Primary Maker: Augusta Savage
Title: Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Harp)
Date: ca. 1939
Medium: White metal cast with a silver patina
Dimensions: Overall: 10 3/4 × 9 1/2 × 4 in. (27.3 × 24.1 × 10.2 cm)
Credit Line: Purchase, Coaching Club Acquisition Fund
Object Number: 2019.90

Object Name: Statuette/Figurine
Classification: SCULPTURE

Curatorial Remarks:
Lift Every Voice and Sing is the signature work by Harlem Renaissance artist, activist, and educator Augusta Savage. It takes the form of a harp. A kneeling man holding a rectangular plate represents the foot pedal. The folds of choir robes worn by twelve stylized young black singers in graduated heights form the strings of the harp. And the hand and arm of God stand in for the sounding board. The composition casts the singers as instruments of God and in so doing highlights the religiosity of its source material. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was written as a poem by Savage’s friend James Weldon Johnson in 1900, set to music by his brother John Rosamond Johnson in 1905, and declared the “Negro National Anthem” by the NAACP in 1919. Savage’s original 16-foot sculpture was an extraordinary accomplishment that defied systemic period sexism and the institutionalized racism of Jim Crow. It was the only commission at the 1939 World’s Fair from a black woman artist. The sculpture stood prominently near one of the entrances to the fair in the court of the Contemporary Arts Building. One of the most popular works of art
at the fair, it was seen by over 5 million visitors and received high praise in the press. Yet the sculpture was destroyed. Savage lacked the funds to cast the original work in bronze and to pay for a facility to store it. It was demolished after the event—smashed by bulldozers as part of the fair’s cleanup. It survives only through small-scale replicas like this one.

Physical Description:
Sculpture (white metal cast with black patina) depicting 12 singers in the form of a harp. Incised signature and “Worlds Fair 1939” at the base. Printed paper label on bottom designating publication by Augusta Savage Studios, Inc., at 143 West 125th Street.


Related Objects: