

ELIZABETH CATLETT



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18.11.23-16.06.24

If images don't exist, one must create them. At the start of the twentieth century, there were certain absences in the way that African American history was represented in the canon of art history. Some collective experiences lacked images with which people could identify, which were necessary for the idea of community and a shared iconography to emerge.

The portraits created by Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012) are clear, precise, and invariably personal. While some of her works show events from African American history, others depict the people she saw all around her. Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Phillis Wheatley are heroines who gave people courage and guidance. But the artist also portrayed women at work in the fields or at the side of the road—when they are displaying vulnerability or resistance; when they are troubled or relaxed.

Catlett's lithographs, woodcuts, linocuts, and even her small sculptures were relatively easy to exhibit in many different locations and could be purchased at a reasonable price. Making art accessible to everyone remained a fundamentally important principle for Elizabeth Catlett throughout her life.

The exhibition *Elizabeth Catlett* is the first comprehensive survey of the American Mexican artist, presenting works from all phases of her oeuvre.



## Elizabeth Catlett: Radical Empathy

Melanie Anne Herzog

“I have always wanted my art to service my people—to reflect us, to relate to us, to stimulate us, to make us aware of our potential [...]. We have to create an art for liberation and for life.”

—Elizabeth Catlett<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Catlett (April 15, 1915–April 2, 2012) was an artist of the people. Her politically charged and aesthetically compelling prints and sculptures, produced over the course of more than seventy years in the United States and then in Mexico, are visual declarations of the dignity, strength, vulnerability, and resilience of Black women, Mexican working people, and those suffering under oppression throughout the Americas. Her art was propelled by radical empathy—a profound sense of connection and identification with those she felt compelled to serve in her art, recognition that the causes of inequity and oppression are structural rather than individual, and commitment to action to remedy these injustices. With radical empathy at the core of her artistic practice, Elizabeth Catlett embraced printmaking as a democratizing medium accessible to a wide public, chose to utilize sculptural materials that, like her artistic subjects, are grounded in the world, and employed a visual language of form and iconography in her prints and sculptures that would speak meaningfully to her intended Black and Brown audiences.

Born and raised in racially segregated Washington, D.C., Catlett developed an awareness of the oppression of African Americans and a fierce sense of justice at an early age. Her father, who had been a professor of mathematics at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) in Macon County, Alabama, died several months before her birth. Her mother, educated as a teacher, worked as a truant officer in Washington’s public schools to support her three children. Catlett grew up hearing her maternal grandmother’s memories of enslavement, narratives that shaped her early awareness of the suffering and exploitation of Black people in the United States and that laid the groundwork for her lifelong determination to give voice to Black women through her art.

Catlett earned her bachelor’s degree at Howard University in Washington, D.C., home to the first art department

established at a historically Black university, though her school of choice was the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh, which denied her admission due to her race. Her years at Howard (1931–35), with professors including textile designer and painter Lois Mailou Jones, printmaker James Lesesne Wells, and art historians and artists James Herring and James Porter, brought her into the center of then-current debates on modernism, aesthetics, and the sources to which African American artists should look for inspiration. After her graduation, she taught for two years in the public schools in Durham, North Carolina, where she participated with lawyer (later US Supreme Court Justice) Thurgood Marshall in an unsuccessful effort to gain equal pay for Black teachers. She then decided to pursue graduate study with the aim of teaching at the college level.

At the University of Iowa (1938–40), Catlett studied with painter and printmaker Grant Wood, who famously instructed her to take as her artistic subject “something that you know [...] the most about.”<sup>2</sup> She changed her emphasis from painting to sculpture and graduated in 1940 with the university’s first Master of Fine Arts degree earned in sculpture. Her description of her thesis carving, *Negro Mother and Child*, in the written portion of her Master of Fine Arts thesis reveals her attention to the relationship of subject, form, and materials, as well as why her chosen subject mattered to her: “To create a composition of two figures, one smaller than the other, so interlaced as to be expressive of maternity, and so compact as to be suitable to stone, seemed quite a desirable problem. The implications of motherhood, especially Negro motherhood, are quite important to me, as I am a Negro as well as a woman.”<sup>3</sup>

Catlett spent the summer of 1941 in Chicago. This was the height of the “Chicago Renaissance,” a vibrant period of community-based, socially engaged cultural expression by Chicago’s Black visual artists, writers, musicians, and dancers. Their overtly progressive and radical politics and their assertion of the power of “art as a weapon” mark the fundamental difference between the Chicago Renaissance and the earlier “Harlem Renaissance.” Many of these Chicago artists, including Catlett’s first husband, Charles White, were more critical than their Harlem Renaissance predecessors in their portrayals of Black community life as circumscribed by race and class oppression.

