Elizabeth Catlett - Biography

American, 1915-

Born in Washington, D.C. in 1915, Elizabeth Catlett was firmly rooted in a scholarly and artistic tradition. Her father, who died when Catlett was young, was a respected mathematics professor at Tuskegee Institute, where Booker T. Washington and George Carver taught years earlier. Having been denied admission to the Carnegie Institute because she was African American, Catlett attended Howard University and later earned a Master of Fine Art degree at the University of Iowa. There she studied sculpture under Grant Wood, a leading regionalist painter best known for his work American Gothic. Her graduate thesis – a sculpture of a black mother and child – received first prize in the African American Exposition held in Chicago in 1940.

After receiving her MFA, Catlett accepted a position at Dillard University in New Orleans, where she became the head of the art department. In the 1940s, Catlett moved to New York and became acquainted with a number of fellow artists, including Jacob Lawrence and writer Langston Hughes. In 1947, she produced her first major show “I Am a Negro Woman,” a series of sculptures, prints, and paintings which toured African American women's colleges in the South.

In 1946, Catlett visited Mexico on a fellowship program. She later worked at the Taller de Gráfica Popular, a workshop that sought to make art more accessible to the working-class population. A year later she married artist Francisco Mora and made Mexico her permanent home, later becoming a Mexican citizen. She became the first female professor of sculpture and head of the sculpture department at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City in 1958, and taught there until retiring in 1976. She continues to be a part of the art community in Cuernavaca.

In 1998, the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York, honored Catlett with a fifty year retrospective exhibition. Her paintings and sculptures are in the collections of many museums including New York City's Metropolitan Museum, the Baltimore Museum of Art and the New Orleans Museum of Art, as well as the Amistad Research Center. Catlett specializes in realistic art that shows her concern for preserving black cultural traditions, especially as represented in the lives of everyday, working-class people. Her work has often focused on African American women and has portrayed a deep political aspect and interest in social change.

Artist Quotes

"Art is only important to the extent that it aids in the liberation of our people."

“I have always wanted my art to service my people — to reflect us, to relate to us, to stimulate us, to make us aware of our potential. We have to create an art for liberation and for life.”