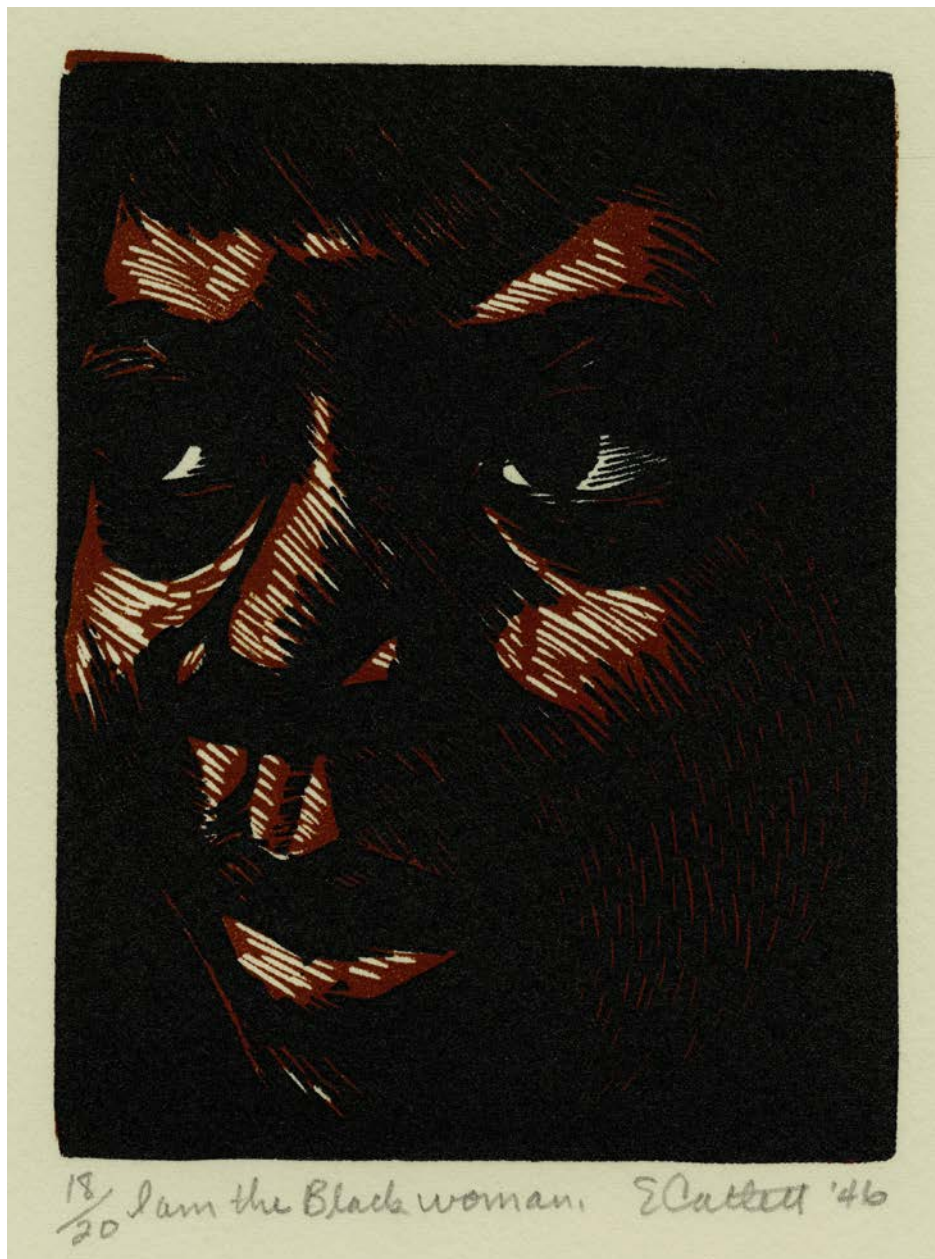


# Elizabeth Catlett

IN THE HILLSTROM MUSEUM OF ART

February 13 through April 23, 2023



Hillstrom Museum of Art

ON THE COVER: Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2021), *I Am the Black Woman*, 1946-1947, color linoleum cut on paper, 5 ¼ x 3 15⁄16 inches, Hillstrom Museum of Art purchase with endowment acquisition funds, © 2023 Mora-Catlett Family / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

# Elizabeth Catlett

## IN THE HILLSTROM MUSEUM OF ART

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with Poetry by Philip S Bryant

February 13 through April 23, 2023

Opening Reception: Monday, February 13, 7 to 9 p.m.

