

Artist Profile – Eldzier Cortor

b. 1916 Richmond, VA; d. 2015 Seaford, NY

Cortor grew up on the South Side of Chicago where he read the Chicago Defender, a newspaper that talked about the successes of African Americans. After high school, Cortor attended the Art Institute of Chicago where a teacher introduced him to the African sculptures at the Field Museum of Natural History, these sculptures greatly influenced Cortor's later works. Cortor became one of the first African American artists to focus on black female beauty. In 1949 Cortor received the Guggenheim Fellowship and used it to study in Jamaica, Cuba, and Haiti, also in 1949, Cortor began teaching at Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince and stayed until 1951. Cortor received many other fellowships that allowed him to travel to the islands of the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina to study the cultures that had been untouched by American culture.

Cortor's paintings and prints typically feature elongated nude forms in intimate settings and are influenced by traditional African art and European surrealism. Cortor's main theme throughout his works revolves around the idea of portraying African Americans in a positive light and highlighting their beauty and achievements. His early works focused on the abstract qualities of the black bodies, while his later works turned more realistic. The shift in style came after Cortor worked on a Works Progress Administration project where he had to paint African Americans living on the South Side of Chicago. After this shift, along with becoming more realistic, his pieces transformed into discussions on the social conditions of the African American experience.

Cortor focused on the female form so often because he believed that the black woman represented the entire black race as well as the continuance of life. Cortor depicts these women to show strength and eternity, his goal is not to shame them or sexualize them but to show their beauty, grace, and strength all while showing them alongside their traditional African culture. Cortor's two main themes are the black female experience and African culture, and he includes symbols or alludes to symbols in his works that go along with these themes, for example he uses the colors of the Pan-African flag (red, yellow, and green). Cortor's palette is often comprised of natural or nude shades and toned down hues, with pops of color added into the background, another portion of his works are all monochrome in either shades of brown or black.

Examples of Cortor's early style, where he abstracted the female form, include *Trilogy No. II, Verso (1)* and *Composition Jewels (2)*. His later works are more representational and include *African Women (3)* and *Classical Study No. 34 (4)*.

