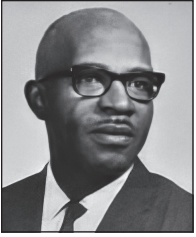


# CONNER • ROSENKRANZ

19th & 20th Century American Sculpture LLC



## William E. Artis (1914-1977)

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Born in Washington, North Carolina, in 1914, William Ellison Artis moved with his family to New York in 1927. In Harlem, Artis studied privately with Augusta Savage, and by the early 1930s was also a student of sculptor Robert Laurent at the Art Students League, courtesy of a Harmon Foundation Scholarship. In the mid-1930s he taught arts and crafts at the Harlem YMCA and studied ceramics at Greenwich House Pottery. His study of the medium continued in 1940 at the New York State College of Ceramics.

Artis' most representative and best-known works are his portrait and stylized heads in terracotta. Modeled by hand, and fired to permanent hardness, each work is unique. An early example, *Head of a Boy*, c. 1935, bears a tender fleshy quality setting it apart from later more stylized works. Evidence of the artist's hand is present in the expressive treatment of the surface, a quality present in few of his portraits. While the surface may be uncommon, his use of the edge of a modeling tool to incise eyebrows and hairline is a technique Artis would employ on subsequent heads.

In To Conserve A Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities, 1999, Monica DiLisio Berry notes, when discussing Artis' *Bust of Ms. Coleman*, terracotta, 1946, "It became apparent that Artis had cut the head open using a thin wire in order to hollow the interior of the bust before firing... Once the bust was hollowed, gouges were made along the exposed wall to increase surface area and clay slip was applied to fill the void and cement the two sections together."



*HEAD OF A BOY* (also *YOUNG BOY FROM HARLEM*), c. 1940, Terra cotta, 10 ¾ x 6 x 7 ⅞ inches, Conner • Rosenkranz.

Upon examination of other heads, as early as 1940, she found they also exhibited this method. Artis' process of separating and hollowing out finished heads, to ensure successful firing, may have been his approach from the beginning. *Head of a Boy*, c. 1935, exhibits similar repaired incisions, reattached with slip, along the back of the skull and behind the ears.



*HEAD OF A NEGRO BOY*, 1939, terracotta, 9 inches high, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*HEAD OF A BOY*, 1940, terra cotta, 11 inches, private collection.



*MICHAEL*, c. 1945, terracotta, 10 ¼ inches high, North Carolina Museum of Art



*BUST OF MISS COLEMAN*, 1946, terracotta, 24 inches high, Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



*AFRICAN YOUTH*, 1948, terracotta, 9 ½ inches high, private collection.

During World War II, Artis served in the Army Air Force, attaining the rank of staff sergeant. Turned down for a Rosenwald grant to survey ceramic art at eight Negro Colleges and schools in the South in 1946, Artis was hired by the Harmon Foundation to travel to perform sculpture demonstrations at six southern black colleges. Bust of Miss Coleman, 1946, was produced in one such session held at Howard University. Artis was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1947 which he applied to studying with Ivan Mestrovic (1883-1962), then teaching at Syracuse University and known for the high technical quality of his modeling and carving – skills which Artis absorbed.

Artis was named associate professor at his alma mater, Nebraska State Teachers College in 1954 and remained there until 1965. From 1966 to 1975 he taught at Mankato State College in Minnesota. Artis was named Outstanding Educator of America by the University of Minnesota in 1970.

In 1971 Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, mounted a retrospective exhibition of Artis'



William Artis with students at Syracuse University, 1948.  
Photo: National Archives, Washington D.C.

ceramics paired with the paintings of Ellis Wilson. David Driskell commented in the Fisk catalog that Artis showed "the beauty of his people, modeled and shaped in bronze, clay; black and beautiful... He has not attempted to solve problems with his art but has seen beyond those obstacles often binding the human spirit. He has encountered through his art the meaning of a universal world." William Artis died in 1977.

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