After teaching for several years at Dillard University, a historically Black university in New Orleans, Catlett moved

to New York City in 1942. She worked in the studio of sculptor Ossip Zadkine, recently arrived in the United States as a refugee from the Nazi occupation of France. Zadkine introduced her to modernist abstraction, which, she said, enabled her to apprehend more fully the nuanced abstraction of African art as a means to convey meaning through form. While living in New York, she spent a semester teaching sculpture at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in Virginia, while White was painting his mural *Contribution of the Negro People to Democracy* (1942–43) there. The art educator Viktor Lowenfeld, a Jewish refugee from Austria who was teaching at Hampton, offered her new insights into representation of the human form based on the physical sensations of her own body as well as her visual perception of her subject. She said, “I am a Black woman. I use my own body in working. When I am bathing or dressing, I see and feel how my body looks and moves. I never do sculpture from a nude model [...] mostly I watch women.”<sup>4</sup> What she learned from Lowenfeld, she stated, also shaped her subsequent teaching of sculpture.

In New York, Catlett also served as an instructor and the promotions director at the George Washington Carver People’s School, a night school for working people in Harlem. What she learned from her students about how their economic circumstances shaped their lives solidified her awareness of the privileges afforded her by her education and the ways that her middle-class upbringing had circumscribed her understanding of the hardships endured by working-class people and those living in poverty. Deeply moved by what she termed the “cultural hunger” of the women with whom she worked at the Carver School, Catlett sought a Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship to produce, as she wrote in her 1945 fellowship application, a “series of lithographs, paintings, and sculptures on the role of the Negro woman in the fight for democratic rights in the history of America.”<sup>5</sup> During the first year of her fellowship, Catlett made little progress on her project. When her funding was renewed for a second year, she determined that she would have to leave New York to complete this body of work. In 1946, Catlett and White went to Mexico.

Many artists and writers from the United States during the 1930s and 1940s were attracted to Mexico’s vibrant social and political atmosphere and abundant visual culture. In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, muralists adorned the walls of Mexico City’s public spaces,

and printmakers produced widely distributed graphic images that manifested pride in Mexico's Indigenous roots, class consciousness, and nationalistic fervor. As they responded to the Mexican Revolution's promise of a new social order, these muralists and printmakers formulated a visual iconography of *mexicanidad*, or "mexicanness," that defined a collective identity rooted in Mexican history, from the pre-encounter and colonial periods, through the movement for Mexican independence, to the Revolution. While this collective identity underscored Mexico's cultural roots as an amalgam of Indigenous and Spanish heritage, rendered invisible in this formulation of *mestizaje*, or cultural mixing, is African ancestry—what has been termed the *tercera raíz* (third root) of *mexicanidad*.

Catlett responded to this erasure of Blackness with assertions of evident African presence in Mexico dating to the time of the ancient Olmec culture of Mexico's Atlantic Coast—what she termed the "mother culture of Mexico"—that preceded the arrival of the Spanish by at least 2,000 years.<sup>6</sup> Despite the minimal recognition of this "third root" of Mexico's intertwined ancestral lineages, she nonetheless found her own artistic intentions affirmed by revolutionary Mexican artists' social commitment, direct engagement with the experiences of ordinary people, deliberately accessible style and imagery, and consciousness of their centrality in the formation and visual expression of a liberatory Mexican identity. She also said that, while anti-Black racism surely exists in Mexico, she found welcome respite from the unrelenting daily occurrences of racism that she had experienced in the United States.