Combined lecture and poetry reading, by Catlett scholar Melanie Herzog and poet Philip S Bryant:

Sunday, February 26, 4 to 5:30 p.m., Wallenberg Auditorium, Nobel Hall



Hillstrom Museum of Art

Art Bridges

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Events are free and open to the public. Regular Museum hours: 9 a.m.–4 p.m. weekdays, 1–5 p.m. weekends. For any potential COVID-related restrictions that may have arisen since printing, visit [gustavus.edu/hillstrom](https://gustavus.edu/hillstrom). The Museum is generally closed when College classes are not in session and between exhibitions. To be placed on the Museum's email list, write to [hillstrom@gustavus.edu](mailto:hillstrom@gustavus.edu).

## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The Hillstrom Museum of Art is pleased to debut two works by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012) that were recently added to its collection, *I Am the Black Woman*, from 1946-1947, and *Rafaela (Sentada Niña)*, from 1951. Although long admired by scholars, collectors, and cognoscenti of African American artists, only in the past few decades has Catlett begun to gain the widespread recognition and appreciation her work deserves. This delayed acclamation is a situation that has plagued many American artists of color, including Catlett's contemporaries Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) and Eldzier Cortor (1916-2015)—Cortor in particular. Works by these two artists have been lent by the Art Bridges Foundation to be exhibited with the Museum's Catlett works, with the goal of not only bringing these prominent and important artists to the attention of our visitors but also to underscore how Black artists have perennially been neglected by the art world.

Art Bridges is the vision of philanthropist and arts patron Alice Walton, founder of the renowned Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. The mission of Art Bridges is to expand access to American art in all regions across the United States.

The Museum is grateful to Art Bridges for lending the artworks by Lawrence and Cortor and for its generous grant to support the exhibit and related activities, including the creation of this exhibition brochure and outreach for the exhibit that will attempt to connect with new visitors to the Museum.

The grant from Art Bridges also supports a visit to campus by renowned Catlett scholar Melanie Herzog, Professor Emerita of Art History at Edgewood College in Madison, Wisconsin, and Senior Lecturer in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Herzog is author of the crucial Catlett monograph, published in 2000, titled *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico*. The subtitle underscores the bi-cultural nature of the artist in her maturity—although throughout her career she kept her experience and identity as an African American in the forefront of her art, she also adopted the Mexican culture as her own after moving there in 1946 and eventually marrying her second husband, Mexican artist Francisco Mora (1922-2002), with whom she had three sons.

The Museum thanks Herzog for her efforts in presenting the Art Bridges-supported public lecture titled *Elizabeth Catlett: Kinship*, which will consider the artist,

her life and career, and her association with other African American artists, as well as the connections she felt with the Mexican people. The lecture will be presented in Wallenberg Auditorium, Nobel Hall, Gustavus Adolphus College, on Sunday, February 26, 2023, starting at 4:00, in a program that also will include readings of new poetry by exhibition collaborator Philip S Bryant.

The Museum is especially grateful to Philip S Bryant, a poet and faculty member in the Gustavus Adolphus College English Department and African/African Diaspora Studies Program. Bryant's new poem, *From a Print by Elizabeth Catlett*, is an integral part of *Elizabeth Catlett in the Hillstrom Museum of Art* and is included in the exhibit and its accompanying brochure. Bryant is interested in the relationship of the visual arts and poetry and has had students in his Creative Writing course create poetry in relation to works of art on view in the Museum. And Bryant has long been fascinated with New York School poet Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) and his close connection with Abstract Expressionist artists including Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989) and her husband Willem de Kooning (1904-1997).

### A Note About the Hillstrom Collection:

While the Hillstrom Museum of Art presents exhibitions of artists and art from a wide variety of periods, places, and cultures, the Hillstrom Collection has a particular emphasis, one that follows the collecting of Museum namesake Richard L. Hillstrom. The Collection therefore is centered on American art of the first half of the twentieth century, mostly two-dimensional works in the figurative or realist tradition. The Ashcan School, the American Scene, and Regionalism are all part of that, and the collection includes, for instance, works by Robert Henri (1865-1929), George Bellows (1882-1925), Peggy Bacon (1895-1987), and Grant Wood (1891-1942). To date, the Hillstrom Collection includes only a small number of works by African American artists from that time and in that mode. It is hoped that the addition of the two works by Catlett will be only the first of many acquisitions to address the situation. While the Museum's endowment allows a small amount of funds for the direct purchase of artworks for the Collection—as with Catlett's *I Am the Black Woman* and *Rafaela (Sentada Niña)*—most of the Museum's acquisitions are through donation. The Museum would like to encourage any persons who would

like donate artworks that would be appropriate additions to the Collection or would like to donate funds towards acquisitions (either for direct purchase or to increase the Museum's Endowment) to contact the Museum or Gustavus Adolphus College's Office of Institutional Advancement.

