

THE SCULPTURAL LEGACY OF SELMA BURKE, 1900-1995,
BY DR. LORI VERDERAME

INTRODUCTION: Selma Hortense Burke was born on December 31, 1900 in Mooresville, Iredell County, North Carolina to Mary L. Elizabeth Jackson Cofield Burke, a homemaker/educator and Neal Burke, a Methodist minister. Neal Burke had traveled the world in the course of his life working as a chef and preaching. Selma's father collected numerous objets d'art on his travels and brought them back to the Burke's Mooresville home. These objects from the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe fascinated Selma, but alas, Neal Burke died when Selma was only 12 years old. Thus her accessibility to such objects was short lived, but her paternal uncles worked at religious missionaries in Africa and continued to bring Selma and her siblings the African ritual objects, masks, and other sculptural pieces removed in an effort to teach the African natives Christianity. This provided Selma with a unique opportunity to live in the company of African sculpture. She recalled, "I have known African art all my life ... At a time when this sculpture was misunderstood and laughed at, my family had the attitude that these were beautiful objects."¹

Selma belonged to a large family brimming with art and enthusiasm. Her siblings included sisters Geneva, Naomi and Zeta and brothers William, Melrose, Charles, and S. J. Selma was rarely alone in her quest to make art. She first enjoyed the process of making sculpture by shaping white clay from local riverbeds that her brothers used to whitewash fireplaces and outbuildings in her native North Carolina, creating tiny sculptures with the white clay.² Her mother preferred that she concentrate on another more regimented goal, but Selma was drawn to the production of 3-dimensional sculpture from an early age.

EDUCATIONAL ROADS: Selma studied at the Nannie Burroughs School for Girls in Washington, DC and was tutored by the superintendent of schools in Mooresville, NC from age 14 to 18. Selma Burke's education was as extensive as it was varied. With encouragement from her mother, Selma studied nursing and accomplished the credential of a Registered Nurse by 1924, moving to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1925, to accept a nursing job. After two years and with renewed interest in nursing and medicine, Selma Burke decided to enhance her medical education by enrolling at the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia.

¹ Interview with Selma Burke conducted by Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, Pittsburgh, PA, March 21, 1970.

During this period, Selma kept in touch with a close childhood friend named Durant Woodward. A mortician, Woodward would become Selma Burke's first husband, marrying her in 1928.³ The marriage ended when Woodward passed away from a blood disease less than a year after their wedding.

Selma continued her advanced studies at the medical college and was recommended for a position to serve as a private nurse to the heiress of the Otis Elevator Company. Because of her high profile nursing position, a position in which Selma would remain in service for four years, Selma Burke was financially unscathed by the Great Depression of the 1930's:

"[Selma Burke] ended up working for a charmingly crazy white woman, a Cooper, of the family for which Cooperstown, New York was named. The woman turned out to be affectionate, generous, and very rich. By the time her employer died four years later, Miss Burke had a fantastic wardrobe, had become a regular at the Metropolitan Opera and Carnegie Hall, and had an acquaintance with royalty—and a nest egg."⁴

Selma Burke still wanted to study art, and in 1935, moved to New York and took a job as an artists' model at Sarah Lawrence College. She studied as an unmatriculated student through her modeling post at Sarah Lawrence College. Burke posed for artists such as painter Leon Kroll, sculptor Paul Manship, and photographer and gallery owner, Alfred Stieglitz.⁵ She decided to pursue art as a career and worked to gain the skills to become an accomplished teacher, artist, and arts administrator.

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE: Shortly after her arrival in New York City in 1935, Selma Burke met Claude McKay (1890-1948), a prominent writer and co-editor of the political publication, *The Liberator*, who had recently returned to Harlem from a trip abroad. He is the author of "If We Must Die" and "Harlem Shadows." The couple briefly set up housekeeping together at 214 West 63rd Street in the Hell's Kitchen section of New York City. New York City's Harlem neighborhood then became a breeding ground for new ideas, avant garde art, and stimulating culture. This was the Harlem Renaissance.

