be in relation to one another. It can be helpful to use the scrap paper to sketch out the size of each part and break off pieces of clay to match.
- When students begin to sculpt, they should use their piece of cardboard as a base on which to work (see “Clay Tips” below). They can shape their clay using their hands and the tools to create patterns, textures, and smaller details.
- Once students have completed their sculptures, have them display their sculptures with their song lyrics and then do a gallery walk to view their classmates’ work. Once the gallery walk is complete, students should set their sculpture aside to dry. In a cool, dry area, most sculptures will air dry within 24 hours. Parts of the sculpture where the clay is thicker may take longer to dry.

Clay Tips

- Coils of clay are a good way to build your sculpture upwards. Roll out pieces of clay into snake-like coils and stack on top of one another to create a form.
- Tools can be used to work the clay, but you can use your hands to create the larger forms in your sculpture. Recesses can be created by pinching clay or digging out with the thumb and forefinger, and shapes can be created by rolling or using surfaces to model the clay.
- Air-dry clay is workable and easy to sculpt, but can be heavy. If students' sculptures have extended or protruding shapes, they can use wire, paper clips, or toothpicks for extra support.
- As sculpture begins to dry, cracks can form in the clay. These cracks can be fixed by mixing clay with water to fill the cracks.
- Air-dry clay will dry out faster the longer it is exposed to air. Sculpture should ideally be done in one sitting to avoid having to store unfinished pieces in between classes.

Clay Tips

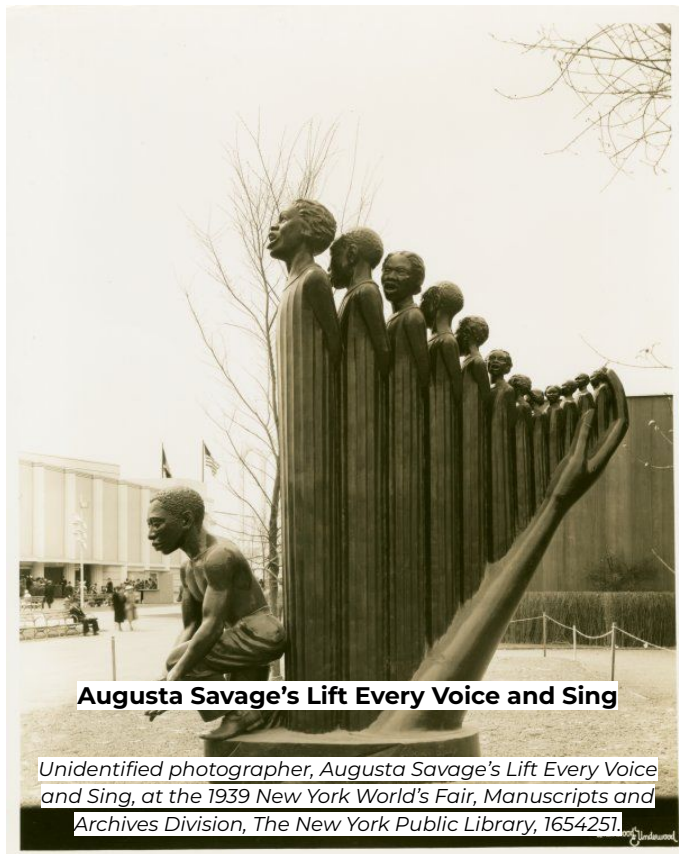
If using Crayola Model Magic®, check out these tips for working with this inexpensive alternative to clay:

<https://www.crayola.com/things-to-do/how-to-landing/model-magic-with-hands/>

<https://www.crayola.com/things-to-do/how-to-landing/model-magic-with-tools/>

Art Vocabulary

- **base:** What a sculpture is mounted, attached, or fixed upon.
- **condition:** Process of kneading clay before use to remove air and make the clay easier to work with
- **form:** an element of art that refers to shape and volume.
- **maquette:** A preliminary model of a sculpture.
- **representational:** Art that is based on images found in the objective world.
- **scale:** Relative size or proportion of one object in relation to another.



Augusta Savage's Lift Every Voice and Sing

Unidentified photographer, Augusta Savage's Lift Every Voice and Sing, at the 1939 New York World's Fair, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, 1654251.

Historical Vocabulary

- **commissioned:** Invited and paid to create or make something for a specific purpose or audience.
- **Jacob Lawrence:** Twentieth-century African American painter famous for portraying Black life in America. An active participant in the Harlem Renaissance who was influenced by twentieth-century Cubism paintings.
- **New Deal:** President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's national program for stimulating the American economy during the Great Depression. Included employment, housing, and social service support systems.
- **sculptor:** An artist who creates sculptures.
- **sculpture:** A three-dimensional work of art, typically carved or molded.
- **Works Progress Administration (WPA):** A program under the New Deal that employed approximately 8.5 million men and women in a variety of jobs.
- **world's fair:** An exhibition that included the participation of artists, scientists, businesses, and nations from across the globe.

Reflection Questions

Conclude the project with a reflection on the art-making process:

- What was it like to use a song as inspiration for your piece? How did you choose your song?
- How does your sculpture evoke the song that inspired it? Were you inspired more by the overall message of the song or by specific lyrics?
- What was it like to work with these materials? What was challenging about working with clay? About working in 3D?
- How did Augusta Savage use her sculpture to make a statement about her identity (as a woman of color, an artist, an activist, an educator, etc.) at the World's Fair? Why was her inspiration and process important to consider while making sculptures of our own?

Extension

To extend learning, invite students to write an artist statement for their sculpture by considering the following: If you were exhibiting at a worldwide event, what would you want people to know about your sculpture, the song that inspired it, and/or the significance of the song that you chose?

Share your work!

We would love to see your artwork!

Consider sharing your work with the Education Division at the New-York Historical Society. Please send it to:

wams@nyhistory.org

Include your grade level and location. You can also send us feedback, questions, and thoughts!