

**Saint Thomas More Black History Month 2006**  
**African American Achievers Archives**  
**Week 3**  
**Famous African American Writers and Artists**



1917-2000

**Gwendolyn Brooks, poet**  
**First African American to win a Pulitzer Prize**

As a child, **Gwendolyn Brooks**, was teased because her skin was dark, her hair was not straight and she wasn't good at sports. So she spent a lot of time alone, reading.

She wrote her first poem at age seven; she published her first poem at 14. She is best known for her sensitive portraits of urban blacks who encounter racism and poverty in their daily lives. In 1945, her first volume of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, was published.

Ms. Brooks went on to win the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Annie Allen*, becoming the first black woman to win this award. In 1968, she was named Poet Laureate for the state of Illinois, and from 1985-86 she was Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.

**Romare Bearden, artist**  
**America's greatest collagist**

Romare Bearden was born in Charlotte, NC and grew up in Harlem, NY.

Mr. Bearden depicted many rituals and social customs of 20th century rural Black America. Visually and emotionally stimulating, his collages and prints of spiritual ceremonies, baptisms and burial, industrial hardships, musical arrangements and daily life are beautiful to behold and fantastic to contemplate. He created more than 2,000 works during his long career and is also noted for his prints in a variety of media.

In the 1960s, he founded the Cinque Gallery to help young artists and the Spiral Group to aid African-American artists. Mr. Bearden received many awards and honors throughout his lifetime, including honorary doctorates from Pratt Institute, Carnegie Mellon University, Davidson College and Atlanta University, to name but a few. He received the Mayor's Award of Honor for Art and Culture in New York City in 1984 and the National Medal of Arts, presented by President Ronald Reagan, in 1987. By the time of his death, he had achieved a stature known by few artists during their lifetimes.



1911 - 1988

## Famous African American Writers and Artists

### **Arthur Mitchell, dancer**

#### **Founded first African American classical ballet company**

**Arthur Mitchell** grew up in a bad Harlem neighborhood where he was more likely to be a gang member than a student. He credits education with saving him.

A guidance counselor who saw Mitchell dance a jitterbug encouraged him to try out for the High School of Performing Arts in New York City. He won a scholarship and began to encounter the racism of the dance world. Although less qualified white students were chosen over him for various projects, he was so talented that, at 18, he was offered a scholarship to study ballet at the School of American Ballet, the training ground for the New York City Ballet.

Three years later, he became a soloist – the first African American principal dancer of a major company in history. He remained with the company for 20 years.

In 1968, Mitchell founded a ballet school in Harlem, New York City, in order to provide classical academic training to black students. By 1970, under his direction, the school developed into the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the first black classical ballet company.



Born: 1934



Born: 1931

### **Toni Morrison, writer**

#### **First African American woman to win a Nobel Prize in Literature**

**Toni Morrison** is an author, teacher and book editor. When she was born, her parents named her Chloe Anthony Wofford. They moved to Lorain, Ohio from the South to escape racism and to find better opportunities in the North.

At home, Chloe heard many songs and tales of Southern black folklore. Chloe attended an integrated school, where, in first grade, she was the only black student in her class and the only one who could read. She graduated from high school with honors and went on to Howard University, where she majored in English with a minor in classics. Since many people couldn't pronounce her first name correctly, she changed it to Toni. After college she worked as a professor and later, as a book editor.

In 1970, she published her first book, *The Bluest Eye*. She published several more after that, and in 1987, she published *Beloved*, which won the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 1988. In 1987, she was named the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Council of Humanities at Princeton University, the first black woman writer to hold a named chair at an Ivy League university. In 1993, Toni Morrison received the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first black woman to do so.

## Famous African American Writers and Artists

### **Augusta Christine Fells Savage, sculptor** **Opened New York's first African American art gallery**

**Augusta Savage** began modeling clay figures as a child. Her father didn't like this because he took literally the biblical admonition against making graven images. As an adult, one of her clay figures won a prize at a county fair and, thus inspired, she raised money to go to New York to get training as an artist. She entered a free art program at Cooper Union in 1921 and supported herself by taking in laundry.

In 1923, the French government turned her down for a summer art program because of her color. She brought this issue to the public's attention. It caused quite an uproar, brought attention to the discrimination African-American artists faced in this country – and labeled her a troublemaker.

Mrs. Savage became a portrait sculptor, portraying W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Frederick Douglass, James Weldon Johnson and other African-American leaders. Part of the Harlem Renaissance, she continued to exhibit and eventually won a Rosenwald Fellowship to study in Europe.

A dedicated teacher who put her own work aside to encourage gifted children, she was appointed director of the Harlem Community Art Center in 1937, and helped to organize the Harlem Arts Guild. In 1939, the New York World's Fair commissioned her to produce a sculpture. She created one of her major works, "The Harp," based on James Weldon Johnson's song, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." It was, unfortunately, destroyed when the fair was over.

Shortly afterward Augusta Savage left Harlem and maintained a studio in Saugerties, NY, where she continued to work and teach.



1882 – 1962



The Harp