Donald Myers  
Director  
Hillstrom Museum of Art

## ELIZABETH CATLETT: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Catlett was born April 15, 1915, in Washington, DC, at the Freedmen's Hospital, the city's principal hospital for the African American community and the first institution to treat formerly enslaved people. Both of Catlett's parents were the offspring of formerly enslaved persons. They both worked in education. Her father, who died before her birth, was a teacher, first at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) in Alabama then in the DC school system, and her mother worked as a school truant officer.

Catlett showed an interest in art early in life, and while still in school, at Dunbar High School, she studied art with Haley Douglass, a descendant of Frederick Douglass. Knowing she wanted to be an artist, she applied to and was accepted by the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh, but her acceptance was rescinded when it was learned that she was Black. So instead, she studied art at Howard University in DC, where she earned a BS degree in 1935. Given her parents' involvement in education, and the difficulties in earning a living as an artist, she logically turned to teaching, moving to her mother's hometown of Durham, North Carolina to provide art instruction in its school system.

In 1939, Catlett moved to Iowa City, drawn there by the prospect of graduate study in art under the famed Regionalist artist Grant Wood (1891-1942) at the University of Iowa (then called the State University of Iowa). When she first met Wood, Catlett recalled in an interview with scholar Melanie Herzog that he

told her how annoyed he was with the Daughters of the American Revolution when they had refused to let famed African American singer Marian Anderson (1897-1993) perform at Constitution Hall earlier that year (Anderson instead gave her historic 1939 concert in front of the Lincoln Memorial, aided in the accomplishment by the efforts of Eleanor Roosevelt, who resigned from the DAR in protest of their treatment of the singer). Catlett, bemused by Wood's statement, realized that Wood was telling her this because he wanted her to know he wasn't racially prejudiced, noting to Herzog that she "had never been around white people in all [her] life, except to fight with them, in Durham and in Washington."

Although Catlett's middle-class background provided advantages that many African Americans did not have, she remained keenly aware of racism and was keen to fight it, including through her art. Wood's tutelage, true to his Regionalist ideals, included him telling Catlett to take what she knew best as her subject matter, and she continued to consider African American experience in her work throughout her long career. In Iowa, she faced racism in not being allowed to live in campus housing, and years later, the University named a dorm after Catlett in repentance of its earlier, racist policy.

Although Catlett had come to the University to study painting under Wood, and liked his working methods, it was in Iowa that she turned to sculpture, which was to become one of her principal mediums,

along with linocut and lithographic prints. Catlett graduated in 1940 as one of the first three to receive an MFA degree from the University, the first African American to earn that degree, and the first to earn it in sculpture. Her thesis project included the creation of a limestone sculpture titled *Negro Mother and Child*, an early example of her embrace of the maternal theme in her sculpture. The work won first place in the 1940 “American Negro Exposition,” also known as the “Black World’s Fair” and held in the Chicago Coliseum to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the Civil War and its accomplishment of abolishing slavery.

Catlett moved to New Orleans next, in 1940, to work at Dillard University, where she chaired the art department and taught painting, drawing, and printmaking. A memorable incident from her time at that historically Black institution was when she arranged to take her students to see a Picasso exhibit at the Delgado Museum (now the New Orleans Museum of Art)—which had to be done through back channels on a day the museum was not open to the public, since it was in a city park that was off limits to Black people.

The artist summered in Chicago while working at Dillard and there she met artist Charles White (1918-1979), whom she married in 1941. Other important African American artists Catlett met in Chicago included Archibald Motley, Jr. (1891-1981) and Eldzier Cortor (1916-2015), the latter featured in this exhibit in the painting *Southern Souvenir No. II*, on loan from Art Bridges. White (whom Catlett divorced in 1946) and Motley have been the subjects of recent important exhibits (*Charles White: A Retrospective* was presented by the Art Institute Chicago in 2018 and also appeared at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2018-2019, while *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist* was presented by the Whitney Museum of American Art, also in New York, in 2015-2016).

