

Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012)

<https://nmwa.org/explore/artist-profiles/elizabeth-catlett>

Sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett used her art to advocate for social change in both the U.S. and her adopted country of Mexico for almost three-quarters of a century.

The granddaughter of former slaves, Catlett was raised in Washington, D.C. Her father died before she was born and her mother held several jobs to raise three children. Refused admission to Carnegie Institute of Technology because of her race, Catlett enrolled at Howard University, where her teachers included artist Lois Mailou Jones and philosopher Alain Locke. She graduated with honors in 1935 and went on to earn the first MFA in sculpture at the University of Iowa five years later.

Grant Wood, her painting teacher at Iowa, encouraged students to make art about what they knew best and to experiment with different mediums, inspiring Catlett to create lithographs, linoleum cuts, and sculpture in wood, stone, clay, and bronze. She drew subjects from African American and later Mexican life.

In 1946, a grant from the Rosenwald Foundation enabled Catlett to move to Mexico City with her husband, printmaker Charles White. There she joined the Taller de Gráfica Popular, an influential and political group of printmakers. At the Taller, Catlett met the Mexican artist Francisco Mora, whom she married after divorcing White and with whom she had three sons.

Catlett taught at the National School of Fine Arts in Mexico City from 1958 until her retirement in 1976, producing realistic and highly stylized two- and three-dimensional figures. Her subjects ranged from tender maternal images to confrontational symbols of the Black Power movement, to portraits of Martin Luther King Jr. and the writer Phyllis Wheatley.

During the past 40 years, museums and galleries have held more than 50 solo exhibitions of Catlett's sculptures and prints, including important retrospectives in 1993 and 1998. Catlett continued to make art through her mid-90s, while dividing her time between New York and Cuernavaca.

http://museum.middlebury.edu/collections/collection_highlights/node/2549

Both a print maker and a sculptor, she was repeatedly attracted to the themes of race and gender drawn or sculpted in a seductive blend of modernism and naturalism. *Black is Beautiful* is one of the images she created in the late 1960s to proclaim her passionate identity with the Black Power struggle. Originally titled *Negro es bello*, she retitled the print in English, possibly to have a greater appeal north of the border.