While she intended to spend a year in Mexico City studying sculpture and working as a guest artist at Mexico's celebrated Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP, People's Printmaking Workshop), Catlett returned to the United States after several months to end her marriage to White, and then went back to Mexico in 1947 to establish permanent residence. Her decision to make her home in Mexico was, in part, a response to the US government's increasingly vicious attacks on leftist artists, intellectuals, and activists following the end of the Second World War. As the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) commenced its Cold War investigations of suspected Communists, anyone who belonged to any group on the Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations (AGLOSO) faced ruthless questioning, loss of employment, and imprisonment. In *Cold War Exiles in Mexico: U.S. Dissidents and the Culture*

*of Critical Resistance*, visual culture scholar Rebecca Schreiber describes the "politically informed transnational and antiracist aesthetic" that was shaped by Mexico's post-Revolutionary leftist artistic community, which included many US artists and writers who relocated to Mexico. This "culture of critical resistance," Schreiber writes, flourished in the political and artistic ambiance of the Taller de Gráfica Popular.<sup>7</sup>

The TGP, founded in 1937, was renowned for its graphic images that functioned as immediate and publicly accessible political commentary on urgent topical issues. In their first decade, the workshop's printmakers produced tens of thousands of images, mostly black-and-white linocuts and some woodcuts and lithographs. These included posters, broadsides, and portfolios that decried fascism, supported labor unions, farmworkers' organizations, national literacy programs, and movements for social justice, and celebrated the historical achievements of the Mexican people. Printed in large quantities on thin, newsprint-quality paper, these prints were intended to reach a mass audience. They were pasted on walls and street corners throughout Mexico City, distributed to the groups whose causes they served, and sold inexpensively. By the end of the 1940s, Catlett was established as a member of the TGP, a dynamic community of artists whose aims aligned with hers. She had fallen in love with one of these artists, Francisco Mora, to whom she was married for nearly fifty-five years, until his death in 2002.

When Catlett arrived in Mexico, members of the TGP were immersed in the production of their celebrated *Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana* (Prints of the Mexican Revolution), a portfolio of eighty-five linocuts with extended narrative titles that honor heroes and martyrs of the Mexican Revolution. Many of these prints were based on well-known photographs. This grand narrative of "people's history" was one model for Catlett's *Negro Woman* print series (1946–47), later retitled *The Black Woman*. Several series of paintings on African American historical subjects by Catlett's friend and fellow artist Jacob Lawrence, most notably his sixty-panel *Migration Series* (1940–41), were another source of inspiration.

Now the best-known part of the project that initially drew her to Mexico Catlett's *The Black Woman* consists of fifteen intimately scaled linocuts in which the historically marginalized achievements of African American heroines and the private realities of the lives of ordinary African

American women demand witness. An insistent first-person declaration of Black female subjectivity echoes throughout the series' narrative, as, commencing with "I am the Black Woman," the prints' titles are a clarion call for empathy. This repetition of "I am" invites viewers, whether Black women or not, to express our identification with her subject.

Photographs produced for the US government's Farm Security Administration and published in Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* of 1941 were sources for elements within several of these prints, emulating the TGP's practice of photographic borrowing.<sup>8</sup> As well, the images of the historical figures Catlett honored in *In Sojourner Truth I fought for the rights of women as well as Blacks*, *In Harriet Tubman I helped hundreds to freedom*, and *In Phillis Wheatley I proved intellectual equality in the midst of slavery* (all 1946) are based on iconic and frequently reproduced engravings. Along with these heroic individuals, Catlett's series also celebrated the courage and resilience of unnamed women and rendered visible the hardships they endured: union organizers, women who hunger for education, working women of the US South whose lives were made immensely more difficult by segregation, and women who faced overcrowded and perilous living conditions in the Northern US cities. The lynching Catlett depicted in *And a Special Fear for My Loved Ones* (1946) is a stark reminder of why so many people migrated from the South to the Northern United States in the early part of the twentieth century, while the concluding image of the series, *My right is a future of equality with other Americans* (1947), offers an image of hope.

