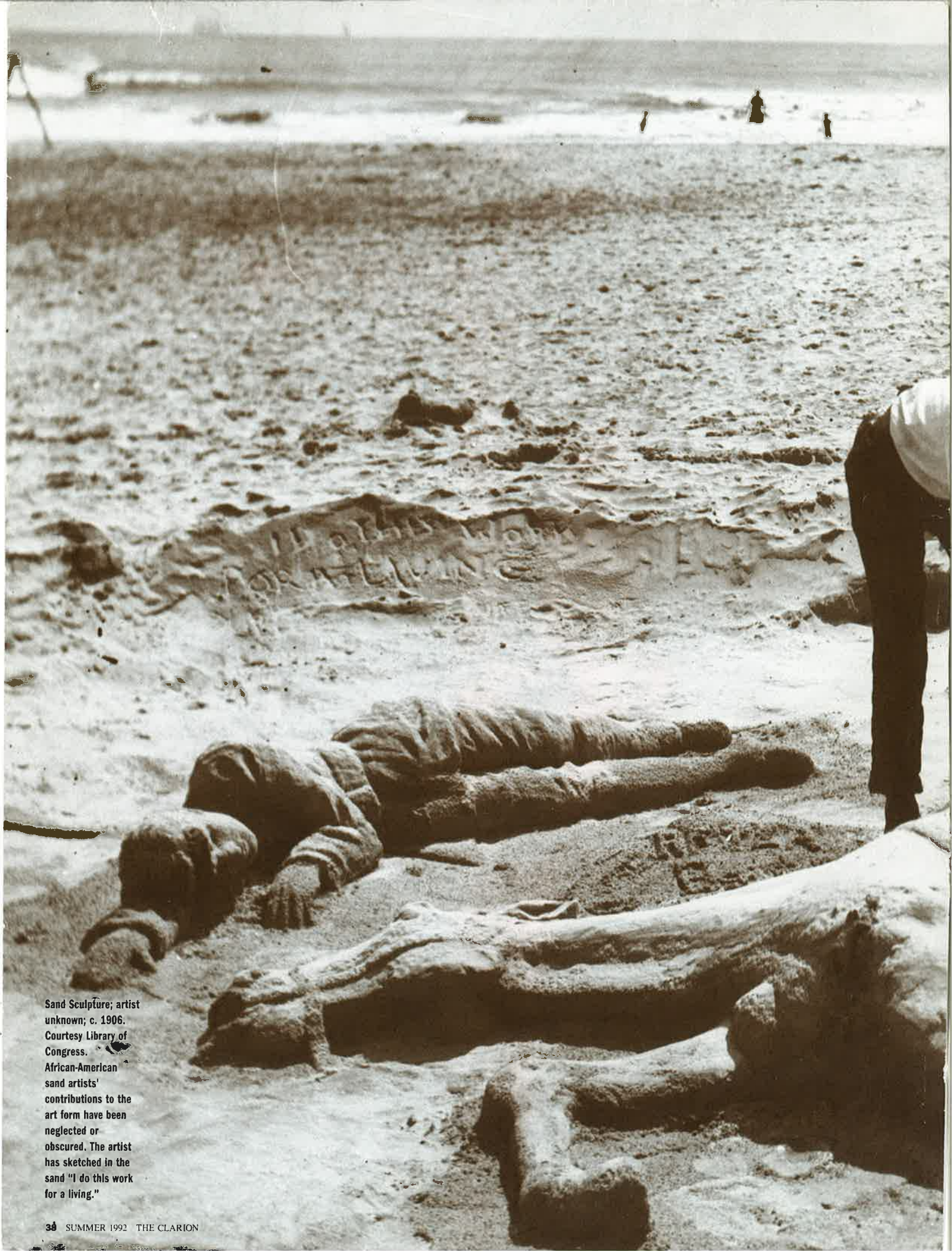
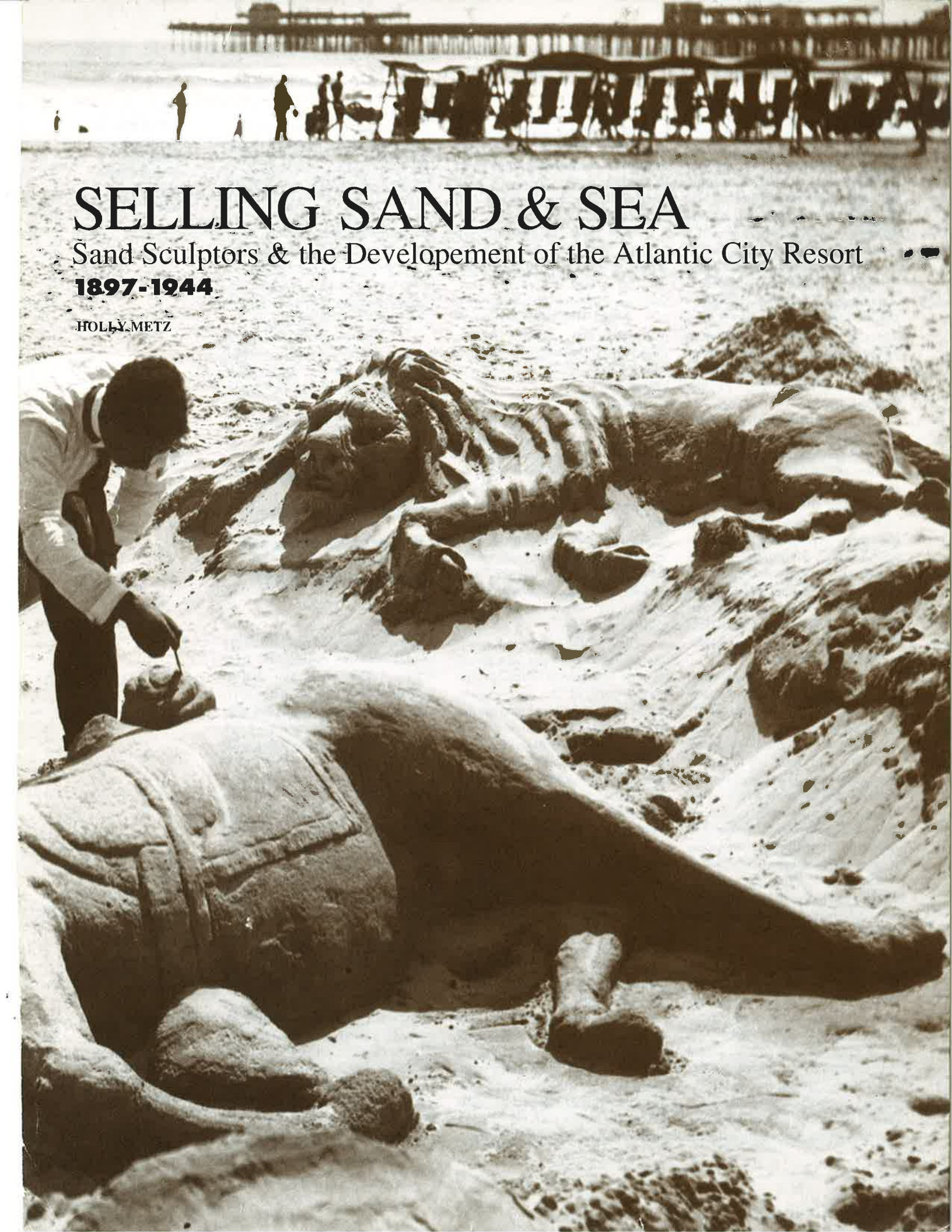


