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February 17, 2021

Hon. Sarah Carroll, Chair  
NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission  
1 Centre Street, 9<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10007

**Re: Additional information on 88 East 10th Street and Selma Hortense Burke in proposed historic district south of Union Square**

Dear Chair Carroll,

I write to you to urge you to reconsider our request to landmark 88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street as part of a historic district south of Union Square. We already detailed the building's rich history and significance in our letter dated November 12, 2019. 88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street was built in 1844 by Peter Stuyvesant, a direct descendant of the last Dutch Governor of New Amsterdam, and in the twentieth century became the home and studio of artist Willem de Kooning. At that time, the building was both the center of the Tenth Street artist enclave that defined mid-twentieth century American art, and the place where de Kooning would complete some of his most important work.



88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street

We have since uncovered additional information documenting 88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street as the home of Selma Hortense Burke, the trailblazing African American woman who was one of the greatest American sculptors of the twentieth century. A key figure of the Harlem Renaissance, she lived here during a critical period of her career, when she created her most renowned artwork, a universally-recognized image of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and founded one of her acclaimed schools for artists and sculptors — an extreme rarity for Black, female artists at the time.



Selma Hortense Burke with her portrait bust of Booker T. Washington, 1930s. [Smithsonian Archive of American Art](#).

“One of the most notable sculptors of the twentieth century” according to the [National Women’s History Museum](#), the celebrated artist, educator, and self-described “people’s sculptor” Selma Hortense Burke lived and worked at 88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street from 1944 until at least 1949, according to New York City directories. While here, Burke completed “The Four Freedoms,” a 2 ½ by 3 ½ foot relief plaque commemorating President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which was used as a model for his image on the U.S. dime coin. Burke is celebrated for her lifelong commitment to the art of sculpture and to art education, for her highly regarded portrayals of towering African American figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Booker T. Washington, and Mary McLeod Bethune, for her significance in the Harlem Renaissance, for her unabashed drawing upon African models for her art, and for achieving success as a Black woman sculptor at a time when few female or Black artists, and even fewer Black female artists, were able to achieve any success or recognition in the United States.

Selma Hortense Burke was born in Mooresville, North Carolina on December 31, 1900. Her father, Neal Burke, was a minister, and her mother, Mary Jackson Burke, was a homemaker and teacher. At a young age, Burke developed an interest in sculpture, and would fashion figures out of clay from the riverbank. She was surrounded by sculptural objects growing up, which had come from her father’s and uncles’ travels in Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe. As reported in Lisa E. Farrington’s book *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*, in 1970 Burke stated: “I have known African art all of my life...At a time when this sculpture was misunderstood and laughed at, my family had the attitude that these were beautiful objects.”

Burke obtained a degree as a registered nurse in 1924, and continued her education at the Women’s Medical College in Philadelphia. Her subsequent work in the field offered her financial security throughout the Great Depression. Burke moved to New York City in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, and began working as an artist’s model and studying at Sarah Lawrence College. She received a Boehler Foundation Fellowship in the 1930s, which gave her the opportunity to study in Europe with sculptor Aristide Maillol and painter Henri Matisse.

Upon her return to New York City, Burke taught sculpture at the Work Progress Administration-sponsored Harlem Community Art Center, one of the most influential art centers to emerge during the Harlem Renaissance. At the time, the Center was directed by the highly notable sculptor Augusta Savage.

Also during the 1930s, Burke met and started a relationship with the renowned Harlem Renaissance author Claude McKay, who introduced Burke to many of the most significant writers and artists of the period (there is some discrepancy among different sources about whether the couple married or not). Meanwhile, Burke received a scholarship to study art at Columbia University, from which she graduated in 1941.

When the United States entered World War II, Burke was one of the first African American women to enlist in the Navy, working as a truck driver until an injury prevented her from continuing. Shortly after, Burke joined a competition — alternately described as coordinated by the Section of Fine Arts, the District Commissioners, or the Commission on Fine Arts — to create a profile portrait of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In 1943, Burke's portrait won, and she was commissioned to produce a relief plaque of the President. She then had two sittings to sketch him in person, and completed the plaque while living at 88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street.