Catlett and her husband moved to New York in 1942. She taught art classes for adults at the George Washington Carver School in Harlem. She studied lithography at the Art Students League, and also studied sculpture, privately, with Belarusian-born artist Ossip Zadkine (1888-1967). She became acquainted in New York with Black artists and intellectuals, including W. E. B. Dubois (1868-1963), authors Langston Hughes (1901-1967) and Ralph Ellison (1914-1994), and painters Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) and Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), the last of these the creator of the painting

featured in this exhibit titled *In the Heart of the Black Belt*, lent by Art Bridges. Catlett and her husband were well known in the African American community in New York. They each were awarded a Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship, and in 1946 this funded their traveling to Mexico.

Catlett lived in Mexico virtually the remainder of her life. She returned to the US to obtain a divorce from White in 1946. She became acquainted with Mexican printmaker and muralist Francisco Mora when she joined the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), a printmaking workshop in Mexico City dedicated to the promotion of social causes and education. She and Mora were married in 1947. Catlett became a mother, a recurring subject in her work, with the birth of her sons Francisco, Juan, and David.

The artist remained with TGP until 1966, and among her early works there was an important series of fifteen linocuts in the 1946-1947 series *The Negro Woman*, an example of the first work of which, *I Am the Black Woman*, is in the Hillstrom Collection. The series was reprinted by Catlett in 1989, and earlier she had changed its overall title to *The Black Woman* and changed the title of the first print from *I Am the Negro Woman*.

In Mexico, Catlett soon began working earnestly in sculpture, although she continued making prints throughout her career, especially during her association with the TGP. One of her most well-known works is *The Sharecropper*, a linocut done at TGP that first appeared in 1952 and that features the head and shoulders of a Black woman with careworn yet powerful features. Among Catlett’s many sculptures, in a variety of materials, are her 1968 red cedar carved figure titled *Homage to My Young Black Sister*, a semi-abstract female with a raised fist that was a tribute to the Civil Rights moment, and her 1971 mahogany carving *Magic Mask*, one of a number of works informed by the artist’s knowledge of African masks.

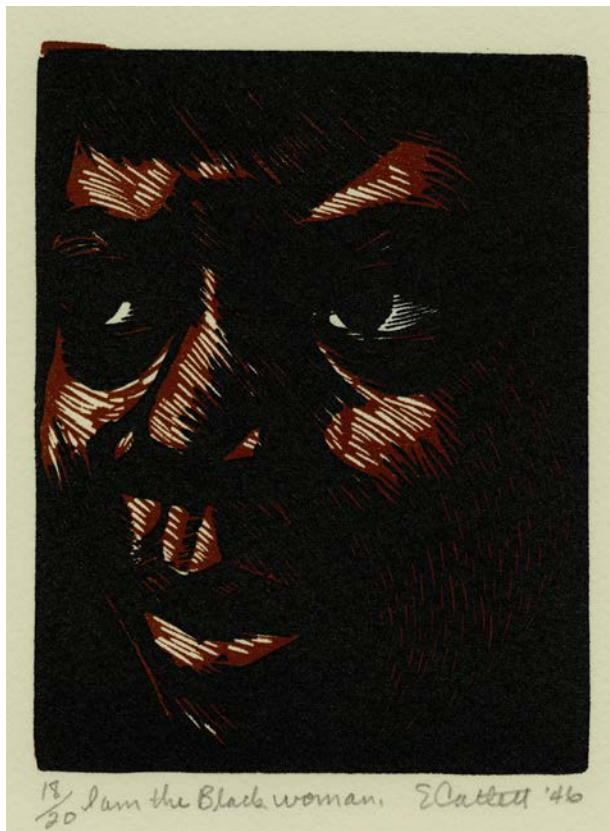
While continuing to use her art in support of African Americans and the fight against racism, Catlett also adopted the Mexican culture as her own and featured it in her work. She met famed Mexican artists Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), Diego Rivera (1886-1957), and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974). Her own work was very much in consonance with the socially conscious approach of these artists, and her typical avoidance of purely abstract imagery was to let her work speak readily and directly to those whose lives she wished to support and improve through her art.

Catlett continued her teaching while in Mexico. She was the first female professor of sculpture at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas in Mexico City starting in 1958 and soon after was named the head of its sculpture department, despite facing protests that she was a woman and a foreigner. She continued teaching there until retiring in 1975.