Sand Sculpture; artist unknown; c. 1906. Courtesy Library of Congress. African-American sand artists' contributions to the art form have been neglected or obscured. The artist has sketched in the sand "I do this work for a living."



SELLING SAND & SEA

Sand Sculptors & the Developement of the Atlantic City Resort

1897-1944

HOLLY METZ

Built on a sand bar, Atlantic City, New Jersey was transformed during the 1850s and succeeding years into a resort capable of drawing millions of visitors annually. In addition to advertising the city's spectacular natural resources, boosters publicized its original man-made attractions, including independent beachfront sand sculptors. Newspaper articles, hotel brochures, and picture postcards featured the sand artists so regularly that tourists came to associate this attraction with Atlantic City, the "Playground of the World."[1]

Old postcards and lantern slides capture ephemeral sculpted images of lovers and sea nymphs, touring cars and battle scenes, presidents and suffragettes. For half a century (1897-1944), free-lance sand artists created these scenes out of sand and sea water, "selling" the resort's natural resources to tourists, who rewarded the skilled craftsmen with their pocket money. (The artists could not, of course, literally sell their works, but instead sold their skills, regularly creating new scenes to delight and entertain.)

Who were these artists working alongside the city's famed boardwalk? How did they learn their craft? What techniques did they use? And what was their relationship to the resort? Last year, I set out to answer these questions. By researching oral histories, and examining back issues of local newspapers, brochures, postcards, and photographs, I ventured to document the aesthetic development of this nearly-vanished New Jersey art form, and to affirm the sculptors' contribution to five decades of Atlantic City's recreation history, which includes the use of their work to promote area tourism.