The Taller de Gráfica Popular became Catlett's social and artistic home. She readily adopted the workshop's collaborative process, graphic style, and thematic concerns and regularly attended the TGP's Friday-night meetings, when prints produced individually and collaboratively were critiqued by the group. Organizations such as unions and agricultural workers' associations would send representatives to these meetings with requests for graphic images in support of their struggles, and TGP members worked together to produce prints that would most effectively and aesthetically convey the desired message. The prints Catlett made at the TGP illuminate the terrain of Mexican people's lives, the ongoing efforts for civil rights and self-determination for African Americans, resistance to US aggression throughout Latin America, and the

experiences and concerns shared by women across political borders and cultural divides. Skillfully incising linoleum and drawings with grease crayons on lithographic stones, she modeled her subjects with the sureness of line and subtle range of tonality seen in the work of the TGP's most technically accomplished printmakers.

Absorbed in the workings of the TGP, married to a Mexican artist, and raising three sons (Francisco, b. 1947; Juan, b. 1949; and David, b. 1951) in the heart of Mexico City, Catlett was immersed in Mexican life, culture, and leftist politics. She discovered commonalities in the experiences of Mexican and African American working-class women, especially mothers. Her growing recognition of the parallel struggles of oppressed peoples across national boundaries sharpened her consciousness of the intersections of race, gender, and class as they shaped people's lived experiences and fueled her choice of subjects for her prints and sculpture.

When her children were small, Catlett's primary artistic focus was printmaking. When she returned to sculpture in the mid-1950s, she resumed her work in clay at the government-run art school known as "La Esmeralda," where she had studied with Francisco Zúñiga during her initial sojourn in Mexico. Zúñiga's weighty ceramic figures, formed from coils of clay as one would construct a hollow vessel, fused elements of Mexico's longstanding Indigenous ceramics and stone-carving traditions with modernist abstraction. Catlett also studied figurative wood carving with José Luis Ruiz. While her clay, wood, and stone figures from these years resemble those of her teachers, their poses and facial expressions convey an active awareness that contrasts with the languid passivity of her teachers' female figures, and their sturdy legs and firmly planted feet ground them in the world and imply potential movement.

In 1958, Catlett was hired as the first woman professor of sculpture at Mexico's oldest and most prestigious art academy, the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas at Mexico's National Autonomous University. She served as chair of the sculpture area and taught fourth- and fifth-year sculpture from 1959 until 1975. While she understood the allure for her students of formal and conceptual experimentation, Catlett maintained that what her students most needed were technical skills that would enable them to communicate their ideas effectively. "Technique is so important! It's the difference between art and ineptitude," she said. "Because our audiences deserve the best, we must equip

ourselves to give them the very best. You can't make a statement if you can't speak the language."<sup>9</sup> Many of her students became well-known artists in Mexico. Following her retirement from teaching, she maintained a sculpture studio at her home in Cuernavaca, near Mexico City, until the end of her life.

Comparing her printmaking and sculpture, Catlett stated, "I'm thinking differently in the two mediums. In the printmaking, I'm thinking about something social or political, and in the sculpture, I'm thinking about form. But I'm also thinking about women, Black women."<sup>10</sup> The sources to which she looked for inspiration were, she said, "not the female nudes of the European artists, but the women of the African wood carvers and the pre-Hispanic stone carvers."<sup>11</sup> Particularly resonant for her was African sculptors' use of abstracted form to convey feeling through angular turns and subtle curves, juxtaposition of concave and convex shapes, and abstraction of anatomical or physiognomic structures to their essential components. She was also drawn to the stylized naturalism of pre-encounter Mexican figurative sculpture in stone and clay and to examples of modern Mexican sculpture. These sources, along with the modernist abstraction of European artists she admired, enriched the sculptural vocabulary of simplified abstraction that she developed as a graduate student and honed while working with Zadkine, Lowenfeld, and Zúñiga.

