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*Malcolm Mobutu Smith's Glad Hand is from a new series currently on display at Hunterdon Art Museum in Clinton, NJ. Photo © Osamu James Nakagawa*

TALKING SHOP

## **Black Clay Artists Everyone Should Know**

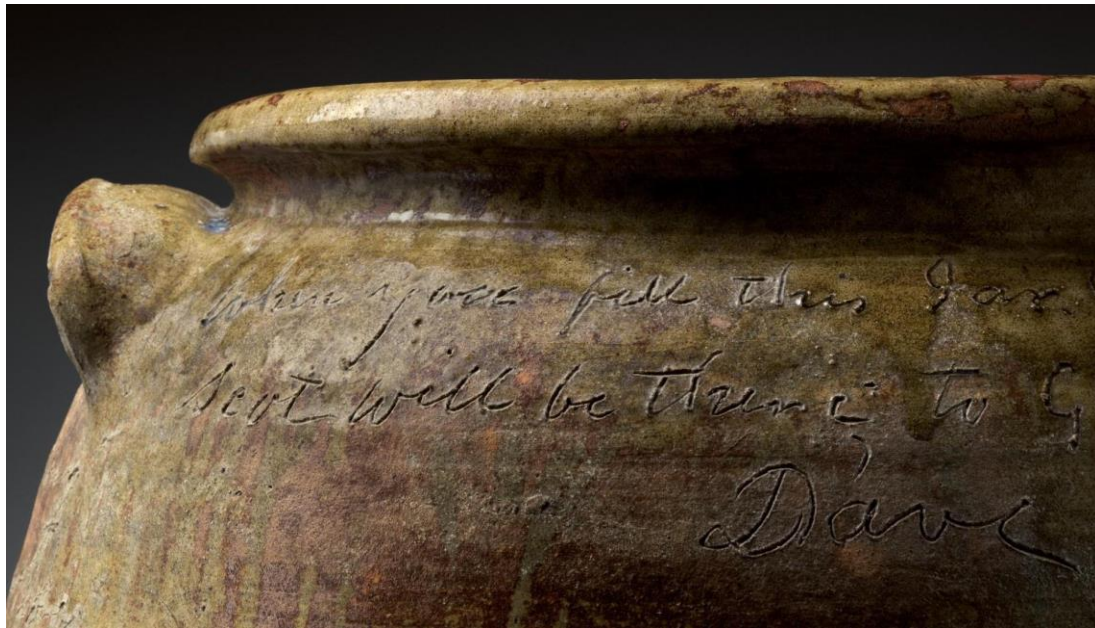
*Design Miami*

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The incredibly rich legacy of Black American ceramic artists

Modern and contemporary ceramics are certainly having a moment, as more galleries and collectors than ever are engaging the medium, smashing auction records along the way. The recent buzz around ceramics, however, underscores the deficiency of representation in the market and the urgent need to fully value the rich legacy that Black artists working in clay have built in the U.S. since the country was founded.

Recent years have shined a light on a few such historical artists, notably David Drake (c. 1800–1870s), the enslaved potter and poet whose work found new audiences when a piece was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 2020, and Doyle Lane (1925–2002), the California-based ceramicist whose work was featured in R & Company's Objects USA 2020. In the wake of the high profile exhibition, one of Lane's signature Weed Pots sold last summer at Phillips New York for \$22,680. Exceptions aside, far too much of this legacy—from the often unknown makers of Afro-Colonoware and Face Jugs to the pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement and beyond—remains obscured by past and persisting prejudices.



*Storage Jar by David Drake, 1858. Photo © Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

*When asked about historical ceramic artists that have inspired her, Alia Williams of Jeffrey Deitch, Inc., recent curator of Clay Pop, cites Drake's work with clay and text as a form of resistance. She adds, "While we're still only scratching surface of the history, it's exciting to see Drake's work collected by a major institution and recognized as fine art."*

“There is a dearth of information about and exposure to the legacy of Black clay artists—I for one knew of but a handful of clay artists and mentors when I began my career 40 years ago,” Indiana-based ceramic artist and professor [Malcolm Mobutu Smith](#) explains when asked what the history of ceramics created by Black artists means to his practice. Over the years, Smith has committed himself to connecting with his precedents, both historical and living, while also incorporating into his vessels references to African Diaspora cultures. And still, he says, the lack of visibility on Black creators in his field means he still has more to learn. “Seeing artists like myself in careers in clay—and specifically those who share my path as an artist/educator—I am both proud and inspired ANY time I find a brother or sister educator in ceramics.” Smith is currently teaching a class on the history of modern and contemporary ceramics at Indiana University, the first offered at the school, working out in real time the most effective way to highlight historical Black artists in the curriculum without siloing them into a category separate from other artists.