Sand sculpture was, from the very beginning, an art form tied symbiotically to the fortunes of this burgeoning resort town. Sand artist Philip McCord's 1897 "debut" on the Atlantic City beachfront, hailed by the press as "a sensation," followed the opening of the resort's expansive new boardwalk by one year.[2] On the ocean side of the distinctive 40-foot-wide elevated promenade, the artist sculpted a compacted dune, drawing to the modern steel railings thousands of strolling visitors eager to watch ". . . the figure grow under the artist's touch," to see ". . . a lifelike thing emerge from a pile of shapeless sand."[3]

Not much is known about McCord, but he must have been very skilled to draw such attention from the frenetic land side of the boardwalk, described by one writer as a ". . . wonderful kaleidoscope of merry-go-rounds, haunted forests, shell bazaars, bath houses, swimming pools, shooting galleries and bric-a-brac stores."[4]

According to historian Charles Funnell, Atlantic City at the turn of the century – and particularly its boardwalk – was a place where performances and exhibitions were *expected*. Conventioneers from professional and fraternal organizations, as well as lower-middle-class vacationers from Philadelphia, New York, Delaware, and beyond, sought diversions that were uniquely both natural and urbane. For these pleasures, resort visitors freely parted with spare change.[5]

Sand art flourished in this setting. Philip McCord was soon joined by other enterprising sculptors, who worked most of the year shaping beach sand into figures and scenes that represented current interests and events. A January, 1900 article on the front page of the *Sunday Gazette* reports a savvy beachfront "sand man" who, upon recognizing the daughter of former president Ulysses Grant, immediately began molding a bust of the retired general. The artist was rewarded with a "greenback" after he also sculpted a scene he called *Cast Up By the Sea* – a mother with seaswept hair, clasping a baby in her arms. Shipwrecks were not uncommon at the turn of the century, so the image of a marooned mother and child was especially poignant for visitors.[6] (See figure 1.)

Enthusiastic reviews of sand art appeared regularly on the front pages of Atlantic City's local papers, especially during the resort's early years, but the sculptors often went unnamed. Although dozens of artists worked the beach over the years, I have been able to identify just eight, listed here with the approximate dates of their activity at Atlantic City: Philip McCord (1897), James J. Taylor (1900-1909), Owen Golden (1907-), Charles A. Ross (1912-), Dominick Spagnola (1909-1944), Lorenz Harres (1914-), George Spetsas (-1944), and John Paul Jones (around 1937-1944). For some of these artists, visual and biographical documentation is limited. I will focus here on artists for whom I have been able to establish some visual or personal record.

The nameless artist featured in the *Gazette*, for example, may have been James J. Taylor, often labelled ". . . the originator of pictures in sand," and certainly one of the first depicted on a picture postcard – a European invention "naturalized" by an Atlantic City hotelier in 1895. Within a few years, Atlantic City headlines would declare that over six million postcards were mailed from the resort alone.[7] A 1900 postcard, printed by the Detroit Photographic Company, shows a "sand man" dressed in dark suit and derby hat at work on several sculptures, including one of a mother and child. Six years later, this suited sculptor was identified as Taylor via the artist's own set of postcards. (See figures 2-4.)

A sand sculpture could take as little as a few days, an average of two weeks, and as much as three months.

Taylor's souvenirs exhibit skillfully-modelled cupids, matrons gathered for tea, and three-dimensional religious parables, including one entitled *Suffer Little Children To Come Unto Me*. Often the artist sketched into the sand "Remember the Worker," an expression adopted by generations of self-employed Atlantic City sand artists. "The sand artist has a notice out that 'every little bit helps' – his way of requesting you contribute a dime or two to help him get a living," one visitor wrote a friend in 1912, on the back of a sand art postcard. "They are quite clev-

FIGURE 1
CAST UP BY THE SEA; artist unknown; original photo postcard; c. 1906. Courtesy Robert Foster

FIGURE 2
CAST UP BY THE SEA; Jas. J. Taylor; c. 1906. Courtesy Robert Foster

FIGURE 3
LOVE'S LABOR; Jas. J. Taylor; c. 1906. Courtesy Robert Foster
After this sculpture appeared on the beach, an *Atlantic City Press* columnist wrote: "It is an artistic portrayal of several Dan Cupids wasting their efforts on unrequited love, and attracts merited attention."

er," she continued, ". . . and I think he gets the living."[8]

Local news articles indicate sand artists were primarily independent operators who chose their own subject matter, although they sometimes scratched out advertisements in the sand for convention sponsors, placing the slogans alongside their sculptures. Eventually the city decided these "sand advertisements" were unbecoming and banned them, along with the modelling of "clotheless figures."[9] Later, religious figures were also banned (figure 5). One old postcard shows a work of sand art contracted by a city entrepreneur. In 1907, former circus showman Frank Hubin, a self-proclaimed "postal card king" and manager of a boardwalk menagerie called "Roving Frank's Gypsy Camp," commissioned James Taylor to sculpt the figure of an elk in sand, along with the fraternal order's greeting. The resulting postcard declares the "original idea" was conceived by Hubin. (See figure 6.) More than 8,000 Elks packed into the resort for two weeks in July, buying countless souvenir postcards, along with decorated napkins and stationery enhanced with Elk insignia. Hubin, who was also an officer in the Elk's Atlantic Lodge, campaigned the following year to bring the free-spending conventioneers back to the resort, distributing thousands of sand art Elk cards at the brotherhood's Dallas convention.[10]