As she explored the expressive potential of form, Catlett's handling of her sculptural mediums demonstrates her engagement with their tactile materiality along with their inherent visual qualities. She valued the rich variety of materials available to sculptors in Mexico—clay, limestone, marble, and onyx, and wood such as primavera, Spanish cedar, and mahogany—all materials of the earth. The ceramic figures she modeled from clay, using the techniques she learned from Zúñiga, appear to swell and breathe from within. The rounded volumes, precisely delineated angles, and nested concave forms of figures and abstract forms that she carved in wood highlight the grain of the wood; those she carved in stone draw attention to the surface qualities of different types of stone. She sanded and polished these sculptures to a smooth, often lustrous sheen. "When I carve, I am guided by the beauty and the configuration of the material," she said. "When I use wood, for example, I might exaggerate the form to bring out a little more of the grain of the wood. I like to finish sculpture to the maximum beauty attainable from the

material from which it is created."<sup>12</sup> Catlett's sculptures are the work of her hands; their carefully wrought details, textures, and surfaces suggest—and invite—caress.

Mindful of the visual and physical properties of her sculptural materials, Catlett continually explored how forms translate differently in additive and subtractive mediums. She often investigated an idea or image through clay models, which she sometimes later cast in bronze, before committing herself to the more arduous work of carving and finishing larger pieces in wood and stone. Over the course of her career, she revisited sculptural themes and compositions using a range of materials; the result was that markedly similar figures and figural groups convey variously nuanced meanings when modeled or carved and when fashioned in wood and different types of stone.

Catlett became a Mexican citizen in 1962. Like other US leftist expatriates in Mexico, she had been subjected intermittently to harassment by the United States Embassy throughout the 1950s. Her decision to seek Mexican citizenship came after she was forcibly taken from her home by the Mexican authorities and imprisoned as a "foreign agitator" during a strike by railroad workers in 1959. Her arrest was part of a move by the Mexican government to suppress trade unionists and the left, an effort that included the arrest and deportation of US citizens living in Mexico who were designated "Communist" by the US Embassy. Soon after her release from prison, Catlett applied for Mexican citizenship to avoid further mistreatment and possible deportation. When her Mexican citizenship was granted, she was immediately labeled an "undesirable alien" by the US authorities and barred from her country of origin.

As a foreigner living in Mexico, Catlett had been cautious about political involvement that could result in her deportation. As a Mexican citizen, she was empowered to engage in a broader spectrum of political activity. In 1963, she was among ninety-one Mexican women who traveled to post-Revolution Cuba to attend the Congress of Women in the Americas. The Mexican delegation returned to form the Unión Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas (National Union of Mexican Women), dedicated to fighting for the rights of Mexican working-class women and *campesinas* (peasant women) and their families. *Mujer* (Woman), a robust life-size figure in wood that Catlett carved in 1964, now in the collection of Mexico City's Museo de Arte Moderno, reflects



her admiration and respect for the women among whom she lived and with whom she now worked. Catlett served on the organization's executive board until 1975.

During the 1960s, although she was prohibited from traveling to the United States, Catlett increasingly focused her attention on the struggles for civil rights and Black Power taking place throughout her native land. In her prints and sculpture, she expressed her embrace of the revolutionary promise of Black Nationalism and the Black Power ethos of self-determination and pride. Sculptures such as her *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* (1968), an abstracted figure with her fist raised in the immediately recognizable Black Power salute, affirm the role of women in these movements. With explicit reference to US Black political leaders and organizations such as the Black Panthers, she proclaimed her political affinities in prints such as *Malcolm X Speaks for Us* (1969). In several prints and in her sculpture *Target* (1970), for which she repurposed an earlier carving of a man's head, now adding the metal form of a rifle sight, she decried the police brutality and violence that wracked urban Black communities in the United States. Catlett's experiences and growing sense of Mexican identity also resonate in these prints and sculptures, for she knew women whose children were felled by the military forces called out against student protesters in Mexico City in 1968; her own sons had been part of these mass demonstrations. She identified with Black mothers in the United States who lived in fear that their sons would be next and with women in Latin America whose children were "disappeared" by US-supported government forces that opposed their people's liberation movements.

Catlett's increasingly transnational perspective is embodied in the allusion to ambiguous and multiple ethnicities in many of her sculptures of women and manifested in the overlay and convergence of their visual references to the lineages of African and Mexican art. "A woman critic here once told me that whenever I do Mexicans in sculpture, they always turn out to be Black," she said, referring to the prominent Mexican art critic Raquel Tibol. "There's no doubt a lot of truth in what she said. My art does, after all, speak for both my peoples."<sup>13</sup> She also noted that sculptures she envisaged as Black often look Mexican.<sup>14</sup> In her representations of passionate, determined, and resilient women, this signaling of racial and cultural identity as fluid and layered also confirms Catlett's recognition of the

conditions and experiences shared across cultural divides by working-class women and women living in economic precarity. This is evident, too, in her sculptures that embody the intimate physicality of maternity, the stoic endurance of mothers, their determination to protect their children against the social forces arrayed against them, and their anguish when they cannot.

