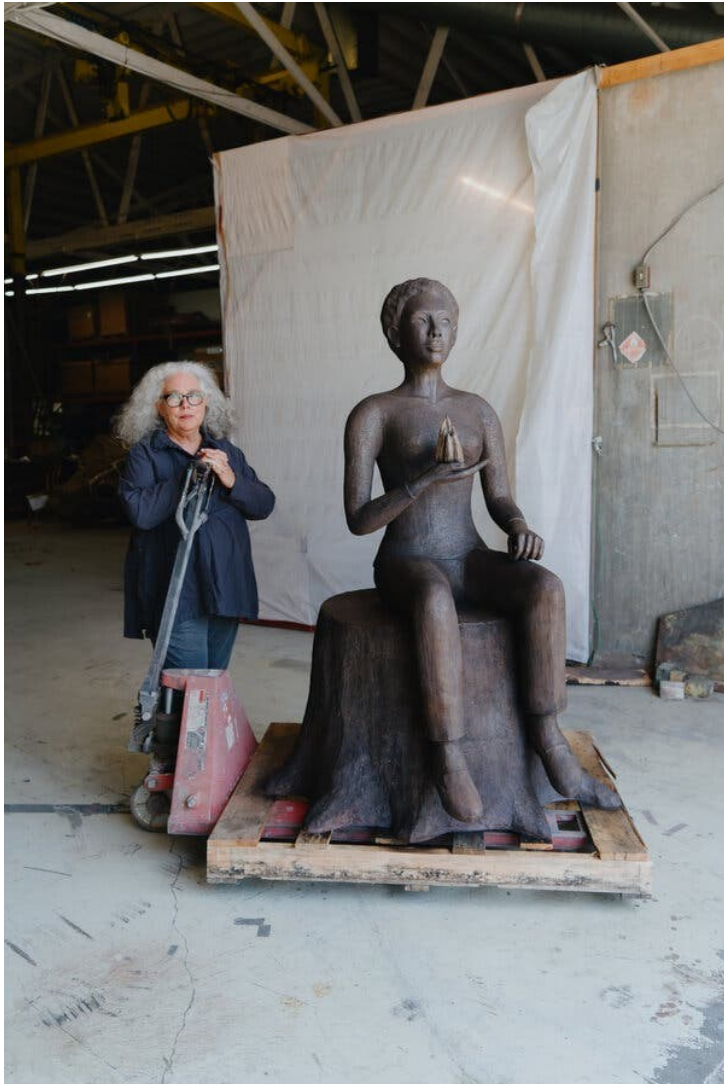


Alison Saar

The New York Times

Lorraine Hansberry Statue to Be Unveiled in Times Square

A life-size likeness of the pioneering playwright will be unveiled in June as part of a new initiative to honor her legacy.



The artist Alison Saar in Los Angeles with her sculpture of Lorraine Hansberry, which will officially be unveiled next month in Manhattan. Credit...Nolwen Cifuentes for The New York Times



By Sarah Bahr
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When the Los Angeles-based artist Alison Saar was commissioned a little over four years ago to sculpt a statue of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, she had just one thought: “Am I the right person for the job?”

“I don’t really work with likenesses,” said Saar, 66, whose artwork focuses on the African diaspora and Black female identity. “But they said, ‘No, no, we want it to be more of a portrait of her passion and who she was beyond a playwright.’”

The request had come from Lynn Nottage, the two-time Pulitzer-winning playwright, as part of an initiative she was developing with Julia Jordan, the executive director of the Lilly Awards, which recognize the work of women in theater. The Lorraine Hansberry Initiative was designed to honor Hansberry, who was the first Black woman to have a show produced on Broadway.

“She’s just part of my foundational DNA as an artist,” Nottage said in a phone interview on Wednesday. “Throughout my career, if I needed to look to structure, or storytelling, or inspiration, I could go to ‘A Raisin in the Sun,’ this perfect piece of literature.”

The statue, a life-size likeness of Hansberry surrounded by five movable bronze chairs that represent aspects of her life, and, Saar said, invites people “to sit and think with her,” will be unveiled in Times Square on June 9. The event will include performances and remarks from Nottage and Hansberry’s 99-year-old older sister, Mamie Hansberry. It will remain in Times Square through June 12, and then begin a tour of the country over the next year or so on its way to its permanent home in Chicago, Hansberry’s birthplace.



