

Survivor  
Elizabeth Catlett

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Amy Hudson-Elizabeth Catlett, *Survivor*

Elizabeth Catlett, daughter of college educated parents, granddaughter of slaves, was born in Washington, D.C. in 1915. She graduated from Howard University in 1935, after which she taught for two years in the public schools in Durham, North Carolina. Catlett pursued a graduate degree at the University of Iowa and studied with Grant Wood. He told her to make art about what she knew best. She took his advice and African American women are often the subject of her work. She brings to light the experiences and struggles of African American women and tells the stories of other oppressed people. In 1940, Catlett was the first student to earn an MFA in sculpture from the University of Iowa. That fall she began teaching at Dillard University in New Orleans. She spent the summer of 1941 in Chicago, studying lithography at the South Side Community Art Center where she met her first husband, Charles White. While in Chicago, she also studied ceramics at the Art Institute.

In 1942, Catlett and White moved to New York where Catlett studied lithography with Harry Sternberg at the Art Students League and sculpture with Ossip Zadkine. She also worked at the George Washington Carver School, a community school for the working people of Harlem. She was the promotion director and taught sewing and sculpture there. Her experience at the Carver School led her to realize that her own middle-class background had kept her from truly understanding the everyday experiences of working-class and poor African Americans and continued to support her idea that her art should be for ordinary people. Catlett found that she had little time for her own work and realized she would need to leave in order to give it the attention it required. She wanted to complete a series of linocuts, paintings, and sculptures that would depict the oppression, struggles, and achievements of black women. Catlett received a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1945 and when she found out it was going to be renewed for another

year, she decided it would be a good time to leave. She and White chose to go to Mexico because both were interested in revolutionary murals and graphic art.

After several months in Mexico, Catlett returned to the US to end her marriage. In 1947, she returned to Mexico to establish permanent residence there. She decided to return to Mexico in part because the political climate in the US was not friendly toward progressive artists. She also felt a connection to Mexican artists and their desire to tell the stories of ordinary people and to make their art accessible to everyone. When she returned to Mexico, she joined a group of artists at the Taller de Grafica Popular (People's Graphic Workshop). In 1947, she married Francisco Mora also a member of the TGP. The TGP was eventually labeled as a "Communist Front organization" by the U.S. Attorney General. Its members were not allowed entrance to the U.S. Catlett's association with the TGP, the fact that her first husband had been a member of the Communist Party, and the Carver School having been put on a list of "totalitarian, fascist, communist, or subversive" organizations by the Department of Justice, all led to her being harassed by the U.S. Embassy during the 1950s. Mexico's government began deporting U.S. citizens who were wanted for questioning back in the U.S. by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Catlett no longer felt safe in Mexico as an American citizen so she applied for Mexican citizenship. She received it in 1962 and was declared an "undesirable alien" by the U.S. State Department. Her U.S. citizenship was eventually restored, but not until 2002. She died in Cuernavaca, Mexico at the age of 96.

The work that I have chosen by Catlett is "Survivor". It is a black and white linoleum cut print dated 1983. The print is based on a 1937-38 photograph taken by Dorothea Lange titled "Ex-slave with a Long Memory". Lange took the photograph while documenting life in the American rural south for the Farm Security Administration. The woman in the print appears

strong and sturdy. She gazes off to her left and does not engage the viewer. Catlett's use of multidirectional line gives the work a sense of movement even though the woman is still. I wonder what she is thinking. I am curious about what she has survived; if she has indeed survived or is there more to come? I think this piece would work well for a tour of portraits, prints, or work done by female artists. I would not use VTS for this work because I think context is needed to really appreciate the piece and the artist. If you plan to use this work or another by Elizabeth Catlett on a tour, I would recommend reading her artist file and "Elizabeth Catlett: In the Image of the People" by Melanie Anne Herzog (NB259.C384H72 2005) which can be found in the KIA's library. My paper is just a small bit of information about the artist and her work.

Also in the KIA's Library

Stargazers: Elizabeth Catlett in Conversation with Sanford Biggers... (N6537.CA4 2010)

Elizabeth Catlett: Works on Paper, 1944-1992 (ND237.C37Z44 1993)