[Selma Hortense Burke with her relief plaque of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. National Museum of the U.S. Navy via the Government and Heritage Library of the State Library of North Carolina.](#)

In March 1945, as Burke remained at 88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street, Eleanor Roosevelt visited her

studio to approve the final design. When the First Lady commented on President Roosevelt's youthful appearance, Farrington cites that Burke responded: "I have not done it for today, but for tomorrow and tomorrow. Five hundred years from now America and all the world will want to look at our president, not as he was for the few months before he died, but as we saw him for most of the time he was with us — strong, so full of life." The plaque was dedicated following Roosevelt's death, on September 24, 1945 at



[U.S. Dime Coin, 2017.](#)



[Selma Hortense Burke with sculpture of mother and child, by Charles "Teeny" Harris, c. 1960-1975. Carnegie Museum of Art.](#)

the Recorder of Deeds Building in Washington, D.C. "The Four Freedoms" was unveiled by Frederick Weaver, Frederick Douglass' grandson, and President Harry S. Truman spoke at the event. While U.S. Mint Chief Engraver John Sinnock is credited with Roosevelt's image on the U.S. dime coin, Burke's relief plaque is widely accepted as the model and original version. Throughout her life, Burke herself insisted that her design was plagiarized on the dime coin.

A 1945 article in *Negro Digest* adds further description of Burke's life at her 88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street home and studio, stating: "She lives energetically and with gaiety, rising at 6 a.m.

to work 'when my mind is rested.'" Significantly, Burke established the Selma Burke School of Sculpture (additionally cited as the Selma Burke Art School) while living here in 1946, as recorded in an article published that year in *Headlines and Pictures* (Chicago, Illinois). At this time, the school was located at 67 West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street (demolished). According to *Headlines and Pictures*, Burke had previously "held drawing classes in her own studio on East Tenth Street."

In 1949, while Burke was still living at 88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street, she married architect Herman Kobbe. The couple then moved to Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and Burke opened the Selma Burke Art Center in Pittsburgh, which operated from 1968 until 1981. While here, Burke also worked for the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Throughout these years, Burke completed a number of sculptural projects, including *Mother and Child* (1968) and *Big Mama* (1972), which focused on the experience of Black women. Some of her other well-known pieces include *Torso* (1937), *Temptation* (c. 1938), *Untitled (Woman and Child)* (c. 1950, now found in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, *Despair* (1951), *Fallen Angel* (1958), and *Together* (1975, now found in the collection of the Hill House Association). Her final monumental work, an eight-foot tall sculpture of Martin Luther King Jr., which stands in Marshall Park in Charlotte, North Carolina, was dedicated in 1980. Over the course of her career Burke also completed portraits of Booker T. Washington, Duke Ellington, Mary McLeod Bethune (now found in the collection of



[Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Sculpture in Charlotte, North Carolina. Smithsonian American Art Museum via Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina.](#)

the Woodmere Art Museum), and other renowned Black figures. Her work is now found in the collection of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, among other museums and institutions.

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter awarded Burke the Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement award. She also received an Essence Magazine award, and a number of honorary doctorates. Furthermore, Pennsylvania Governor Milton Shapp created Selma Burke Day on July 20, 1975. After a long and profoundly significant career, Burke passed away on August 29, 1995 at the age of 94.

The remarkable and groundbreaking history of Selma Hortense Burke at 88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street gives further basis for the designation of this building as part of a historic district south of Union Square. For the above reasons and all those described in our last letter, we strongly urge you to quickly move ahead with consideration of landmark designation of 88 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street.

Sincerely,



Andrew Berman  
Executive Director

cc: Borough President Gale Brewer  
City Council Speaker Corey Johnson  
City Councilmember Carlina Rivera  
Senator Brad Hoylman  
Assemblymember Deborah Glick  
Community Board 3, Manhattan  
Historic Districts Council  
NY Landmarks Conservancy

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