Although Taylor's work is visually well-documented through postcards, little is known about his personal life or artistic training. An art education would likely be mentioned by status-conscious reporters, who regularly extolled the education and social standing of professionals visiting the resort. A newsclipping from 1909 reports the artist was persuaded by a booster from nearby Asbury Park to leave Atlantic City, and to work for a salary. Taylor was later lured to Long Beach, California, where his sand art was exhibited "under canvas." The public was said to ". . . gladly pay admission to view the work."[11]

The execution of a patron's "original idea" could militate against Taylor's classification as a folk artist, if one considers folk art to be part of

a consistent aesthetic tradition in which the artists *alone* dictate how, what, and when they create. Wrestling with definitions, however, would subsume this article and its purpose – to document Atlantic City sand art's 50-year aesthetic development, and to affirm the sculptors' contribution to the resort's history. Postcards demonstrate that Taylor's Elk sculpture was aesthetically consistent with his non-commissioned works, which consisted of both free-form sculptures and bas-relief figures sculpted into slanted embankments. Moreover, his approach to materials was part of a tradition sustained by subsequent generations of beachfront artists – sculptors who habitually described themselves as self-taught, telling reporters they learned the craft by imitating unrelated practitioners or by working alongside kin.[12]

Newspaper reports reveal that sand art took two forms: sand modelling (sculpture) and sand sketching. The latter was often practiced by local boys, some younger than 12 years old. As early as 1902, *Atlantic City Press* articles report both black and white youths sketching "photographs" with their hand-made "sharp-pointed sticks." Working ". . . where there [was] likely to be the greatest crowd," the young artists ". . . applied their stick and their wits with their drawing abilities" to a smooth patch of sand. In about half an hour the young artists produced ". . . a number of sketches that would do credit to a caricaturist," including likenesses of President Teddy Roosevelt, Admiral George Dewey, William Penn, and Britain's King Edward. Although reporters generally praised the best of these, their highest admiration was reserved for the sand modeler, ". . . an artist in his line, for few can excel his work."[13]

Expert sand sculptors understood the importance of creating a densely-packed pile of sand to work with, for if done incorrectly, the form would collapse during carving. Once compacted, the higher grades of sand found on Atlantic City's beaches would dry rock hard and stand for months, according to the sand artists.[14] "We would build a big sand platform, sometimes flat, sometimes at different angles . . . it all depended

THE SAND ARTIST AT WORK ON THE BEACH, ATLANTIC CITY, N. J.

FIGURE 4
AFTERNOON TEA; Jas. J. Taylor; c. 1906. Courtesy Robert Foster

FIGURE 5
Sand Modelling; artist unknown; Detroit Publishing Co.; c. 1908. Courtesy Robert Foster
According to a 1937 *Time* magazine article, religious figures were banned from the beach around 1920, "when a colored life-size crucifixion remained intact after a rainstorm and such throngs of the pious came to kneel and pray before it that bathers were inconvenienced."

FIGURE 6
Elk Modelled in Sand; James J. Taylor; Atlantic City, NJ; c. 1907; Frank B. Hubin's Big Post Card Store. Courtesy Robert Foster

on what scene or subject we were going to make. We'd pack the sand real hard, using sea water to constantly wet it down to just the right degree of firmness," veteran sand artist Dominick Spagnola told an interviewer in 1965.[15]

Born in Calabria, Italy in 1897, Spagnola began sculpting soon after he arrived in Atlantic City – sometime during Teddy Roosevelt's 1901-1909 administration, he said. He reportedly skipped grade school classes to work on the beach, usually assisted by his brothers Tony and Frank. Tony was responsible for clearing the chosen location – after 1909, a prime spot next to Young's Million Dollar Pier at Arkansas Avenue – and for keeping the sand wet while the sculpture was in progress. Several early postcards of sand artists show their assistants in the background, hauling buckets of water to the site.

African-American sculptors regularly worked on Atlantic City's beaches.

According to Dominick, a sculpture could take ". . . as little as a few days, an average of two weeks, and much as three months . . . depending on their size and complexity." Dominick occasionally sculpted alone, but more often he worked alongside Frank, or with a partner whose name was unfortunately unrecorded. "We would sketch the outline of our subject in the sand roughly, and build up a mound of sand in relief," Dominick said. "Using our hands, and a pointed stick, we would fashion the sculpture, and finishing off the very fine details with a nail-file. Smooth areas would be worked with a paint brush, and always, we would use sea water to make the sand firm."

Although Dominick asserted that ". . . sand artistry was practiced in my native Italy through the centuries," he emigrated at age four, before he could reasonably acquire a working knowledge of traditions established in his former homeland. He probably learned on Atlantic City's beaches; he recalled studying the skillful sculptors who worked along the boardwalk during his youth, including James J. Taylor, and two one-armed artists, one of them African-American.

This one-armed black artist may have been Owen Golden, who is shown, surrounded by sculpted lions, in a photograph that appeared on the front page of the August 12, 1907, *Atlantic City Daily Press*. The caption below advised that "Owen Golden, the one armed sand artist, never attempted this work before this season. The figures he carved out of sand have attracted general attention, and more especially because he can only work with one hand."

