



Chazen Museum of Art

Fall 2020 Faculty Curriculum: Activism through Art

Elizabeth Catlett, *Survivor*, 1983



Linoleum cut, 7 5/8 x 9 5/16 in.  
Gift of Richard E. Brock, 2012.27.2

*I don't think we can still keep going to Paris and Rome to see what the last word is in art and come back to our desperate nations and live in intellectual isolation from what's going on in our countries and ghetto.*  
— Elizabeth Catlett <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Catlett, "My Art Speaks for Both My Peoples," *Ebony* (January 1970)



### **Artist Biography**

Elizabeth Catlett (American, 1915—2012) was an African American sculptor, printmaker, and art educator, who worked first in the United States and later in Mexico. Catlett's father, a mathematics professor at the Tuskegee Institute, died before she was born. Raised in Washington D.C., Catlett heard stories about slavery from her formerly enslaved grandmother and about the city's slums from her mother, a teacher who worked as a truant officer for the public schools. Influenced by these narratives—as well as her own experiences and social movements—Catlett became an activist artist and dedicated her career to giving visibility to oppressed peoples and social justice issues.

Catlett earned an undergraduate degree in 1935 at Howard University, where she studied with painter Lois Mailou Jones and Dr. Alain Locke, a Harvard graduate who taught philosophy and who became known as the “Father of the Harlem Renaissance” with the publication of his 1925 anthology *The New Negro*. She taught for two years in public schools in Durham, North Carolina, where she participated in an effort led by Thurgood Marshall (ultimately unsuccessful) to gain equal pay for black teachers. She went on to earn her M.F.A. in sculpture at the University of Iowa—the first person to do so. Following her graduation in 1940, she taught art at Dillard University in New Orleans and, over the summer, spent time in Chicago studying ceramics at the Art Institute of Chicago and lithography at the South Side Community Art Center. She married artist Charles White in 1941 (whom she would later divorce), moved to New York, and worked in the studio of European émigré sculptor Ossip Zadkine. During World War II she taught at the George Washington Carver People's School, a night school in Harlem for working students.

In 1946, Catlett traveled to Mexico City for several months on a grant. The following year she moved there permanently and remarried. In Mexico City she joined the Taller de Gráfica Popular (People's Graphic Arts Workshop), a collective of political activist printmakers creating prints, posters and other printed materials in support of social causes like organized labor and anti-authoritarianism. There Catlett developed an expressionistic style of printmaking that highlights the strength and dignity of her subjects. Her work also began to include Mexican subjects as she became aware of synergies between the histories of African American and Mexican peoples. In 1958, she was arrested during a Union of Railroad Workers' strike in Mexico City.

Catlett became the first female professor to teach sculpture at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in 1959. After Catlett became a Mexican citizen in 1962, the United States barred her from re-entry (except for a one-time exception) until 2002 due to Socialist-leaning political affiliations. Although exiled from her country of origin, Catlett's work of the 1960s nonetheless showed her support for American causes, including the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Her visibility in the United States increased with the publication of the article “My Art Speaks for Both My Peoples,” in *Ebony* magazine in 1970 (see Additional Resources section).



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In 1971, she organized an exhibition of her work at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Due to pressure exerted by many other African American artists, Catlett received a waiver and was able to visit America for six days. In 1975 she retired from teaching and moved to Cuernavaca, Mexico the following year. Although she continued to work with sculpture, printmaking—particularly the creation of linocuts—was a constant thread throughout her career. In both mediums, the artist focused on what she knew best: strong African American women. She continued to create artwork until her death in 2012.



### **Location**

*Survivor* is currently installed at the Chazen Museum on the Chazen Mezzanine. To view this work in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

### **Visual Description**

*Survivor* is a linoleum cut print created in 1983 by Elizabeth Catlett. The black and white print is small measuring seven and five eighths inches by nine and five sixteenth inches or roughly the size of a standard sheet of paper. The image is vertical and depicts a person from the waist up standing centered on the page. The subject is not smiling or looking straight ahead but staring off to the right. They tightly grasp an object in their hands that is thin and slender and resembles a broom handle. They are wearing an apron, a long sleeve jacket with a collared shirt underneath and a scarf-like head covering. Though they wear a hoop earring in the one ear we can see, their gender is non-descript. It is unclear as to whether there is any patterning on the subject's clothes which is largely due to the linoleum print technique used to produce this image. Short white hash lines run diagonally across the surface of the apron which add texture and contrast to the image. The collared shirt has bands of skinny white lines which suggest a pattern. The person stands against a black background void of any details except for in the area behind their head and shoulders. To the left of the figure, short white vertical hashmarks grow from behind the shoulders and turn into zig zag lines that veer to the right and off the page. To the right of the figure, a larger area of straight white hatch marks stretch to the height of the subject's eyes before turning into zig zag lines that veer right and off the page. Though we can't be clear what these marks depict, they suggest foliage of some kind.



**Content and Context**

*I think that all artists have to have some basic idea of what you want to accomplish. My idea is to do something that black people understand, and I want to do it about Black Women. I'm not interested in expressing myself. I'm interested in doing something that will draw people to it. I want people to feel that I'm interested in what they would like to see.* —Elizabeth Catlett

As an artist and social activist, Elizabeth Catlett depicted subjects traditionally excluded from the history of art, particularly black women and their experiences. *Survivor* depicts a rural laborer in the Southern United States. Catlett derived the image of the black woman from *Ex-slave with a Long Memory, Alabama*, a photograph taken by Dorothea Lange in 1937.<sup>2</sup>



Working as a photographer for the Farm Security Administration, Lange encountered tenant farmers who survived in Southern states by working land owned by a landlord. Although Lange's employers expected her photographs to focus on white people, Lange used her camera to help expose the racial and economic power relationships of the tenant farmer system, which oppressed and exploited African Americans.