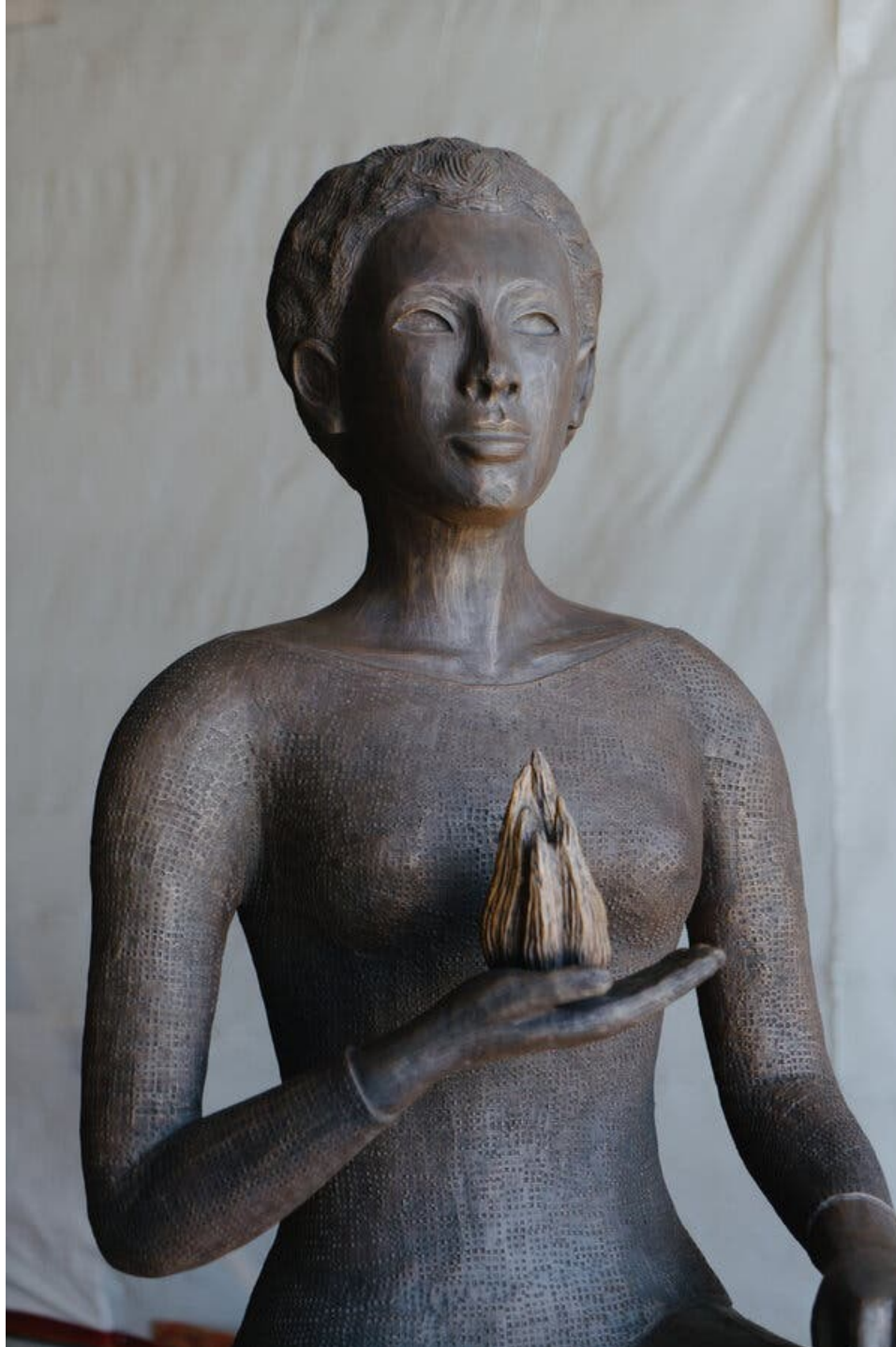
Lorraine Hansberry in 1959, the year she made history when she became the first Black woman to have a play reach Broadway. Credit...David Attie/Getty Images