After retirement, Catlett moved to Cuernavaca, Morelos, about 50 miles south of Mexico City. She and her husband bought an apartment in Manhattan in 1983 and they split their time each year between there and Mexico. For a number of years after she'd moved to Mexico, Catlett was not allowed to return to the United States. Because of her association with the left-leaning TGP, she was arrested in 1959 as a "foreign agitator" by the Mexican government, and not long after, the US

government declared her an undesirable alien. Catlett was not able to visit her ailing mother in the States before she died in 1962. She was, however—thanks to a letter-writing campaign on her behalf to the State Department—able to gain permission to return to the US to attend a 1971 exhibit of her work at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Catlett became a naturalized Mexican citizen in 1962. The US reinstated her citizenship in 2002.

Marking Catlett's death in Cuernavaca on April 2, 2012, the *New York Times* concluded its extended discussion of the artist and her career by noting that Catlett "was more concerned with the social dimension of her art than its novelty or originality," and quoted the artist, "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."



Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2021), *I Am the Black Woman*, 1946-1947, color linoleum cut on paper, 5 ¼ x 3 15/16 inches, Hillstrom Museum of Art purchase with endowment acquisition funds, © 2023 Mora-Catlett Family / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2021), *Rafaela (Sentada Niña)*, 1951, color lithograph on paper, 9 ½ x 7 ½ inches, Hillstrom Museum of Art purchase with endowment acquisition funds, © 2023 Mora-Catlett Family / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

FROM A PRINT BY ELIZABETH CATLETT

For Nina Louise & Corah Blue

“Look at me, tell me what you see,  
First, *I am the black woman*.  
No more, no less,  
And what you can see  
Good peoples,  
Is mostly, what you’ll get.

I am what you’ve lost  
And I am what you found.  
I am what you feel  
When you can finally stand  
On solid ground.

I am what you’ve puzzled over  
And only begun  
to ponder,  
I am what you’ve briefly glimpsed,  
When you looked, way over yonder.

I am the Rock; I am the river,  
The far distant shore.  
I am *the blues player*, soothsayer,  
Shape shifter and more.

I am *The sharecropper*,  
Hip Hopper,  
High stepper,  
And Bebopper.

I am the counter narrative.  
I am the lost and found heritage,  
The one, Soul, *Survivor*,  
I am like *The Sorrow Songs!*

I am Langston Hughes’ *Weary Blues*,  
When you play it slow,  
And all night long.

I am your *Magic Mask*.  
I am your sad mournful wail,  
When it’s so late at night,  
And it’s hard for them to listen,  
And so hard for them to tell,

If I am the most loud and joyful laugh.  
That always keeps laughing, right  
here in the present,  
Yet will always be laughing,  
somewhere in the past.



I am the Alpha.  
I am the Omega.  
I am the soft whispered sighs,  
Of Sigma and Beta.

I am the Divine Comedy.  
I am Greek Tragedy, pure French Farce,  
I am the light that shines all night.  
I am the deep and insistent dark.

I am the blood.  
I am the life.  
I am the marrow and the bone,  
Of every black woman  
Who was ever was,  
And every black woman,  
Who done packed her bags  
And gone.

I am the Nile, the Mississippi,  
the Congo,  
The Euphrates.  
I am those solid hips,  
Frizzy hair, eyes and lips,  
That drive men crazy.