Despite her expatriate status, Catlett had not been forgotten in the United States. As a younger generation of African American artists claimed her as a foremother, her work found renewed visibility. A 1970 article in *Ebony* magazine, "My Art Speaks for Both My Peoples," highlighted her status as an accomplished artist and educator in Mexico and emphasized her Black Nationalism. One photo caption reads, "Armed with power tools and chisels, Miss Catlett begins the liberation of another of her figurative Black sisters imprisoned in a log."<sup>15</sup>

With the struggle for racial justice in the United States so prominent in her consciousness and her artistic production, Catlett's desire to convey to her Mexican audience the realities experienced by African Americans was the motivation for her 1970 exhibition *Experiencia negra: Escultura y grabado de Elizabeth Catlett* (Black Experience: Sculpture and Prints by Elizabeth Catlett) at the Museo de Arte Moderno. The following year, The Studio Museum in Harlem hosted *Elizabeth Catlett: Prints and Sculpture*, her first major solo exhibition in the United States since 1948. A concerted effort led by Studio Museum director Edward S. Spriggs and artist/writer Elton C. Fax and supported by numerous other African American artists compelled the US State Department to grant her a visa to attend the opening. Along with the *Ebony* article featuring her work, this exhibition solidified Catlett's status in her homeland as a prominent—and revolutionary—Black artist. It was the first of many that took place during the 1970s and in subsequent decades at historically Black colleges and universities and at libraries and community centers in predominantly Black communities in the United States. She also continued to exhibit in Mexico and internationally.

As was her practice in her sculpture, Catlett often revisited earlier themes and subjects in her prints. After her departure from the TGP in 1966, she maintained the workshop's approach to printmaking as a form of social commentary and protest. She continued to produce lithographs, linocuts, and serigraphs, experimented with print mediums and techniques that were new to her, and made prints that com-

bined multiple printmaking processes. In the early 1990s, Catlett produced a series of six lithographs that were inspired by the poet Margaret Walker's *For My People*.<sup>16</sup> Catlett and Walker had been graduate school roommates while both women attended the University of Iowa, and they remained lifelong friends. First published in 1942, Walker's epic poem mourns the losses, chronicles the endurance, honors the continued survival of Black people in the United States, and looks to a future of liberation and justice. Fifty years after the poem's initial publication, Catlett's lithographs accompanied Walker's poem in a portfolio published by the Limited Editions Club in New York.<sup>17</sup>

In her sculpture, Catlett continued to hone her visual and material language of form to convey feeling in works that range from realistic portraits of individuals to elegant figural abstractions and monumental works. "I'm thinking about a form that would achieve sympathy," she said in 2003.<sup>18</sup> Standing figures stride confidently forward; seated and reclining figures hold space with self-assurance; mothers tenderly cradle their children; and paired figures embrace with warmth and love. In the last decades of her life, Catlett was awarded commissions for sculptures that center ordinary and extraordinary Black women, including Sojourner Truth in Sacramento, California (1999), and Mahalia Jackson in New Orleans, Louisiana (2010).<sup>19</sup>

Catlett's US citizenship was restored in 2002, and she spent her last years as a citizen of both the United States and Mexico. Along with major commissions, she received several honorary degrees and numerous other honors and was invited to exhibit in major museums and prestigious galleries. Her radical empathy endured throughout her career as the driving force that motivated her intertwined politics and artistic practice. It impelled her choice of artistic subjects and the visual and material language with which she affirmed and honored the people she portrayed in her art and those she fervently wished her art to serve.