² Nell Daniels, "WSSU's Selma Burke Gallery" in *Winston-Salem Magazine*, July 1989, 16.

³ Barbara Klaw, "She made Art Play" in *Negro Digest*, vol. 4, December 1945, pp. 35-36. Unfortunately, Woodward died only 11 months following their wedding of blood poisoning. By 1945, Selma Burke had not remarried.

⁴ Tom Seig, *Winston-Salem Sentinel*, September 24, 1983.

⁵ Harry Schwalb, "Diary: Without Color" in *Art News*, September 1994, p.27.

McKay introduced Selma Burke to such notables as Eugene O'Neill, Ethel Waters, Langston Hughes, Max Eastman, Sinclair Lewis, Rosamund Johnson, among others. Selma's time in Harlem was enhanced by her relationship with and, as some report her unconfirmed marriage to the writer/poet.

STUDYING ABROAD: Widowed in her first marriage and experiencing a tumultuous relationship with writer Claude McKay, Selma Burke concentrated on her dreams of being an artist. In 1937, she won a scholarship to Columbia University to study art, but before attending the prestigious university, Selma Burke went abroad with funds she received from both a Rosenwald and Boehler award. 1938, Selma Burke spent nearly one year in France, Germany, and Austria. She studied first in Paris in 1938 with Aristide Maillol, one of the most important classical figure sculptors of the early 1900s. Selma took private art lessons from Henri Matisse in Paris and traveled to Vienna to study ceramics, an early love, with Michael Povolney.

HARLEM COMMUNITY ART CENTER: The impact and influence of the Harlem Renaissance, Social Realism and art on the American Scene, as well as European abstraction were all important aspects contributing to the blooming of Selma Burke's creativity. As an art community, Harlem was rich and active. One of the most influential art centers was the Harlem Community Art Center (HCAC).

Before the opening of the HCAC, the Harlem YMCA also offered art classes with sculptor William Artis from 1934 to 1935. Other artists such as Robert Blackburn, Jacob Lawrence, and Gwendolyn Knight attended art classes at HCAC with Augusta Savage (1892-1962) and at her studio on 143rd Street. Like Alston, Augusta Savage was resourceful as she took a 136th Street renovated garage and made it into an art center and educational site called the Uptown Art Laboratory. Savage taught art to children and the African American community there.

THE SAVAGE CIRCLE: By the late 1930s, Augusta Savage would be the first person to direct the Harlem Community Art Center. The HCAC was a magnet for the great minds of American art. Located at 290 Lenox Avenue at 125th Street, the HCAC began in November 1937 and continued through March 1939. It was the WPA's largest New York community center for instruction in the arts. Classes were offered in various artistic disciplines: painting, sculpture, printmaking, etc. Assisted by Gwendolyn Bennet, Savage invited many of Harlem's most talented artists to teach or attend classes there. These included Charles Alston, Henry "Mike" Bannarn, Romare Bearden, Selma Burke, Ernest Crichlow, Aaron Douglas, Elton Fax, Sargent

Johnson, William Henry Johnson, Langston Hughes, Ronald Joseph, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Claude McKay, James Lesene Wells, and Richard Wright.

In operation from 1937 to 1942, the Harlem Community Art Center (HCAC) was a model for WPA art centers with more than 1500 students enrolled in day and evening classes in drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, and design.⁶ At Savage's invitation, Selma Burke taught sculpture at the HCAC while attending Columbia University with artists Ernest Crichlow, Robert Pious, Sarah West, Francisco Lord, Robert Blackburn, Bert Jackson, Aaron Douglas, Norman Lewis, William H. Johnson, and Gwendolyn Bennett.⁷ Selma Burke shared her wealth of experience with her students at HCAC. Her work had ties to the tradition of European Modernism and Selma Burke fully understood classical sculpture, and, Expressionism as well as the tenets of direct carving. Selma Burke demonstrated her prowess and mastery of direct carving with such classical pieces as: Torso, 1937, limestone, 22 ins. high; Lafayette, 1938, plaster, 24 ins. high, WPA Federal Art Project; Temptation, 1938, Indiana limestone, 30 ins. high; and, Jim, 1939, plaster, 13 ins. high, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