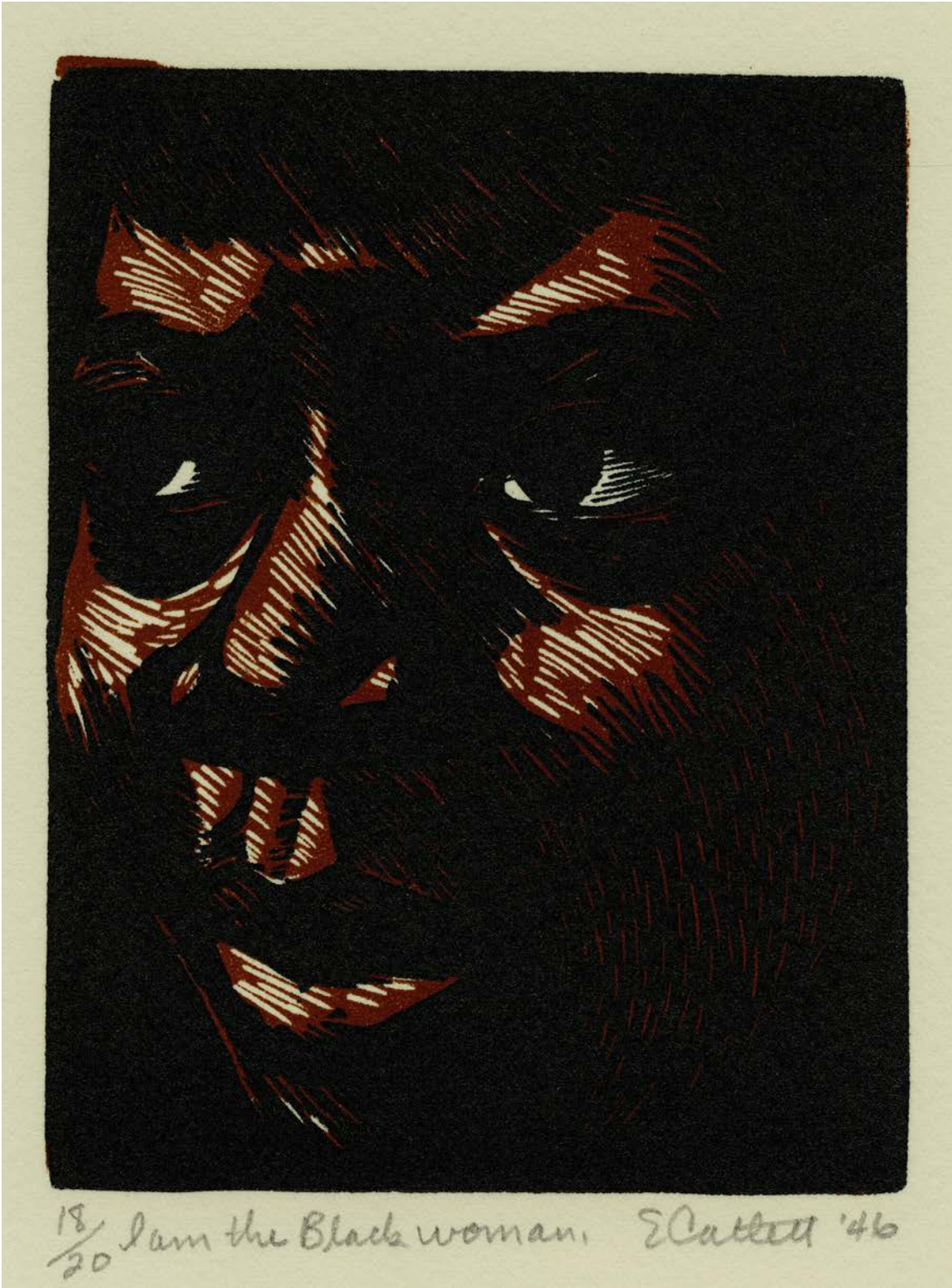
I am the preacher.  
I am the choir.  
I am the brimstone  
I am the fire.

I am the singer.  
I am the shaker.  
I am the molder.  
I am the maker.

I am the oldest drawing  
In all of human history,  
Yet still to this day,  
I Remain a mystery.

So, look at me closely,  
Tell me what you see,  
*I am the black woman*, first,  
No more, no less –  
And, what you see, good peoples,  
Will always be, what you get.”

— Philip S Bryant



## ELIZABETH CATLETT (1915-2012)

### *I Am the Black Woman*, 1946-1947

Color linoleum cut on paper, 5 ¼ x 3 15/16 inches

Hillstrom Museum of Art purchase with endowment acquisition funds

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This small but powerful image is the initial work in a series of 15 linocuts that Catlett made early in her association with the TGP (Taller de Gráfica Popular) printmaking cooperative in Mexico City. The artist's approach—in creating a series, in a narrative and relatively realistic style that would be easily accessible to many people and would more readily spread their socialist goals—reflects the typical strategies of the TGP. The series, originally named *The Negro Woman* (while this print was originally called *I Am the Negro Woman*), is a catalogue of the “oppressions, accomplishments, and aspirations of black women” (in the words of Catlett scholar Melanie Herzog). The series title and that of *I Am the Black Woman* was changed by the artist in the early 1970s when she began to exhibit her works again in the US and updated the self-identificatory nomenclature. The series was re-printed by the artist in 1989. By then, Catlett's works were gaining recognition, and the small numbers in the original edition of *I Am the Negro Woman* meant there were not enough examples available to meet demand, especially when the prints were shown in a 1989 exhibit at the Jamaica Arts Center (Queens, New York) titled *Elizabeth Catlett: Print Retrospective*.

