

Sojourner Truth statue inspires artist

Sculptor Nash 'felt a deep connection to her story'

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AKRON, Ohio – The sculptor who spent years bringing the bronze, life-sized Sojourner Truth statue to life in downtown Akron, Ohio, is the city's own Woodrow Nash.

The new, 6-foot statue of the legendary former slave, abolitionist and suffragist is the focal point of Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza, unveiled in late May at the site of the Old Stone Church, where Truth gave her historic "Ain't I a Woman?" speech exactly 173 years earlier on May 29, 1851. Her speech, which she gave during the Ohio Women's Rights Convention, challenged the exclusion of women of color from the women's rights movement.

Who is Woodrow Nash, and how did he become involved with this historic project honoring Truth's legacy?

Nash, 75, began his artistic trajectory in Akron, leading him to become an internationally renowned artist whose work is sought after by galleries, art collectors and African American celebrities.

He was always artistically inclined and enjoyed drawing throughout his school years. To this day, he sees people from grade school who remind him that he taught them how to draw Popeye.

He studied art for three years at the University of Akron before getting a two-year degree in commercial art at Pels School of Art in New York. He lived in New York for nearly 15 years, starting as a graphic designer for advertising agencies.

"I found it difficult to work in those agencies because it's such high pressure and you never really win your position," he said. "You're only as good as your last assignment."

He later became a freelance artist doing fashion illustration and designing and illustrating album covers for jazz greats such as Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Cat Anderson and Arnett Cobb.



Artist Woodrow Nash's work is sought after by galleries, art collectors and African American celebrities. His style combines African tradition with European art nouveau. PHOTOS BY MATTHEW BROWN/AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

In the 1980s, Nash returned to Akron, where he met and married his wife, Wanda. He worked as a technical illustrator at Goodyear Aerospace Corporation and as an illustrator for American Greetings Corporation.

In 1991, the Nashes moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where he worked as a graphic designer in advertising, but his career changed after the couple visited the annual Art Fair on the Square in Madison. At the time, Nash didn't know anything about art fairs but saw lots of people buying art.

"That was a defining moment for me, and I said, 'Well I can do this,'" Nash said, telling his wife: "Next year, I'm gonna be in the show."

Nash decided to create 3D work for the art fair, even though he hadn't done sculpture since his college days, where he had focused mainly on painting.

At an art show near Madison, a group of Black people asked him where the Black art was. That was the beginning of a big switch in Nash's artistic career.

"I started putting images of Black people on my vases, and that caused quite a sensation," he said. "People were just interested in it."

The work Nash does now, African



The bronze statue of Sojourner Truth stands tall at the Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza in Akron, Ohio.

nouveau art, evolved from that moment. His style combines African tradition with European art nouveau, a stylized, sensuous way of painting and sculpting.

Nash says clay talks to him. As he created the Sojourner Truth sculpture, he worked to bring to life her spirit of resilience, bravery and unwavering pursuit of justice.

"As I sculpted, I felt a deep connection to her story, molding each feature to capture both her strength and the soft-

ness of her humanity," Nash reflected on his website.

Truth, born into slavery as Isabella Baumfree, changed her name after freedom, becoming an abolitionist and traveling preacher. She was illiterate but had a great command of scripture from memory.

"Her name was who she was. She was traveling, she was sojourning and she was speaking the truth, truth to power," Nash said.

As people enter the Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza from the southwest, they see Truth's historic figure facing them. She's holding a Bible and wearing a shawl, dress, bonnet and spectacles.

Nash began work on the statue in 2019 at his production studio, where he works with clay, firing, molds and glazing. Creating the clay Truth sculpture, Nash started with the legs. Once they were stable, he added the torso, then the face, arms and hands.

Next, he added Truth's clothing drapery. He created that by rolling clay over cheesecloth and draping it. Once it's fired, the clay matures and the cheesecloth burns out.

The clay parts were then cut into sections to create numerous molds for Studio Foundry of Cleveland to cast in bronze for the finished statue.

Nash was originally tapped by Faye Dambrot of the Women's History Project of the Akron Area to create a Sojourner Truth statue in the 1990s. He created a small prototype at the time, but that project came to a halt after Dambrot died. Years later, Nash was commissioned to create the statue in 2019 by the Sojourner Truth Project, which was formed from the Summit Suffrage Centennial Committee to honor Truth's legacy.

At the Sojourner Truth Legacy Plaza, Truth's statue is surrounded by her inspiring quotes as well as four pillars proclaiming the words faith, activism, power and identity.

Nash wants those who visit the Sojourner Truth statue to know how difficult her work was traveling and fighting for equal rights.

"I want the children, the youth, to understand and just not take things for granted," he said.