



Smithsonian American Art Museum

February 2012

Gamin

c. 1929

Augusta Savage

Born: Green Cove Spring, Florida
1892

Died: New York, New York 1962
Painted plaster

9 x 5 3/4 x 4 3/8 in. (22.9 x 14.7 x
11.2 cm.)

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Gift of Benjamin and Olya

Margolin

1988.57



[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

Researcher Ann found contradictory information about who the boy portrayed in this sculpture and how the important Harlem Renaissance sculptor and art teacher Augusta Savage came to portray him in this well-known image. She tried to sort out the confusion:

- Who was the model for this sculpture and how did Augusta Savage come to portray him?
- What role did this sculpture play in Savage's career?

This sculpture is in Luce Foundation Center for American Art open storage, so I began by studying the work in person. I noted how the artist applied bronze dust and paint to make the plaster cast look like a bronze. The curatorial file on this sculpture includes a lot of information about the different versions of this sculpture, which exists in two sizes, with this smaller cast represented in many collections. Instead of further investigating how many such casts the artist made and where they are now, I investigated the identity of the boy depicted. All scholars have assumed that the boy was from Harlem, where Savage lived. Some publications say that the boy shown in *Gamin* was a stranger to the artist while others assert that he was the artist's nephew. The questions are important for the interpretation of the image – is this boy part of the northern urban African American history of Harlem or is his history different? Did the artist know her subject well as an individual, or did she generalize him, as the title *Gamin* (scratched into the front of the sculpture) implies, as an urban street “type?”

I began by reading standard texts on Augusta Savage, including chapters in two books by Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson: *Six Black Masters of American Art* (1972) and *A History of African-American Artists* (1993), as well as a small catalogue by Deirdre L. Bibby, *Augusta Savage and the Art Schools of Harlem* (1988). Bearden and Henderson, in both of their books, said that *Gamin* was modeled on a Harlem street child whom Savage did not know, but she “coaxed him into posing for her.” (1972). Juanita Marie Holland, however, in her chronology for *Augusta Savage and the Art Schools of Harlem* identifies *Gamin* as being modeled from not a stranger but Savage's nephew, Ellis Ford (Holland in Bibby, 1988). Regenia A. Perry, citing a 1935 article about Savage by T. R. Poston in *Metropolitan Magazine*, expands this to say that Ellis Ford “lived in Harlem.” (Perry, 1992; Post, 1935) Only Perry cites a source for her information about the subject of *Gamin*.

Theresa Leininger-Miller accepts the identification of the model for *Gamin* as a denizen of Harlem's streets and adds that Savage modeled *Gamin* in the spring of 1929, but does not clarify the source of this date (Leininger-Miller, 2001). Leininger-Miller cites a three-page, unpublished biographical summary about Savage, dated November 20, 1928. This biographical summary was created as part of Savage's application for a fellowship she received in 1929 from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. I ordered a copy of this biographical summary from the Julius Rosenwald Fund Archives now at Fisk University. This biographical summary does not mention *Gamin* at all, so it is not clear whether Savage had yet completed the sculpture which would help to impress the people who selected Savage for the 1929 Rosenwald fellowship that paid for her to study art in Paris (See Leininger-Miller, 2001; and Frank Hayes, “Young Art Student Wins Prize for Sculptor Work,” *Chicago Daily News* (probably June 1), 1929).

Further investigation of Savage's life, through searches in books and articles, including a collection of articles in the Smithsonian American Art Library's vertical files, showed me that before she received the Rosenwald Fellowship, the young artist had long been in search of funding that would enable her to study in Europe. In 1923 she an important chance to study in France because of her race. This blatant racism despite Savage's great talent gained the artist

wide support in the African American community and brought her opportunities to study and exhibit in America, but did not bring her the coveted study abroad (Leininger-Miller, 2001 and contemporary articles including “[President Warren G.] Harding Asked to Intercede in Exclusion Case,” *New York World* (May 10, 1923).

Savage went to work in a steam laundry to earn the necessary funds for her European study (Lester A. Walton, “Negro Girl Gets Fund to Study Art Abroad,” publication, date, and page unknown). Her hard-won savings were depleted when her father became paralyzed and both parents came from their home in Florida to live with the artist in New York. A deadly hurricane struck Palm Beach, Florida, where many others in Savage’s family lived, on September 16, 1928. Savage’s sister had both legs broken and their brother Fred died while rescuing flood victims. The devastated family of nine crowded into Savage’s three-room apartment at 284 West 137th Street in Harlem (Leininger-Miller, 2001; “Hurricane Sweeps Florida,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (September 17, 1928): 1). [Google maps](#) shows the building where Savage’s apartment was located.

When I repeated a previous online historical article search because the database had added new journals, I found an article that provides a previously missing link between *Gamin* and Savage’s family from Florida. *The Chicago Defender* said in 1940 that Savage’s model for *Gamin* was her “little nephew.” However, the nephew was not a Harlem resident but rather one of those who emerged from the tragedy of the Florida hurricane to “to live with her [Savage] in her crowded New York apartment. . . The result was approximately 48 hours work, using the nephew as a model.” (Galbreath, 1940) Therefore *Gamin* depicts not a Harlem youth but a Florida boy who had just escaped from a deadly disaster (“Florida Dead Put at 400, With 23,000 in Distress,” *New York Times* (September 20, 1928), 1). *Gamin* represents an entirely different aspect of African American experience than has been previously assumed by scholars. Further, the *Defender* article suggests that *Gamin* was modeled in September 1928, not in the spring of 1929 as had been widely published (Leininger-Miller, 2001 and Macadam, 2007, etc.).

All sources agree on the importance of *Gamin* for Savage’s career, since this work gained her the Rosenwald Fellowship mentioned above. The path toward this fellowship began in November 1928 when Savage called on Eugene Kinckle Jones, executive secretary of the National Urban League. A date of autumn 1928 for *Gamin* would mean that the sculptor could have shown the work, or a photograph of it, to Jones. Jones contacted Frederick Keppel, president of the Carnegie Corporation, in search of funding for Savage. Keppel suggested that Savage write to the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, known for funding Negro education and granting individual fellowships to African Americans (Leininger-Miller, 2011). On May 17, 1929, Savage learned that she had been granted a fellowship to study abroad for two years. She was the first visual artist granted a Rosenwald fellowship (Schulman, 2009). Ever since, *Gamin* has been one of Savage’s best known and most admired works.

I eagerly awaited the arrival of T. R. Poston's article about Savage, as well as the biographical statement on the artist from the Rosenwald Archives. When they arrived, neither one contradicted the 1940 *Defender* article with the connection of *Gamin* the Savage's Florida family and the 1928 hurricane. The division of the hurricane victims into "white" and "negro" categories in contemporary newspaper articles strongly implies that the two categories of victims were treated differently and makes me wonder about the experience of Savage's family, suggesting the following question:

- **What happened to Savage's nephew and other members of the artist's family during and after the 1928 hurricane?**

Selected Bibliography:

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Three-page biographical summary of Augusta Savage, November 20, 1928. Archives of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, John Hope and Aurelius E. Franklin Library, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee.

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