Library of Congress images from the period show – and earlier news reports confirm – that African-American sculptors regularly worked on Atlantic City's beaches. (See photograph, pages 38-39.) Yet, in the course of my research, I discovered that the artistic contributions of these sculptors received less and less publicity over the years, and were often deliberately neglected or obscured. Two Atlantic City sand art postcards provide graphic evidence, illuminating significant aspects of the resort's social history, which can only be briefly outlined here.

The 1910 postcard labeled "The Sand Artist, showing Automobile made out of Sand, Atlantic City, N.J.," copyrighted by photographer Herman Becher and printed in Germany, depicts an unnamed African-American artist standing next to the touring car he carved out of a sand embankment (figure 7). The sculptor created a woman driver – considered a novelty at the time – and added props, including fenders, wheels, and a steering wheel, to enhance the illusion. Along the bottom of this scene he created a frieze with witty commentary on ". . . what they call it" – that is, money – which he would like visitors to toss down to him from the railings. A later version of the very same image, credited to Herman Becher but reproduced in the United States (figure 8), shows that the features of this black artist have been re-touched to make him appear Caucasian – a common practice, according to postcard archivists.[16]

The mutually beneficial relationship between sand artists and area promoters – in which the latter used images of the former to draw tourists – would now exclude African-American sculptors. For although Atlantic City ". . . was highly dependent on black labor" in its hotels and restaurants – by 1910, fully 95 percent of the resort work force was African-American – city boosters were ". . . not anxious to advertise the presence of blacks to potential white customers," notes Charles Funnell in his history of Atlantic City. By then, as many as 300,000 visitors per day were pouring into the resort. One scholar asserted the city's white promoters essentially believed the racist adage described by W.E.B. DuBois: "Negroes are servants; servants are Negroes." African-Americans played an important part in building the resort, but by 1915, they were barred from amusement piers, restaurants and hotels (except to work), and could only bathe in one section of the beach, at Missouri Avenue.[17]

Evidence exists of African-American sand artists' continued presence on Atlantic City beaches through 1914. But these photographs were part of one woman's visual diary; they were not for reproduction in city newspapers, brochures or postcards. Lida Hall, described by her chroniclers as ". . . an Atlantic City working woman," photographed the city every day from 1913 through 1925; some of her glass negatives were discovered decades later and published in *Atlantic City Remembered*.[18] One photograph, identified by the author as ". . . the sand sculptor, near Steeplechase Pier, October 23, 1914," shows a black sand artist working on an elaborate display, including sketches of top-hatted men at the railing, several water nymphs, sculptures of Hannibal, Caesar, and King Neptune on his throne, as well as two figures embracing by an overturned boat. Unfortunately, this image cannot be reproduced here, but several postcards showing the same display later carved on Asbury Park beaches, credit the work to the sculptor Lorenz (or Lorentz) Harres. (See

