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Smithsonian American Art Museum Names Dalila Scruggs as the Inaugural Augusta Savage Curator of African American Art

The Smithsonian American Art Museum announced today that Dalila Scruggs will join its curatorial team as the Augusta Savage Curator of African American Art. Scruggs’s expertise ranges across different types of media—including painting, prints, sculpture and photography—from the 19th- and 20th centuries. In her new role, Scruggs will help shape the museum’s exhibition program and collecting priorities as they relate broadly to African American art, a longstanding area of strength of the museum’s holdings distinguished by its depth and range. She will also contribute to “American Voices and Visions,” a major cross-departmental initiative to comprehensively reinstall the museum’s collection. She begins work at the museum April 22.

The position is named to honor Savage’s legacy as an artist, teacher and community art program director in Harlem in the 1930s. Fittingly, Scruggs has served in education and curatorial roles and has sought to draw on her experience as a museum educator to cultivate a curatorial practice that is visitor- and object-centered.

“I am delighted to welcome Dalila Scruggs to SAAM as the inaugural Augusta Savage Curator of African American Art,” said Stephanie Stebich, the Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “SAAM is home to one of the most significant collections of African American art in the world, and I am so pleased that Dr. Scruggs will bring fresh, thoughtful analysis to these works that evoke themes both universal and specific to the African American and the American experience.”

Scruggs comes to the museum from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, where she has been the curator for photography and prints since 2021. She also has served as a guest curator at the Brooklyn Museum since 2020. Previously, she has held positions at the Paul R. Jones Collection of American Art at the University of Alabama as a consulting

curator, at the Brooklyn Museum as an assistant curator of American art and at the Williams College Museum of Art as a curatorial fellow.

Her publications include “Activism in Exile: Elizabeth Catlett’s Mask for Whites,” a contribution to the scholarly journal *American Art*, published by the Smithsonian American Art Museum with the University of Chicago Press, and several exhibition catalogs, including contributions to *Brooklyn Museum: Highlights* collections handbook and an entry for the upcoming *The Awe of the Arctic: A Visual History* for the New York Public Library.

Scruggs joins the curatorial department led by Randall Griffey, the museum’s head curator and joins a team of 11 curators at the museum.

Scruggs graduated from Cornell University with a bachelor’s degree in art history and earned a doctorate from Harvard University in the history of art and architecture. Her dissertation “‘The Love of Liberty Has Brought Us Here’: The American Colonization Society and the Imaging of African-American Settlers in Liberia, West Africa” focuses on African American daguerreotypist August Washington and his photographs in service to the American Colonization Society, a 19th-century reform organization dedicated to sending African Americans to Liberia, West Africa as an alternative to promoting radical abolition or perpetual slavery in the United States. From 2007 to 2008, Scruggs was a Terra Foundation for American Art Predoctoral Fellow as part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s prestigious fellowship program.

The Augusta Savage Curator of African American Art is generously funded by anonymous donors with a [\\$5 million endowment gift](#) to the museum. The donors requested the position be named for the trailblazing artist and educator to elevate her legacy.

About Augusta Savage

Augusta Savage (1892-1962) was a renowned sculptor and teacher who effectively used her work to challenge discrimination and promote civil and women’s rights. When she arrived in New York City in 1921, she met with some initial success, receiving commissions to produce busts of W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Such works won her the attention of African American community groups.

She was dedicated to expanding educational and professional opportunities for African American artists. In 1932, she founded the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in Harlem, she was a cofounder of the Harlem Artists Guild that secured employment for Black artists, and in 1937 she helped establish and was the first director of the Harlem Community Art Center, which

received funding from the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Through her work at these institutions, she not only nurtured the careers of many younger African American artists, including Jacob Lawrence, Gwendolyn Knight, and Norman Lewis, but she also actively challenged the biases among WPA administrators by insisting African American artists deserved support. As an artist, however, Savage often struggled to find backers for her own work.

In 1939 she opened the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art, the first gallery in the United States dedicated specially to exhibiting and selling works by African American artists. That same year, she sculpted a huge plaster for the World's Fair inspired by "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a song widely considered the Black national anthem. Like much of her work, it was not cast in bronze and was later destroyed. She created fewer artworks after 1940, when she moved to upstate New York, though she continued to teach.

The art historian Richard Powell calls Savage "a legend in African American art history because so much of her life was filled with struggle, with perseverance and with creativity, all mixed up."

To learn more about Savage, listen to the episode "[The Monumental Imagination of Augusta Savage](#)" produced by the Smithsonian's podcast Sidedoor, and explore the digital comic "[My Monument Will Be In Their Work](#)," published by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Art by African Americans at the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum is home to one of the most significant collections of African American art in the world. Beginning in the mid-1960s the museum acquired major works, including Sargent Johnson's "Mask" and James Hampton's visionary installation, "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly," and works by Romare Bearden, William H. Johnson and Alma Thomas. In 1980, the museum acquired works by 19th-century artists Joshua Johnson, the earliest documented professional African American painter; Edward Mitchell Bannister; Robert S. Duncanson and Henry Ossawa Tanner; and neoclassical sculptures by Edmonia Lewis, the first professional sculptor of color. Six years later, the museum acquired more than 400 works by folk and self-taught artists from the holdings of Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., and in 2015, the museum acquired nearly 100 works by self-taught artists from the Margaret Z. Robson collection. A significant number of artworks in these collections are by African Americans, including William Edmondson, Bessie Harvey,

Sister Gertrude Morgan, Elijah Pierce, Nellie Mae Rowe, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, Bill Traylor and Inez Nathaniel-Walker.

In recent years, the museum has brought into its collection works by leading modern and contemporary artists, including Bisa Butler, Mark Bradford, Nick Cave, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Sonya Clark, Theaster Gates, Arthur Jafa, Barbara Jean Jones-Hogu, Simone Leigh, Kerry James Marshall, Martin Puryear, Cauleen Smith, Mickalene Thomas, Hank Willis Thomas, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems and Fred Wilson, among others.

In 2021, the museum acquired the L.J. West Collection of early American photography, which transformed the museum's photography holdings with the addition of works by early African American daguerreotypists James P. Ball, Glenalvin Goodridge and Augustus Washington. The museum holds the world's largest collection of daguerreotypes by these three early African American photographers. This collection was enhanced by the purchase in 2023 of the Dr. Robert L. Drapkin Collection, a wide-ranging collection of photographs that represent African Americans from the medium's early years to the near present—roughly the 1840s to the 1970s. Other important holdings in photography include works by Ball, Dawoud Bey, Roy DeCarava, Roland Freeman, Tony Gleaton, Robert McNeill, Marilyn Nance, Gordon Parks, Carrie Mae Weems and James Van Der Zee.

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum is the flagship museum in the United States for American art and craft. It is home to one of the most significant and inclusive collections of American art in the world. The museum's main building, located at Eighth and G streets N.W., is open daily from 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. The museum's Renwick Gallery, a branch museum dedicated to contemporary craft, is located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W. and is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Check online for [current hours and admission information](#). Admission is free. Follow the museum on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [YouTube](#). Smithsonian information: (202) 633-1000. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Website: americanart.si.edu.

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Note to editors: A high-resolution image of Scruggs is available via [Dropbox](#).