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Malvina Hoffman, *Martinique Woman*

Dominic Carter: The polished marble of this woman's face glistens as if she's standing in the noonday sun. She looks out at the world: a powerful, self-possessed woman whose glance could stop us in our tracks. Walk around the piece and note the bold forms and rough surface of the hair.

The sculptor Malvina Hoffman was raised in New York City. Like many artists of her generation, she went to Paris, where she studied under the great French sculptor Auguste Rodin. Her subjects became more varied after she traveled to Africa in 1926. All we know about the woman portrayed is that she's from the Caribbean island of Martinique, where Hoffman also visited.

The bust was enthusiastically received when it was first exhibited in the 1920s, says curator Terry Carbone.

Terry Carbone: For an audience in the early twentieth century, this was seen as an almost reverential act, in observing and capturing in such a beautiful form a figure of a black woman.

Dominic Carter: Our response to a work of art often depends on what we know: who did it, when it was done, what the artist thought about the world. Malvina Hoffman was a European American from New York. She would become best known for sculptural works that sought to represent the world's racial and ethnic groups for the Field Museum in Chicago. Would you think differently about this bust if Hoffman had been an African American—or a man? For Victoria Missick, a high school teacher here in Brooklyn, probably not.

Victoria Missick: Malvina's got some good thing going there. She's really captured a beautiful image of an African woman. It seems so interesting to me that in 1920 she captured an image that you probably could see walking down the street, in Brooklyn. My students wear their hair like this.