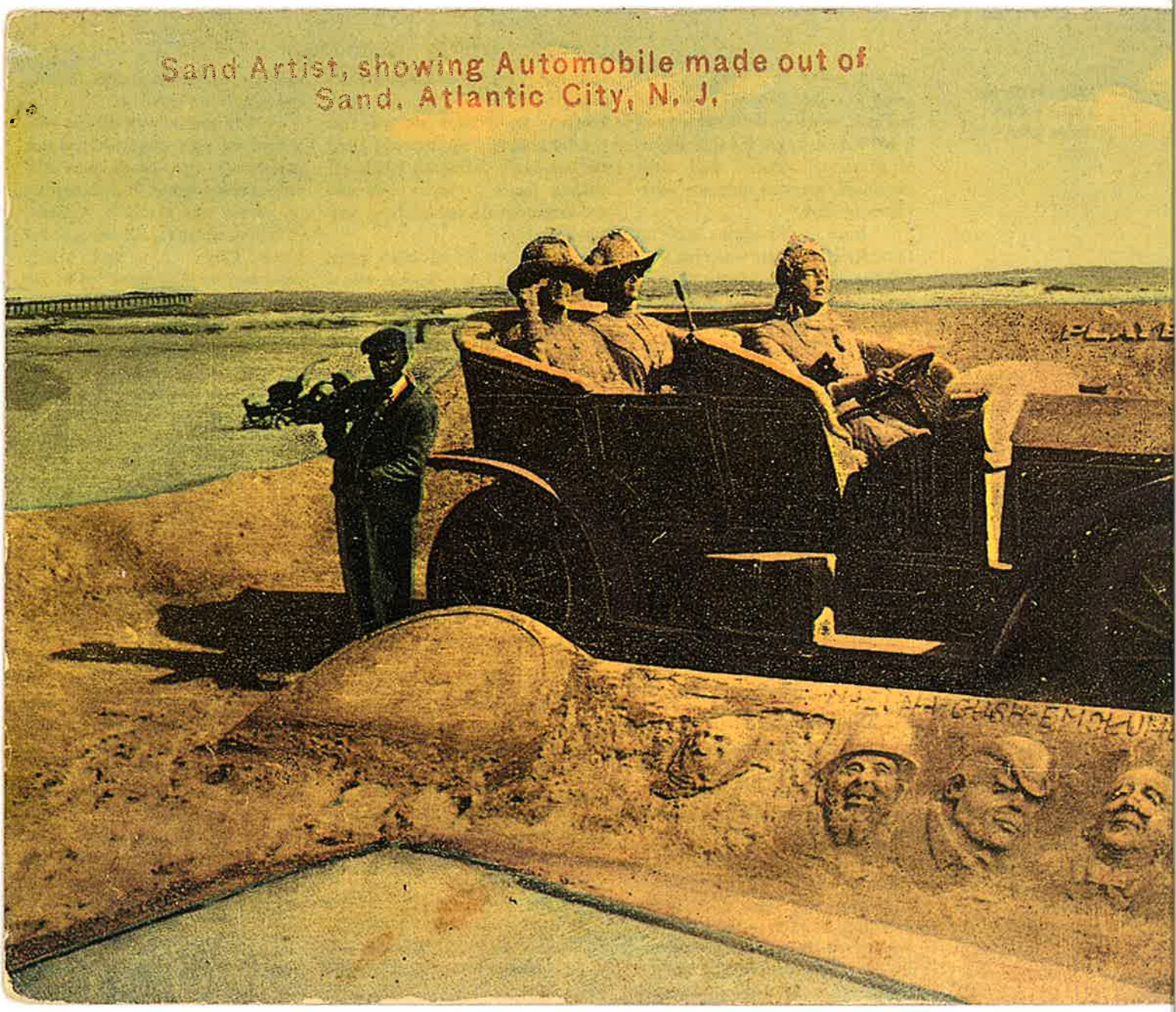


FIGURE 7
Sand Artist Showing Automobile Made Out of Sand; artist unknown; Atlantic City, NJ; 1910; Herman Becher. Courtesy Robert Foster
African-American artist appears in original photo.

figure 9.) Little else is known about this skilled artist, or why he began work in Asbury Park, which also maintained a "color line" that restricted African-American residents' access to resort beaches and amusements.

Atlantic City newspapers and promotional literature continued to selectively feature sand art and their makers over the next 30 years, but with less frequency. Some artists took to coating their finished creations in a wash of cement to protect them from storms, and this allowed for the application of vivid paints. "While we're touching on things colorful, if you haven't seen the Seaside Block sand-artist painting the seat of the crouching Indian's bright red shorts, then you haven't seen anything!" chortled the local gossip columnist. As in earlier days, reporters lavished praised on the most adept artists, like Dominick Spagnola, who made sand sculpting his life's work, and whose creations were said to be ". . . worthy of place in any art gallery in the country."[19]

Although Spagnola sculpted busts of celebrities like Caruso, Valentino, Chaplin, and portraitist William Chase (who told him to "keep it up"), and produced tributes to notables like aviator Charles Lindbergh (figure 10), he was best known for his monumental masterpieces, including the *Lion of Lucerne*, *The Lost Battalion in Argonne Forest* – showing ". . . the terror and the bravery on the faces of gallant warriors awaiting the arrival of their own soldiers or death" – and exquisite re-creations of well-known paintings like Victor Giraud's *Slave Merchant*.[20]

The increasing use of cement coatings made sand art more permanent, but also more static, and city representatives complained that it was becoming less like traditional sand art. Spagnola pioneered the use of lights, drawing night strollers to his displays. Yet most visitors – who could, after all, view live incubator babies or vaudeville acts or aviation displays – still craved performance. Some artists substituted quick paper sketches, offering them to passersby for a few coins. By 1940, its reputation well-established, the resort no longer needed sand art to attract tourists; it assigned a mercantile tax to exhibitors.

In 1944, Atlantic City dropped sand sculptors from its list of attractions. That was the year the resort was radically changed by a hurricane that destroyed the famous Heinz Pier, miles of boardwalk, and the elaborate stands that the sand sculptors had constructed around their work. According to local press reports, Dominick Spagnola's display was overwhelmed by a wall of water, ". . . but at the peak of the flood, the words 'Buy Bonds' remained readable above the tide." The city tore down what remained. Spagnola became a sign painter, and George Spetsas, another sand artist, went on to paint portraits.[21] But for them, and the millions of tourists who marveled at their creations every year, Atlantic City would never be the same. 1944 marked the end of an era – 50 years of selling sand and sea through a popular seaside attraction. ★

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NOTES

1. For example, the lead article in the *Atlantic City Daily Press* [hereafter listed as *ACP*], September 18, 1901, notes that resort hotels, supported by the railroads, hired a major advertising company to place promotional material in 50 newspapers nationwide. Promotional brochures like *Atlantic City, New Jersey: The World's Greatest Resort*, issued by the city's publicity bureau in 1911, highlighted sand sculptures. And writers for *Time* maintained ". . . by 1910, sand

FIGURE 8 (Detail)
Sand Artist Showing Automobile Made Out of Sand; artist unknown; Atlantic City, NJ; c. 1910; Herman Becher. Courtesy Robert Foster
Image of black artist has been retouched to make him appear white.

sculptors . . . had become as much an Atlantic City fixture as its [rolling] chairs, fortune-tellers and Million-Dollar Pier," June 21, 1937, p. 37. See also: *The Ambassador, Atlantic City, New Jersey: The World's Most Beautiful Resort Hotel*, c. 1935, featuring D. Spagnola's sculpture, *The Lion of Lucerne*.

