



Celebrating Black History Month Beulah Ecton Woodard, Black Female Sculptors, and Honoring African Heritage

by Charles Swaney, Museum Docent

Beulah Ecton Woodard (1895–1955) was born in Frankfort, Ohio, and moved with her family to the Los Angeles area when she was 12 years old. She attended Los Angeles Polytechnic High School where she first experienced clay modeling/sculpture. After high school and until her early thirties, she made a living as a housekeeper, but she eventually began sculpting with clay. After marrying Brady Woodard in 1928, Woodard took art classes at the Otis Art Institute, the Los Angeles Art Institute, and the University of Southern California. She studied under Greg Lukens, Peter David Edstrom, and expatriate Russian prince, Paul Troubetzkoy, in turn establishing a studio at her home.

Woodard's first solo exhibit was in 1935, and she was the first African American artist to have a solo exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1937, the same year she was instrumental in founding the Los Angeles Negro Art Association. She died in 1955 just before the opening of a retrospective of her work in Germany. Woodard's emphasis on pride in African roots set her apart from her contemporaries and predecessors, distinguishing her as a clay sculptor. This emphasis is particularly well demonstrated in two terracotta sculptures she rendered of the American dancer, Maudelle Bass Weston, both created in 1937–38.

The Museum's version of *Maudelle* was purchased in 2007 at auction from the sizable collection of African American art at The Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, which in 1938 was the largest African American life insurance company on the West Coast. The portrait is an earthy terracotta work emphasizing Maudelle's calm, confident, quiet demeanor. Her abundant hair is styled in cornrows that are gathered together at the back of her head. There is no glazing, save that on large turquoise earrings, which are quite prominent in contrast to the rest of the work. Woodard was clearly emphasizing the African roots of Maudelle, as well as all African Americans.



Beulah Ecton Woodard (American, 1895–1955)

Maudelle, 1937

Painted terracotta with added glaze

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2007.40)

(Continued on page two)



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

The differences between the Museum's *Maudelle* and the [Petrucci Foundation](#) version could not be more profound. It portrays Maudelle with neat short hair, unbraided, and with the same calm, confident demeanor, but the terracotta has a bronze color, rendering it a more classical and naturalistic bust of the dancer. The serenity of the Museum's work is somehow missing in the other portrait, as are suggestions of Maudelle's African heritage. Today in the Norton Museum, Palm Beach, [African Woman](#), also sculpted by Woodard in 1937–38, shows the strong African elements evident in the Museum's portrait and is characteristic of the Afrocentric works by the artist.

Maudelle Bass Weston (1908–1989) was the youngest of ten children, born to farmers Brutus and Elizabeth Bass in Georgia. Her father was from South Carolina and had Caribbean roots, which influenced Maudelle's dance style. She toured as a dancer in the Folklorica dance group in Mexico, Central, and South America for three years, coming to the attention of Diego Rivera, who employed her as a model. In 1933, she moved to Los Angeles, studying at the John Gray Conservatory of Music and modeling for Johan Hagemeyer (*see photo*), and Edward Weston, who photographed her as part of a series of nudes on the beach in 1939. The renowned American dancer, La Meri (1899–1988), an expert in ethnic dance, said, "Maudelle is an artist of rare and moving sincerity. Her expression is an inspiration for all artists." Maudelle Weston died at the age of 81 in New Jersey.

In addition to Woodard, other female African American sculptors have a prominent heritage in art, starting with Edmonia Lewis (1844–1907), who gained international credibility living and working for many years in Rome. Her sculpture, *The Death of Cleopatra*, is located in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Lewis was followed by Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1877–1968), who lived in Philadelphia and Framingham, MA, but also journeyed to Paris and studied under Auguste Rodin. Her style is more akin to Rodin than to classicism, and she is known for [In Memory of Mary Turner: As a Silent Protest against Mob Violence](#), a response to the death of Turner, who died in a spate of lynchings in Lowndes County, GA in 1918. Turner, heavily pregnant at the time, was hung upside down and her live baby was cut from her body. Fuller was active throughout her life in works portraying confrontational African American historical and religious themes. Augusta Savage (1892–1962) is renowned as an African American woman who earned a reputation as an artist in Paris, studying under

(Continued on page three)

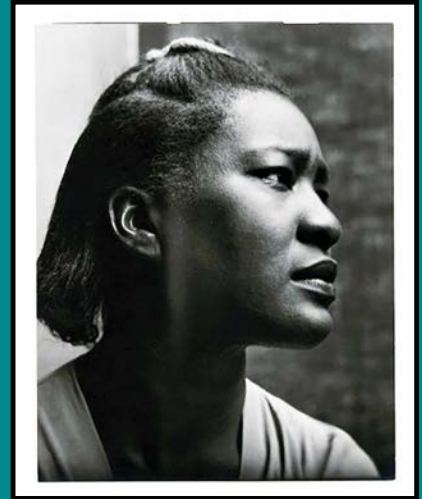


Photo of Maudelle Bass Weston
By Johan Hagemeyer
Maudelle, Dancer, 1940
Photographic print gelatin silver
(BANC PIC 1964.063)
Reproduced with permission
Courtesy of the Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley



Edmonia Lewis (American, 1844–1907)
The Death of Cleopatra, 1876
Smithsonian American Art Museum
Gift of the Historical Society of Forest Park, Illinois



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

a Julius Rosenwald grant from 1929–1931. She was also an integral part of the Harlem Renaissance, establishing the Harlem Community Arts Center, partially funded as a WPA art project. Students of this school included Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and Gwendolyn Knight. Savage's most well-known work is *The Harp* (aka *Lift Every Voice and Sing*), a plaster sculpture created for the 1939 New York World's Fair, with metal souvenir versions available for sale at the Fair. The original, unfortunately, was destroyed after the end of the Fair. [Gamin](#) is another celebrated work by her, which bears a strong resemblance to [Bad Boy](#) by Woodard. Selma Burke (1900–1995) worked alongside Augusta Savage in the Harlem Community Arts Center and was most known for a bas relief of [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#) that was used as the image on the US dime. Fuller, Savage, and Burke were contemporaries of Beulah Woodard, but were on separate coasts. Their realistic styles were similar, but Woodard's emphasis on African heritage set her apart from the rest. ■



The Harp, by Augusta Savage, displayed at the 1939 New York World's Fair, Queens (original artwork destroyed). Photo credit: Getty Images