Immediately following the abolition of slavery in the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865, Southern states enacted codes that limited the types of jobs African Americans could hold and ensured cheap labor for white landowners. By the 1880s, state and local statutes, known as Jim Crow laws, further limited the rights of African Americans and legalized segregation. Jim Crow laws remained in

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothea Lange, [Ex-slave with a Long Memory, Alabama](#), 1937. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.





effect until a series of federal acts legally ended segregation and promoted voting rights and fair housing for African Americans in the 1960s. As with the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, however, changes in law did not ensure the full cessation of systematic racism and oppression directed at people of color.

Created in 1983, *Survivor* revisits Lange's photograph, recalling the histories of slavery and the Jim Crow era lived by the elderly woman and making them present to viewers yet today. Sadly, the woman's name has been lost (or at least is unknown to this author), however, Catlett's print transforms her into an icon of black womanhood. Notably, Catlett focused on the woman—her hands, face, clothes, and the implement of her work—but eliminated the agricultural setting in the original photograph and instead added energizing patterns of white lines framing the woman's face.

The type of print—a linoleum cut—is also significant and speaks to Catlett's determination to introduce black subjects into the history of art. Note that Catlett's printing method reversed the direction the woman is facing. Linoleum cuts are a form of relief printing, the origins of which are woodcuts developed first in China and later in Europe. Early woodcuts mainly replicated images of religious icons, like Buddha or Christian saints to be revered, used for contemplation, and remembered as sources of inspiration. Catlett used a linoleum block instead of wood, but the method of printing is the same, and her use of the medium evokes this centuries-old tradition.

If one considers the print's materiality (i.e. potential interpretations based on aspects of its physical existence that the artist may or may not have intended), the materials and process Catlett used to create the work reinforces a theme of the strength and resiliency of black women. To create *Survivor*, Catlett carved away the outlines and highlights, leaving behind the linoleum block's surface to print the image of the woman in black ink. Catlett printed 1,000 impressions from this block. This is an uncommon and surprisingly large edition number for a fine art print; in making an edition of this size, Catlett subverted this elitist commercial system and created a product that would have been quite affordable. The linoleum block, capable of surviving 1,000 rounds in the printing press, was as resilient as the ex-slave and tenant farmer it embodied. Pressed again and again, her image is an icon for all strong African American women who have survived and continue to persevere.



**Discussion Questions**

1. When you hear the word “survivor”, what images come to mind? How does your idea of a survivor compare or contrast to Catlett’s?
2. Of her work, Catlett says that she wanted to show the “history and strength of all kinds of black women.” Does she illustrate strength in this image? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. The woman in this image looks off the page and away from us. What do you think she is looking at? How would your relationship to her change if she were looking directly at you?
4. If Catlett were alive today, which black women might she choose to champion in her works of art and why?

**Collection Connections for Further Engagement:** *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Ron Adams (American, b. 1934). [Blackburn](#), 2002. Color lithograph, 25 x 35 in. Delphine Fitz Darby Endowment Fund purchase, 2010.42.

Robert Blackburn (1920—2003) was another influential African American teacher and printmaker. He opened his printshop in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City in 1947. It served as a hub for experimentation and collaboration. In this lithograph, we see him making a print.

Elizabeth Catlett (American, 1915—2012). [Negro es Bello II](#), 1969/2001. Color lithograph, 27 3/4 x 21 1/16 in. Harry and Margaret P. Glicksman Endowment Fund purchase, 2011.23.

This print is one of a number that Catlett created in support of the Black Panthers. Given its Spanish title, it was likely intended for Spanish speaking audiences in Mexico City, where Catlett lived at the time of its initial publication.

Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (German, 1884—1976). [Carpenter \(Zimmerman\)](#), 1925. Woodcut, 19 9/16 x 15, 5/16 in. Gift of Barbara Mackey Kaerwer, 2012.9.55.

Like Catlett, many other artists have focused on laborers, including many involved in the German Expressionist movement, such as Kathe Kollwitz (see related dossier) and Schmidt-Rottluff.



**Additional Resources**

Elizabeth Catlett website: <https://www.elizabethcatlettart.com/bio>

“Art Speaks for Both My Peoples,” *Ebony* (January 1970),  
[https://books.google.com/books?id=bVP7JyMGSaEC&pg=PA94&source=gbs\\_toc\\_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=bVP7JyMGSaEC&pg=PA94&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Robert Berlind and Elizabeth Catlett, “Elizabeth Catlett,” *Art Journal* vol. 53, no. 1: *Art and Old Age* (Spring 1994), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/777525> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen’s Canvas site]

*Elizabeth Catlett: My Advice to Young African Americans* (April 2010), 4 minutes,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EA19xr5dbx8>

Dorothea Lange Digital Archive, “Deep South: Picturing Race and Power,” *Oakland Museum of California* website, <https://dorothealange.museumca.org/section/deep-south-picturing-race-and-power/>

Melanie Anne Herzog, “Elizabeth Catlett: In the Image of the People,” in *Elizabeth Catlett: In the Image of the People* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2005), <https://www-aaeportal-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/?id=-16579> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen’s Canvas site]

The People’s Forum NYC, *The New Intellectuals: Internationalism and the Radical Pedagogy of Elizabeth Catlett* (March 2, 2020), 22 minutes, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18JJ\\_Cih7QQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18JJ_Cih7QQ)