2. Recalled by Frank Butler, "Roving Reporter" column, *ACP*, December 4, 1942. No 1897 reference to McCord could be found in available issues of the *Press*; most were destroyed in a fire.

3. Frank Butler, "Roving Reporter," *ACP*, December 4, 1942.

4. John F. Hall, *The Daily Union History of Atlantic City and County, New Jersey* (Atlantic City, NJ: The Daily Union, 1900), p. 255.

5. See Charles E. Funnell, *By the Beautiful Sea: the Rise and High Times of That Great American Resort, Atlantic City* (New York: Knopf, 1975) 37-47.

6. "An Incident Along The Beach; Mrs. Satoris Saw Her Father's Face Moulded in Sand," *The Sunday Gazette*, January 28, 1900. The comments on shipwrecked figures come from Jake French, in a letter to the author, March 22, 1991; Mr. French worked at the resort for many years with his wife, who rode the Diving Horse off of Steel Pier.

7. A letter, *ACP*, July 21, 1909, asserts ". . . fifteen years ago [1894] sand art was introduced by James J. Taylor." No corroborating evidence has been found. For postcard history, see: *New Jersey: A Guide to its Past and Present*, Federal Writers' Project of the *Works Progress Administration* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), p. 195; and *Atlantic City Press*, July 25, 1908.

8. Postcard of "The Sand Modeler – Atlantic City," postmarked August 30, 1912; collection Robert Foster.

9. See *ACP*, April 5, 1910; May 13, 1910; June 15 and 16, 1910; July 10, 1910. Ordinance No. 27 resulted from local vendors' charge that they were not permitted to erect billboards, so the same should hold true for sand artists. The ordinance established a permit requirement for the artists, to be secured from the mayor. The permits also designated where they could work, thus restricting them to a set location for the first time.

10. See *ACP*, July 16 and 17, 1907; July 14, 1908.

11. "Beach Artists Have a Defender," letter to the editor from H.H. Grant, *ACP*, July 21, 1909.

12. See for example: *ACP*, March 3, 1902; July 5, 1926; also "Sand Sculptors," *Time*, June 21, 1937, pp. 37-38.

13. *Atlantic City Press*, March 3, 1902; June 23, 1902; June 30, 1902; July 13, 1903.

14. See Ted Seibert, *The Art of Sandcastling* (Seattle, Washington: Romar Books, Ltd., 1990), p. 124. Contemporary sand artist Norman Richard Kraus noted in conversation (March 6, 1991) that sculptures have been sprayed with sugar, beer, or soda to hold them.

15. Unless otherwise noted, all information on Dominick Spagnola is from Jack E. Boucher, "Atlantic City's Famed Sand Sculptors," *Atlantic County Historical Society Yearbook 1965-66* (Somers Point, N.J.: Atlantic County Historical Society, 1966), pp. 140-144; William McMahon, "A.C. Boardwalk once studio site for sand artists," *The Press*, November 26, 1989; and Frederick and Mary Fried, *America's Forgotten Folk Arts* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), pp. 180-185.

16. Conversation with Debra Gust, researcher at Curt Teich Postcard Archives, Lake County Museum, Wauconda, Illinois, February 6, 1990. See also: "A Fair Society Motorist," *Atlantic City Press*, August 16, 1911.

17. Funnell, *By the Beautiful Sea*, p. 29. See also: Herbert James Foster, "Institutional Development in the Black Community of Atlantic City, New Jersey: 1850-1930," in *The Black Experience in Southern New Jersey* (Camden, N.J.: Camden County Historical Society, 1985), pp. 33-46. Visitor estimates from *Atlantic City, New Jersey: World's Greatest Resort*, 1911. Black tourists were welcomed one day out of the year, after Labor Day, when the season for whites had ended. See: "Thousands of Happy Colored People Will Crowd Atlantic City To-Day," *ACP*, September 6, 1906: "The darkies were all agog . . . preparing for the greatest of all days to them – the colored excursion. Annually the colored people come here to spend a short period. Merry-go-rounds, theatres, all places of amusement decline to draw the color line this eventful twenty-four hours. . . ."

18. Judith Nina Katz and Chester Perkowski, eds., *Atlantic City Remembered; Thirty-two Postcards Made From Antique Photographs* (Atlantic City, N.J.: Chelsea Press, 1979). Also published by the editors, same press: *An Atlantic City Album*, (1978).