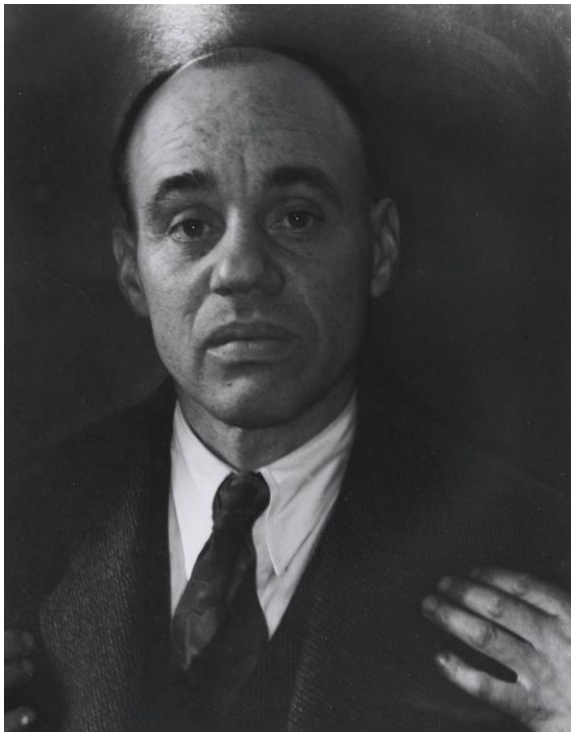
*Adire 6 and Womb on White by Malene Barnett. Photos © Malene Barnett*

Brooklyn artist and activist Malene Barnett agrees that this legacy looms large for contemporary Black artists but much work is needed to achieve equity and broaden awareness. “The legacy of Black ceramicists is manifesting through shapes, forms, and processes [embraced by today’s makers]. Contemporary ceramics that utilize hand-building and hand carvings techniques and repurposing glaze recipes from the ancestors

build on the legacy,” Barnett explains. She adds: “The urgency to tell the complete experience of Black ceramicists in the Americas and beyond is necessary to create inclusive craft histories. We need archives documenting our ancestral pottery legacy to contemporary Black ceramicists thriving today.”

While this list cannot hope to be exhaustive, here are a few Black artists working in clay, past and present, who have had tremendous influence on those who followed.

### **Sargent Claude Johnson (1888–1967)**



*Portrait of Sargent Johnson by Consuelo Kanaga, 1934. Photo © Brooklyn Museum | Untitled (Terracotta) by Sargent Johnson, c. 1940. Photo © Smithsonian American Art Museum*

Johnson, a Bay-Area-based painter, printmaker, graphic artist, and sculptor, achieved a national reputation for works representing the beauty and dignity of Black people, often expressed in abstract and modernist styles across a range of media. He also created striking functional pottery for the tabletop. He famously said, “It is the pure American Negro I am concerned with, aiming to show the natural beauty and dignity in that characteristic lip and that characteristic hair, bearing, and manner; and I wish to show that beauty not so much to the white man as to the Negro himself. Unless I can interest my race, I am sunk.”

## Augusta Savage (1892–1962)



*Augusta Savage working on Lift Every Voice and Sing, renamed The Harp, for the 1939 World's Fair in New York. Photo © Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library*

Born near Jacksonville, Florida, Savage overcame numerous obstacles to become the first director of the Harlem Community Art Center and a vital mentor to a generation of Black artists. She was commissioned to create a number of important portraits and public art projects over the course of her career, but tragically her inspiring large-scale sculpture for the 1939 World's Fair was destroyed. "Augusta Savage has always inspired me," Malene Barnett noted. "She was a renaissance woman, and I feel a synergy between her life and mine. We share the same desire to sculpt Black life, commit to building community, and express pride in our culture."

## Selma Hortense Burke (1900–1995)



*Selma Burke with her portrait bust of Booker T. Washington, c.1935. Photo © Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*

As a child in Western North Carolina, Burke would form figures in clay from a nearby riverbed. She went on to become one of the most prominent women of the Harlem Renaissance, producing sculptures—especially high-profile portraits—in a range of media, including brass, wood, marble, and stone. Among her most public works is her bas relief portrait of Franklin Roosevelt, which the US mint adapted for the dime, and her larger-than-life statue of Martin Luther King, Jr., which can be found in Marshall Park in Charlotte, North Carolina. In 1979 Burke was recognized by Jimmy Carter for her contribution to African American art history.

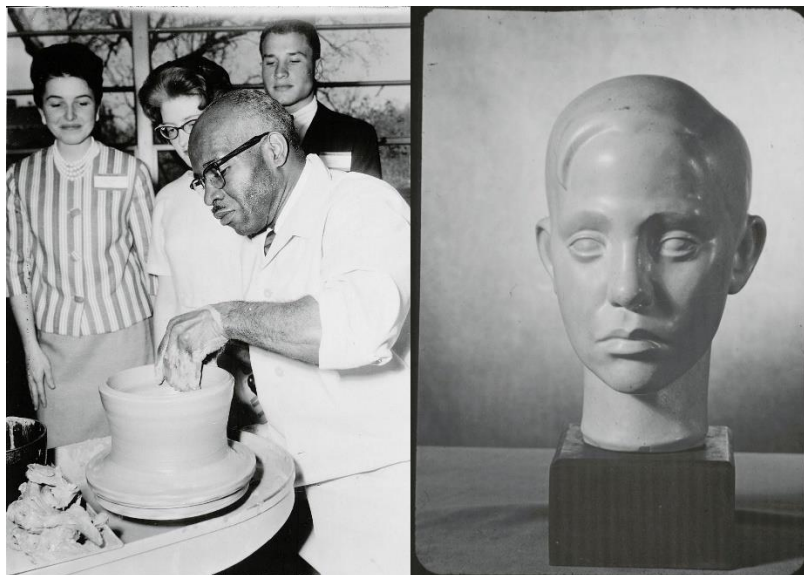
## Wilmer James (1917–1999) & Tony Hill (1908–1975)