But, Nottage said, they also wanted a more forward-looking way to honor Hansberry, leading to the initiative's second prong: A scholarship to cover the living expenses for two female or nonbinary graduate student writers of color who create for the stage, television or film. Beginning next year, the \$2.5 million scholarship fund will give its first recipients \$25,000 per year, generally for up to three years — the typical length of a graduate program. (LaTanya Richardson Jackson, who was nominated for a Tony Award for her role as Lena Younger in the 2014 Broadway revival of "Raisin," the Dramatists Guild and the National Endowment for the Arts are among the initial donors.)

“So many graduate programs for writers at elite institutions like Juilliard, Yale and Brown now offer free tuition,” Nottage said, “but you see people not taking a place because they can’t afford to take three years off to pay for rent, computers, food and travel, which could be, on average, anywhere from \$15,000 to \$35,000 per year.”

“It would’ve made a huge difference for me,” Nottage said of the scholarship fund. “When I was at the Yale School of Drama, one of the actors told me I could get public assistance to pay for groceries and electricity, and when I showed the welfare department in New Haven my financial aid package — I was doing work-study — they were like, ‘Oh, yeah, you’re living below the poverty line.’”

Hansberry, who was just 34 when she died of pancreatic cancer in 1965, is best known for “Raisin,” a semi-autobiographical family drama that tells the story of an African American family living under racial segregation on the South Side of Chicago. The play, which opened on Broadway in 1959 with Sidney Poitier in the cast, would go on to win the New York Drama Critics’ Circle award for best play, making Hansberry, at 29, the youngest American and first Black recipient of the award.



The life-size statue shows Hansberry holding a flame. It will be surrounded by five movable bronze chairs that represent aspects of her life and work. Credit...Nolwen Cifuentes for The New York Times

Hansberry was also active in political and social movements, including the fight for civil rights, regularly writing articles about racial, economic and gender inequality for the Black newspaper Freedom. She also wrote letters signed “L.H.N.” or “L.N.” — for Lorraine Hansberry Nemiroff (her husband’s last name) — to The Ladder, a monthly national lesbian publication. In those letters, she wrestled with issues she faced as a lesbian in a heterosexual marriage and the pressure on some lesbians to conform to a more feminine dress code.

Her older sister, Mamie, recalls Lorraine being bookish from a young age. Their parents allowed them to sit out on the sun porch during visits from prominent individuals, such as the poet Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson, the singer, actor and activist. “Daddy wanted us to be able to listen to some of the distinguished people who came by the house,” she said.

Lorraine Hansberry would write letters to congressmen — “My mother would find them when she was cleaning her room,” Mamie Hansberry said. “She was free to write to anyone,” Mamie said, “and they would answer!”

It is that spirit that Nottage and Jordan said they hope to cultivate in the next generation of playwrights. The statue’s tour will begin with stops at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem (June 13-18) and Brooklyn Bridge Park (June 23-29) before traveling to cities like Atlanta, Detroit and Los Angeles. It is also set to make stops at historically Black colleges and universities, including Spelman College in Atlanta and Howard University in Washington.

Jordan said the initiative will also work with local theaters and artists to present Hansberry’s work, as well as the work of contemporary writers of color, in conjunction with the sculpture’s placement. New 42, the nonprofit organization behind the New Victory Theater, has also created a resource guide to teach middle- and high-school students about Hansberry and “Raisin,” which will be free for schools and organizations to use.

“I do think that if Hansberry had continued to write and develop as an activist, one of the things she would’ve done was amplified voices of other women of color,” Nottage said.

Jordan said she and Nottage had already raised \$2.2 million of their \$3.5 million goal for the statue construction costs, tour and scholarship fund. By 2025, Jordan said, they expect to support a total of six playwrights per year.

“Everyone wants to produce these women,” Nottage said. “But we want to make sure people are prepared — that they’re secure in their voices and secure in their craft — so they don’t fail when they get that opportunity.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/arts/design/lorraine-hansberry-statue-times-square.html>