Burke also carved in wax and used the lost wax method of casting to create period pieces in the style of European modernism she learned from Maillol and Matisse for the work Torso, 1937, brass, 8 1/2 ins. high, collection of the Hickory Museum of Art, Hickory, NC. She championed the process and prominence of sculpture in an art community where, as is true today, there are approximately 10 painters working for every 1 sculptor. The expensive process of casting sculpture, direct carving and slower production times all weigh heavily on the spirit and financial stability of sculptors. When compared to paintings, sculpture is more difficult to market and sell. Burke and her colleagues were then aware and inspired by this hardship. With an obvious bias toward painting in the western art world, Selma Burke worked to educate a generation about the benefits of making art a profession and successfully demonstrated her prowess as a pioneer in 20th Century American sculpture.

Image 1: Obverse of the United States "Roosevelt" ten-cent coin. United States coin image courtesy the United States Mint.

⁶ Sharon Patton, "Twentieth Century America and Modern Art" in African American Art, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 147.

THE WPA OPPORTUNITIES: President Roosevelt's New Deal was instrumental in the advancement of creative efforts as the Federal Writers, Theatre, and Art Projects all impacted the lives of creative people. For African American artists this was particularly noteworthy. The WPA project has never been matched in concept or content and it was a major turning point for American art and artists. Artists in Selma's circle included some of the powerhouses of American art history: Hale Woodruff, William Scott, Robert Blackburn, Horace Pippin, and Augusta Savage.⁸ The partial list of Black artists participating in the project reads like a roster of a art history's notables: Jacob Lawrence, Francisco Lord, Ellis Wilson, Charles Alston, Elton Fax, Selma Burke, Norman Lewis, Louise Jefferson, Ernest Crichlow, Rex Gorleigh, Joseph and Beauford Delaney, and Augusta Savage. ⁹

STUDYING AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY: Selma returned from abroad and resumed her work and studies at Columbia. She worked as the studio assistant to Oronzio Maldarelli. Selma studied with Hans Reiss in New York and taught sculpture to students at the Harlem Community Art Center. Selma pursued the Master's degree at Columbia, meeting new friends including her lifelong friend, Margo Einstein, another Columbia student, and the daughter of Albert Einstein. This introduction was one of many in a lifetime moving in the circles of some of American history's most famous and important figures. Unbeknownst to Selma, she too would carve out her own place among such prominent members of American culture. Selma Burke graduated from Columbia University in 1941 with a Master's degree in Fine Art.

WORLD WAR II AND SCULPTING A PRESIDENT: Selma Burke accepted a job with the Navy's Defense Department when the World War II broke out, driving a truck at the Brooklyn Navy Yard because she felt that "during the war, artists should get out of their studios."¹⁰ An injury cut the job short for Selma and she was soon back in the studio with a new competition she had heard about, a competition to create a profile portrait of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

In 1943, Selma Burke's portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt won the Fine Arts Commission prize for the District of Columbia. She was commissioned to produce a portrait sculpture depicting the President in the form of a relief plaque showing the President in profile. President Roosevelt gave Selma Burke an appointment for February 22, 1944. Burke told the

⁷ Elton C. Fax, Seventeen Black Artists, New York, NY: Dood, Mead, and Company, 1971.

⁸ C. Eric Lincoln, The Negro Pilgrimage in America, New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1967.

⁹ Anonymous, "Art Education: An Overview" in Black Art: An International Quarterly, vol. 1, Winter 1976, pp. 44-62.

¹⁰ Interview with Selma Burke conducted by Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, Pittsburgh, PA, March 21, 1970.

New York Times after meeting with the President that this sculpture should be “the best piece of sculpture I had ever done.”¹¹ The final bronze plaque or relief sculpture was installed in the Recorder of Deeds Building in Washington, DC measuring 3 ft. 6 ins. x 2 ft. 6 ins.