19. Charlotte Johnson, "Cast Up By the Sea," column, *ACP*, July 6, 1933. On Spagnola's work, see: *ACP* July 7, 1926.

20. See notes 15 and 19; also *Time*, June 21, 1937.

21. *ACP*, September 18, 1944. For the artists' new professions, see: *Polk's Atlantic City Directory, 1955-56*. Spagnola's brother Anthony is listed as a news distributor. Dominick Spagnola died in 1977; Spetsas' date of death is unknown.

FIGURE 10
Performer from the Bert Smith Revue with Topical Sand Sculpture: CHARLES A. LINDBERGH AND THE "SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS"; Dominick Spagnola; Atlantic City, NJ; c. 1927. Photograph by Tony Spagnola. Originally published in Frederick and Mary Fried's *America's Forgotten Folk Arts* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). Reprinted with permission of Frederick Fried.

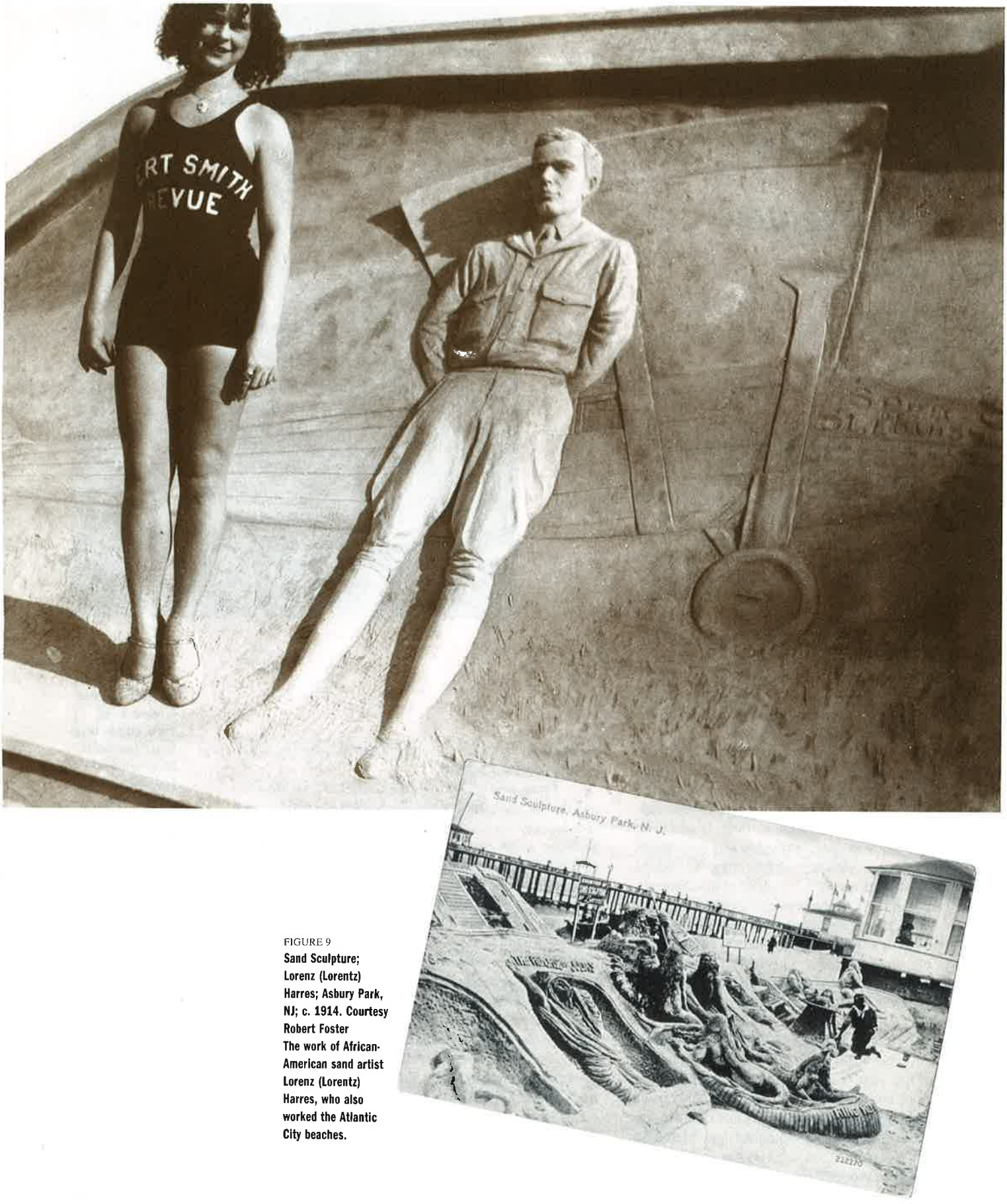

FIGURE 9
Sand Sculpture; Lorenz (Lorentz) Harres; Asbury Park, NJ; c. 1914. Courtesy Robert Foster
The work of African-American sand artist Lorenz (Lorentz) Harres, who also worked the Atlantic City beaches.