- 1 Elizabeth Catlett, quoted from Samella Lewis, *African American Art and Artists* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), originally published as *Art: African American* (Los Angeles: Hancraft Studios, 1978), pp. 134–35. Artist, art historian, and educator Samella Lewis (1923–2022) was central to the field of African American art history, and her monograph on her teacher and lifelong friend Elizabeth Catlett laid the groundwork for future scholars, including this author. See Samella Lewis, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett* (Los Angeles: Hancraft Studios, 1984).
- 2 Interview of Elizabeth Catlett by Camille Billops, October 1, 1989, excerpted in *Artists and Influence: The Journal of Black American Cultural History*, vol. 10 (1991), ed. James V. Hatch and Leo Hamalian (New York: Hatch-Billops Collection, 1991), p. 19.
- 3 A[lice] Elizabeth Catlett, "Sculpture in Stone: Negro Mother and Child," a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Department of Graphic and Plastic Arts, State University of Iowa, June 1940 (Iowa City: State University of Iowa, 1940), p. 1.
- 4 Elizabeth Catlett, untitled and undated handwritten manuscript for a presentation about her work. Artist's files, Elizabeth Catlett Estate, Cuernavaca, Mexico; copy in the author's collection.
- 5 "Elizabeth Catlett 1945 Rosenwald Fellowship Application," John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Fisk University, Nashville, TN, USA. Special Collections, Rosenwald Collection, box 400, folder 7. See online: *Women of Rosenwald: Curating Social Justice through the Arts (1928–1948)*, <https://womenofrosenwaldfellowship.omeka.net/items/show/1433>, accessed September 22, 2023.
- 6 Interview of Elizabeth Catlett by Glory Van Scott, December 8, 1981, excerpted in *Artist and Influence*, p. 10. In lectures on the subject, Catlett and her husband, the artist Francisco Mora, emphasized the continued African presence in Mexico after the arrival of enslaved Africans.
- 7 Rebecca Schreiber, *Cold War Exiles in Mexico: U.S. Dissidents and the Culture of Critical Resistance* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 57. Schreiber emphasizes the importance of the Taller de Gráfica Popular for Catlett and other African American artists who spent time in Mexico in the mid-century, particularly John Wilson, Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs, and Charles White. From 1950 until 1956, John Wilson studied mural painting in Mexico and made prints at the TGP. Margaret Burroughs visited Catlett in Mexico in 1952–53 and worked as a guest artist at the TGP.

- 8 See *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*, text by Richard Wright and photo-direction by Edwin Rosskam (New York: Viking Press, 1941).
- 9 Elizabeth Catlett, quoted from Lewis, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett*, p. 148.
- 10 Interview of Elizabeth Catlett by Mary Gibbons, 1989. Audio-cassette recording in the collection of the Elizabeth Catlett Estate, Cuernavaca, Mexico; copy in the author's collection.
- 11 Elizabeth Catlett, untitled and undated handwritten manuscript for a presentation about her work. Artist's files, Elizabeth Catlett Estate, Cuernavaca, Mexico; copy in the author's collection.
- 12 Elizabeth Catlett, quoted from Lewis, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett*, p. 90.
- 13 Elizabeth Catlett, quoted from Elton C. Fax, "Elizabeth Catlett," in *Seventeen Black Artists* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1971), p. 31.
- 14 Interview of Elizabeth Catlett by the author, December 10, 1991.
- 15 Marc Crawford, "My Art Speaks for Both My Peoples," *Ebony*, vol. 25, no. 3 (January 1970), pp. 94-101.
- 16 Margaret Walker, *For My People*, with a Foreword by Stephen Vincent Benet (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1942).
- 17 See Margaret Walker, *For My People*, with lithographs by Elizabeth Catlett (New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1992).
- 18 Elizabeth Catlett, quoted from Michael Brenson, "Form That Achieves Sympathy: A Conversation with Elizabeth Catlett," *Sculpture*, vol. 22, no. 3 (April 2003), p. 33.
- 19 *Sojourner*, carved in Mexican limestone, was vandalized in 2013 and broken into multiple pieces. Following its restoration, it is now housed at Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum. One of the last sculptures Catlett completed, *Mahalia Jackson*, cast in bronze, stands adjacent to the theater that bears her name, near Catlett's *Louis Armstrong* (1975-76) in Louis Armstrong Park, New Orleans, Louisiana.