On March 10, 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt visited Selma Burke’s studio to see the final piece. When Mrs. Roosevelt saw the finished piece, she remarked “Oh, it’s well done, but you’ve made him too young.” Selma Burke told the First Lady, “I’ve not done it for today, but for tomorrow and tomorrow.” That representation of President Roosevelt was influential to the design employed by John R. Sinnock, chief engraver at the U.S. Mint in 1945 to depict Roosevelt on the US dime coin. The profile image of Roosevelt as a visionary was intended by Burke to “inject the feeling of pride and a positive direction.”¹² The impressive and prominent sculpture which inspired the design of the Roosevelt dime remains a masterpiece in American sculpture. Unfortunately, the sitter never viewed the piece in person. Selma Burke was expected to meet with the President to discuss her work on April 20; alas President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945.

GREENWICH VILLAGE: While many Black artists had not experienced the creativity that they expected to find in the Post War Greenwich Village, Selma Burke, Ellis Wilson and others had. Selma Burke was perpetually busy in her workshop at 88 East 10th Street in the late 1940s. She maintained that some of her best work was done there.¹³ Selma Burke continued to work in stone during this time in the tradition of the direct carvers with pieces including: Gentle Spring, ca. 1945, stone, 19 ins.; Victory, ca. 1946, Collection of Dry Dock Savings Institution, New York, NY; and, Seated Nude, ca. 1947, stone.

She typically worked from about 6 AM when her mind was rested. She also lectured through government assisted education programs in New York City and Pennsylvania’s Bucks County, Swarthmore, and Pittsburgh. In October 1949, Selma Burke married Herman Kobbe. The couple moved to Bucks County where she worked with the local Chamber of Commerce in nearby Doylestown and spearheaded the annual Bucks County Sculpture Exhibition, which continues to this day. Appointed to the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Selma Burke served under Governors William Scranton, Raymond Schaefer, and Milton Schapp.

¹¹ The New York Times, July 25, 1945.

¹² Interview with Selma Burke conducted by Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, Pittsburgh, PA, March 21, 1970.

¹³ Allan Morrison, “Twilight for Greenwich Village” in Negro Digest, vol. 7, January 1949, pp. 26-37.

BUCKS COUNTY ARTIST: Selma lived happily in Bucks County and continued to work on her sculpture from her New Hope studio. She showed her work in New York galleries and in regional competitions throughout the 1950s and continued to enhance an already strong exhibition record. An art critic described Selma Burke's figures from the period as "basically classical in conception ... the small jagged marble ambiguously attempts to disengage itself, succeeds quite well—somewhat like a primitive recapitulation of Michelangelo's The Prisoners."¹⁴ Works such as: Despair, 1951, Pennsylvania travertine marble, 14 ins., Collection of the artist; Tension, 1955, Italian alabaster, 23 ins.; and, Falling Angel, 1958-59, pear wood, 96 ins. high, Collection of the Howard University Art Gallery, Washington, DC all indicate Selma Burke's unique ability to demonstrate the full expression of her emotional sculpture. With themes ranging from classical to contemporary, Burke's works were consistently impressive and moving.

Herman and she lived happily in Bucks County, a place where the strong and supportive art community embraced Selma and were enthusiastic about her work and her contributions as a teacher. Selma Burke taught art at the Princeton Arts Group, among other organizations, in the early 1950s. And at her home and study in Bucks County she, like other African American artists of her time, tutored artists. In 1955, Selma was forced to consider her work as a method of solace when her husband, architect Herman Kobbe died.

THE SELMA BURKE ART CENTER, PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA: Selma Burke retained her Bucks County home and used her relationship with the PCA to work with major art figures and institutions throughout the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. By the late 1960s, Selma Burke had made plans to open her own school at 6118 Penn Circle South in Pittsburgh, PA. The Selma Burke School was in operation from 1968 to 1981 and its theme, as Burke described it was "a place to grow and a place to show." As Selma prepared to open the Selma Burke Art Center, she completed one of her most important sculptures, Portrait bust of Edith Barome, ca. 1967, plaster, 24 ins. It marked an image of a great person and was produced for the historic Schomburg Collection at the New York Public Library, 135th Street Branch Library, New York, NY in 1967. This work and others of this period for Burke like Mother and Child, 1968, pink alabaster, 30 ins. secured Selma Burke's place as an enthusiastic contributor to direct carving and expressionistic American sculpture.