The 15 individual titles in the series, when read sequentially, form a narrative: 1. *I Am the Black Woman*; 2. *I have always worked hard in America*; 3. *In the Fields*; 4. *In other folks' homes*; 5. *I have given the world my songs* [also known as *Blues*]; 6. *In Sojourner Truth I fought for the rights of women as well as Negroes*; 7. *In Harriet Tubman I helped hundreds to freedom*; 8. *In Phyllis Wheatley I proved intellectual equality in the midst of slavery*; 9. *My role has been important in the struggle to organize the unorganized*; 10. *I have studied in ever increasing numbers*; 11. *My reward has been bars between me and the rest of the land*; 12. *I have special reservations*; 13. *Special houses*; 14. *And a special fear for my loved ones*; 15. *My right is a future of equality with other Americans*.

In addition to images of the three women specifically named (Truth, Tubman, and Wheatley), the series includes scenes of Black women laboring, singing while playing guitar, standing against a backdrop of tenement housing, and, in the penultimate image about a “special fear,” a prone Black man with a noose around his neck. The final image is a Black woman looking upwards, hopeful that her right to a future as an equal to other Americans will someday be honored.

The last image is presumably meant to depict the same Black woman from the first print of the series. It is tempting to try to read into the features of this woman those of Catlett herself, but she did not adopt her own portrait for her images, which are meant to stand for all Black women. The works in the series are all powerful and moving—and as Melanie Herzog has noted, they are at once monumental and intimate. Herzog has also noted the interactive nature of the series, in which viewers read the titles and themselves become the first-person “I” in those titles, which she compares to the “call and response” strategy found in some African and African American music, preaching, and other discourse. It should be noted that poet Philip S Bryant in his new poem for the exhibit, *From a Print by Elizabeth Catlett*, had the same “call and response” mechanism in mind in the juxtaposition of his poetry with Catlett's print.

As Melanie Herzog has noted, in addition to the influence from other prints, especially ones made in a series and done for the TGP, Catlett was also influenced in her group *I Am the Black Woman* by other artists, including, perhaps most notably, the groups of paintings done by her friend, artist Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), such as his 60 paintings known as the *Migration Series*, or his 10 paintings collectively titled *In the Heart of the Black Belt*, the titular image of which is in this exhibition.



## ELIZABETH CATLETT (1915-2012)

**Rafaela (Sentada Niña)**, 1951

Color lithograph on paper, 9 ½ x 7 ½ inches

Hillstrom Museum of Art purchase with endowment acquisition funds

© 2023 Mora-Catlett Family / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

When Catlett went to Mexico in 1946 on her Rosenwald Fellowship, it was with the purpose of creating a series of linoleum cuts, sculptures, and paintings relating to her concern for the oppression and struggles of Black women, but also to recognize their achievements. Her series titled *I Am the Black Woman* was a primary result of this effort. But when she settled permanently in Mexico starting in 1947 and began her family with second husband, Mexican artist Francisco Mora, known as Pancho, she expanded to her strong identity as a Black woman to include her identification with the hopes and trials of the Mexican people. As Catlett scholar Melanie Herzog has noted, she began to understand the idea of *mestizaje*, Spanish for “mixed race” and signifying the blended ancestries of many in Mexico that included indigenous, Spanish, and African heritage.

Catlett immersed herself in the culture of Mexico, where she felt more comfortable in her daily life and experienced far less of the daily direct and systemic racism she’d known in the US. As Melanie Herzog has noted, in Mexico “blackness was not constructed in the same way” as in the US, and without experiencing racism as a daily occurrence, Catlett had “space to think about identity more broadly.”

Both in her printmaking and in her sculpture, she began to explore Mexican subjects in addition to African American ones. While her children were young and she spent much of her time raising them, she worked primarily on prints. The eldest, Francisco (called Panchito) was born in 1947, while Juan was born in 1949, and David in 1951. Catlett returned to immersive efforts in sculpture after David began kindergarten in 1956.

*Rafaela*, also known as *Sentado Niña* or *Sentada Niña*, is from the same year Catlett’s youngest was born, and it seems to show a maternal tenderness towards the young girl depicted in the color lithograph. *Rafaela*’s specific identity has not been discerned, but she may well have been the child of a neighbor or possibly a friend associated with the Taller de Gráfica Popular, the prints workshop where the artist was still a member.

The serious visage of the girl and her compacted form seated on the ground bears traces of pre-Columbian

sculpture. Just as Catlett had embraced African art for her work with African American subjects, so did she now embrace indigenous Mexican art and its styles. She studied sculpture in Mexico with Francisco Zúñiga (1912-1998) who was interested in pre-Hispanic artistic methods and styles.