*Ceramics by Wilmer James exhibited in California's Design Women exhibition at Autry National Center in 2012—the first time her work was shown in a museum. Photo © LA Times, 18 Aug 2012 | Tony Hill mention in Jet Magazine, February 14, 1957*

James and Hill founded a successful ceramics studio together in LA in 1944. James went on to start her own business before relaunching her art career in printmaking. Later, she founded the Art Center of the Exceptional Children's Foundation, dedicated to teaching art to children with special needs. Hill meanwhile ran the ceramics studio until the mid-1970s, while also developing import-export businesses in Africa. For a time he was married to actress-activist Francis Elizabeth Williams, but by the 1950s Jet Magazine was referring to him as a "top bachelor" while covering his chic soirees attended by Hollywood glitterati.

## William Ellsworth Artis (1914–1977)



*William E. Artis demonstrating his work. Terracotta Head by Artis. Photos © National Archives at College Park*

Born in North Carolina, Artis moved to New York in 1927 and soon began to study sculpture and pottery under Augusta Savage and Selma Burke. He developed a multifaceted practice over the course of his career, winning multiple awards and professorships along the way. His signature series comprises portraits of young people from his community, sensitively rendered in terracotta and stoneware. Artis' works can be found in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, Atlanta University, North Carolina Museum of Art, and more.

With many thanks to [Smith](#) and [Barnett](#), who contributed the names of those who inspired them, the list continues with influential living ceramics artists you should know and follow:

[Bing Davis \(b. 1937\)](#)

[James Tanner \(b. 1941\)](#)

[David MacDonald \(b. 1945\)](#)



*Syd Carpenter at work in her studio; Farm Bowl Freewoods Farm by Syd Carpenter. Photos © Syd Carpenter*

[Winnie Owens-Hart \(b. 1949\)](#)

[James C. Watkins \(b. 1951\)](#)

[Syd Carpenter \(b. 1953\)](#)



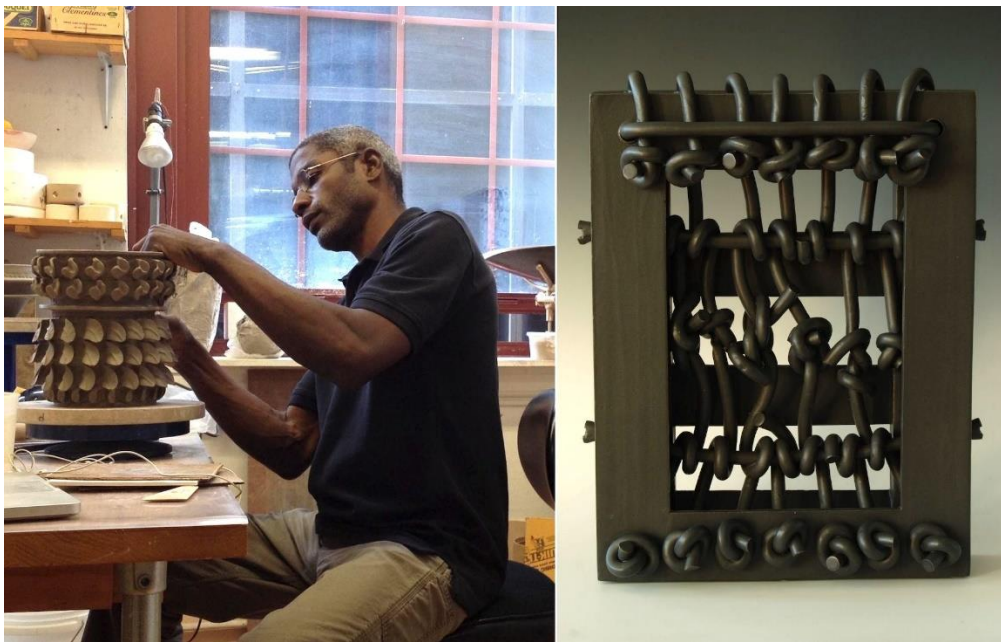


*Sana Musasama in the studio. I Died Many Times by Sana Musasama, from her Girl Soldiers series, on view at Mindy Solomon Gallery. Photos*

© Sana Musasama

**[Sana Musasama \(b. 1957\)](#)**

**[Paul S. Briggs \(b. 1963\)](#)**



*Paul S. Briggs at work in his studio; Parse (Knot Series) by Paul S. Briggs. Photos © Paul S. Briggs*

As Alia Williams mentioned, this list only scratches the surface...