¹⁴R. Warren Dash, "In the Galleries: Selma Burke" in Arts, vol. 32, June 1958, p. 58.

Working as a teacher, arts administrator, and artist, Selma Burke ran the Center while consulting with the A. W. Mellon Foundation in Pittsburgh. The Selma Burke Art Center was an original art center that played an integral role in the Pittsburgh art community. The center offered a litany of studio classes, television production and even puppetry. Exhibitions were organized from the school as well as films, concerts, lectures, and other visual art presentations. From the Selma Burke Art Center, Burke recalled the day that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. She described a sculpture project, an abstracted piece featuring King and a crowd of figures interlocking hands that was a gathering place for peace, hopefully to be sited in Washington, DC as a memorial to a vital figure in American history. She wanted her students to understand the context for her art, how it reflected social issues, and how art could change the world and the direction of it. Selma Burke's art center led the way in a series of community based regional art sites.

Selma Burke's own works in the 1970s were well known throughout the country. Two of her most powerful pieces were: Big Mama, 1972, black walnut, 24 ins., W.H. Murdock, International Battery Corporation, Reading, PA, and Peace, 1972, Italian alabaster, 24 ins. high, Collection of Winston Salem State University, Winston Salem, NC. Showing powerful images of women, Burke's 1970s pieces could easily be associated with the themes put forth by the prominent Women's Art Movement of the decade spearheaded by various American women artists working in all media.

RETURN TO BUCKS COUNTY: In 1981, Selma Burke retired as an arts administrator in Pittsburgh and returned to the Bucks County home and studio she had shared with Herman Kobbe. She continued to make art and to teach on a reduced schedule completing one of her most sought after portrait studies of her career. Burke's work depicting Mary McLeod Bethune, 1980, brass, 10 x 4 x 5 ins. is currently part of the Paul R. Jones Collection at the University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware. This work captures the fortitude and dedication of the sitter, a role model for many, through the eyes of the accomplished sculptor.

By 1983, Selma Burke decided to share her vast collections of European Modern, African, and her own sculptural creations with the community at her alma mater Winston-Salem State University in the form of a major art gift to the university's art museum.¹⁵ Throughout

¹⁵ The collection donated by Selma Burke to Winston-Salem State University consists of more than 100 works of art including fifty of Selma Burke's paintings and sculptures. The collection includes Burke's portrait bust of Duke Ellington and a maquette of the statue of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The collection

the 1980s, Selma continued to find inspiration from her beautiful Bucks County home and surroundings as well as the art community that so loved her. While she suffered with Diabetes, Selma Burke worked tirelessly on her art, creating new pieces all the time.

At 93, Selma Burke was working in her New Hope, PA studio completing a federal commission to sculpt civil rights activist Rosa Parks. She was still working on the project when, on Tuesday, August 29, 1995, Selma Burke died. She passed away at Chandler Hall's Hospice Care Center in Newtown, PA, not far from her New Hope, PA home and studio. A community tribute to Selma Burke took place in Doylestown, PA on November 10, 2001 when the artist's work, Together, 1975, a beautiful image of a family in relief, was unveiled in the James A. Michener Art Museum's sculpture garden. It is fitting to note that Selma Burke's commitment to art and teaching was her legacy. She overcame obstacles and never blinked when adversity looked her in the eye. A powerful and inspirational woman and artist, Selma Burke once commented that "Art didn't start black or white, it just started ... There have been too many labels in this world: Negro, Colored, Black, African-American ... Why do we label people with everything except 'children of God?'"¹⁶ Selma showed the world that she was not only a child of God, but she was doing, through her artwork, God's work.

further included works by such major artists as Horace Pippin, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and others.

¹⁶ Harry Schwalb, "Diary: Without Color" in Art News, September 1994, p.27.