

WOMEN WHO SHAPED HISTORY

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How Elizabeth Catlett Lifted Up Black Women Through Art

The pioneering sculptor defied trends to honor the daily lives of her subjects

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Head of a Negro Woman, 1946, by Elizabeth Catlett. Alex Jamison / NMAAHC; © 2022 Mora-Catlett Family / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

As a young girl, Elizabeth “Betty” Catlett—born in Washington, D.C., likely in 1915—spent a great deal of time with her grandparents, who had been born into slavery and who took care to teach the child about her people’s ongoing struggle for basic rights. In the summers, Betty would visit her maternal grandparents in North Carolina, where she saw sharecroppers tilling hard ground and later recalled marveling at their perseverance in the face of “extreme poverty.” Portraying such people with dignity would become her artistic mission.

Betty came of age during the first part of the Great Migration, in a well-educated household: Her father, John, who died before she was born, had taught mathematics at Tuskegee University in Alabama before the family moved to the nation’s capital. Her mother, Mary, served as a high school attendance officer while maintaining several other jobs to support Betty and her brother and sister. Betty’s interest in art bloomed in high school, and she went on to study at Howard University. There she majored in design and was mentored by the artist Lois Mailou Jones, who trained other prominent Black artists of the day, including David Driskell and Sylvia Snowden. Catlett was quickly finding her voice, and her purpose.

Graduating with honors in 1935, Catlett moved to Durham, North Carolina, to teach high school, and then to Iowa City, where she became the first Black woman to obtain an MFA from the University of Iowa. She met her first husband, Charles Wilbert White, while studying at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. When the couple moved to New York City in 1942, Catlett taught art at the George Washington Carver School, a night school for working adults in Harlem, where she found major inspiration for her work.

Catlett’s rapidly maturing style in sculptures and prints was shaped by the stories she’d heard from her grandmothers and sharpened by her experiences in Harlem, where she had seen a quiet, daily heroism that she was determined to capture in her work. The art world was moving toward abstraction, yet Catlett in the 1940s was set on diving deeper into social realism, to portray Black experiences in America—especially the experiences of Black women.



Sculptor-printmaker Elizabeth Catlett, photographed at Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1977.
Larry Morris, The Washington Post via Getty Images

A crucial opportunity came in 1946, when she won a Rosenwald Fund fellowship that allowed her to work in Mexico City, which would serve as the artist's home base off and on until her death. It was around this period that Catlett sculpted *Head of a Negro Woman*, inspired by her time teaching in Harlem, and particularly at a night school where the cultural revival of the Harlem Renaissance could still be felt. Lucia Olubunmi Momoh, Constance E. Clayton curatorial fellow at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, says that whether Catlett made the terra-cotta sculpture in New York or Mexico City remains uncertain. Today, the piece is in the collection at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

The figure's eyes have no pupils; Catlett has replaced them with hollow space, a choice that creates a piercing, haunting presence, while the turn of the chin is almost defiant. It's a startling vision that evokes both modern womanhood and deep African ancestry. The sculptor has taken a wide nose and thick lips, often-mocked attributes of Black women, and exalted them.

Kinshasha Holman Conwill, deputy director of NMAAHC, who knew Catlett, says the generation that raised Catlett worked hard to teach their children that "they were somebody," despite the segregation of the era. Conwill says *Head of a Negro Woman* honors historic figures such as Harriet Tubman while also reflecting the everyday life of women of African descent in the United States. "Very few American artists lifted up Black women the way Betty did from the beginning," she says. Momoh agrees, noting that "Catlett was one of the earliest recognized Black women artists whose work focused on uplifting other Black women and

girls.”

Catlett’s early visits to Mexico brought her into contact with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo—and with the Mexican painter Francisco Mora, whom she married in 1947. During her prolific career, Catlett maintained her focus on Black womanhood while broadening her repertoire to include Mexican influences. She spent much of her final years in Mexico, teaching at the National School of Plastic Arts in Mexico City before retiring to the city of Cuernavaca in 1975, where she maintained a studio until she died in 2012 at 96.

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