## For My People

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs  
repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues  
and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an  
unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an  
unseen power;

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the  
gone years and the now years and the maybe years,  
washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending  
hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching  
dragging along never gaining never reaping never  
knowing and never understanding;

For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of  
Alabama  
backyards playing baptizing and preaching and doctor  
and jail and soldier and school and mama and cooking  
and playhouse and concert and store and hair and  
Miss Choomby and company;

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn  
to know the reasons why and the answers to and the  
people who and the places where and the days when, in  
memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we  
were black and poor and small and different and nobody  
cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood;

For the boys and girls who grew in spite of these things to  
be man and woman, to laugh and dance and sing and  
play and drink their wine and religion and success, to  
marry their playmates and bear children and then die  
of consumption and anemia and lynching;

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox  
Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New  
Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy  
people filling the cabarets and taverns and other  
people's pockets and needing bread and shoes and milk  
and  
land and money and something—something all our own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time  
being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when  
burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied, and shackled  
and tangled among ourselves by the unseen creatures  
who tower over us omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in  
the dark of churches and schools and clubs  
and societies, associations and councils and committees  
and  
conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and  
devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches,  
preyed on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by  
false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way  
from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,  
trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,  
all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless  
generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a  
bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second  
generation full of courage issue forth; let a people  
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of  
healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing  
in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs  
be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now  
rise and take control.

—Margaret Walker, 1942

# Tours

On the following days there will be free public guided tours at MUSEUM<sup>mmk</sup>, ZOLLAMT<sup>mmk</sup>, and TOWER<sup>mmk</sup>:

## **Elizabeth Catlett**

at TOWER<sup>mmk</sup>

Guided tours in German:

Tuesdays at 4 pm

Sundays at 2 pm

Guided tours in English:

Sundays at 4 pm

## **Helena Uambembe. Blooming in Stasis: 25.8230° S, 23.5312° E**

at ZOLLAMT<sup>mmk</sup>

Guided tours in German:

Sundays at 4 pm

Guided tours in English:

Saturdays at 11 am

## **Channeling**

at MUSEUM<sup>mmk</sup>

Guided tours in German:

Wednesdays at 5 pm

Thursdays at 4 pm

Saturdays at 12 noon and 3 pm

Sundays at 12 noon and 3 pm

Guided tours in English:

Saturdays at 4 pm

Guided tours for visually impaired people (German): every 2nd Sunday of the month at 2 pm

Guided tours in easy language

(German): every 3rd Sunday of the month at 11.30 am

Guiding tours in German including German Sign Language: every 4th Sunday of the month at 3 pm

More information on guided tours, workshops, and events can be found at: [www.mmk.art](http://www.mmk.art)

The public guided tours are included in the admission price. For children and young people under 18 years of age, admission is free. On every last Saturday of the month admission is free for everyone.



# Imprint

This booklet is published in conjunction with the exhibition

*Elizabeth Catlett*

TOWER<sup>mmk</sup>

18 November 2023–16 June 2024

OPENING HOURS

Tue–Sun: 11 am–6 pm

Wed: 11 am–7 pm

PUBLISHER

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GRAPHIC DESIGN

Zak Group, London  
Anna Sukhova, Frankfurt am Main

PRINT

AC medienhaus, Wiesbaden

COVER

Elizabeth Catlett, *Sharecropper*, 1970,  
MUSEUM<sup>mmk</sup> FÜR MODERNE KUNST,  
photo: Axel Schneider

INSIDE FRONT COVER

Elizabeth Catlett, *Gossip*, 2005,  
MUSEUM<sup>mmk</sup> FÜR MODERNE KUNST,  
photo: Axel Schneider

IMAGE PAGES

Elizabeth Catlett, *Ohne Titel*, o. J.,  
Elizabeth Catlett Family Trust,  
Mexico, photo: Axel Schneider

Elizabeth Catlett, *Two Generations*,  
1979, courtesy of Dr. and Mrs. Walter  
O. Evans, photo: Axel Schneider

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60310 Frankfurt am Main  
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TOWER<sup>mmk</sup> was made possible by:



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