*Rafaela* is a colored lithograph. Catlett had studied lithography, one of the two primary printmaking methods she practiced, in Chicago at the South Side Community Art Center (where she also taught), and in New York at the Art Students League, under artist Harry Sternberg (1904-2001). Lithography allows for a relatively fluid creation of imagery, since it begins with a freely drawn image using a lithographic crayon on a lithographic stone. Litho is stylistically quite different from the linoleum cut method, Catlett’s other primary type of print (such as *I Am the Black Woman*), in which the lines must be carved out of the linoleum matrix, a more stilted process. Catlett had first worked in linocut as a student at Howard University in DC, under James Lesesne Wells (1902-1993), who was associated with the Harlem Renaissance.

A version of *Rafaela* done as a screen print—a medium less frequently used by the artist—was shown in her 1971 exhibit at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the exhibit for which Catlett was finally allowed to return to the US, after a letter-writing campaign to the State Department. An example of that print recently viewed online is dated in pencil, 1959, and the artist has also penciled in “*Rafaela*” as the title. The colored lithographs of the image, including this work, typically have the date of 1951, along with the artist’s signature, though there is an example published in the 1984 study by Catlett scholar and friend, artist Samella Lewis, with “*Rafaela*” inscribed as its title, along with Catlett’s signature and date of 1951.

The two prints by Catlett in the Hillstrom Museum of Art provide a significant, albeit abbreviated, indication of major aspects of her career in printmaking. Both her perennial concern for others of her own ancestry, and her expanded concern for her new identity as a Mexican woman with a family with Mexican forebears, are encompassed in the two small but potent works.

## JACOB LAWRENCE (1917-2000)

### ***In the Heart of the Black Belt***, 1947

Tempera on board, 20 x 24 inches

Art Bridges

© 2023 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Jacob Lawrence was born September 7, 1917, in Atlantic City, New Jersey. His early years were spent in Easton, Pennsylvania, and in Philadelphia until 1930 when he, his mother, and his siblings lived in Harlem, in New York City. As a young teen, Lawrence studied arts and crafts at an after-school daycare program, Utopia Children's House, with Charles Alston (1907-1977), a painter associated with the Harlem Renaissance. He continued studying under Alston at the Harlem Art Workshop after dropping out of school at age 16, and later, at Alston's urging, studied with sculptor Augusta Savage (1892-1962) at the Harlem Community Art Center.

Lawrence rented space in Alston's studio from 1934 to 1940 and began painting scenes of life in Harlem. It was at this time that he began the use of water-based paints such as tempera, a practice he kept throughout his career.

Lawrence was one of the first nationally recognized African American artists, and he typically portrayed African American contemporary life as well as historical African Americans, in a semi-abstracted and simplified style. He became known for his series of paintings, including, early in his career, groups based on the lives of historical Blacks such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. The earliest of these series, painted when Lawrence was just 21 years old, was 41 works depicting the life and deeds of 18th century Haitian general Toussaint L'Ouverture, a prominent figure in the Haitian Revolution of slaves against the French. Lawrence's paintings in this series were exhibited in 1938 at the Baltimore Museum of Art as part of its exhibit of *Contemporary Negro Art*. Around this time, the artist was hailed in *Newsweek* magazine as "a discovery."

In 1940, the artist was awarded a Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship to create a series of paintings on "the great Negro migration during the World War," when hundreds of thousands of African Americans relocated from the rural South to the urban North after World War I. The result of this effort was Lawrence's famed *Migration Series*. The 60 paintings in this group, dating 1940-1941,

are now shared between the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC. Twenty-six of the panels were published in *Fortune* magazine in November 1941, and they were shown in the prominent Downtown Gallery at that time, making Lawrence the first Black artist to be represented by a major New York gallery.

A little before this, in July, Lawrence married fellow artist Gwendolyn Knight (1913-2005), who had also studied under Augusta Savage. During World War II, Lawrence was drafted into the Coast Guard, in October 1943. Although he served as a public affairs specialist, he continued painting and documented the war experience in a series of 48 now-lost paintings.

The Lawrences met artist Elizabeth Catlett in the 1940s after she and her first husband, artist Charles White, moved to New York in 1942. They were to remain friends throughout their lives, until Lawrence's death from lung cancer on June 9, 2000.

In 1945, Lawrence was awarded a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, and in 1946 he was recruited by artist Josef Albers (1888-1976) to teach at the famed summer art program at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. The Lawrences traveled there in a private train car that had been hired for them so they would not have to move to the "colored" section of the train when they entered the South.

In 1947, Lawrence was again commissioned by *Fortune* magazine to create a series of works, resulting in this painting, *In the Heart of the Black Belt* (also the name of the series), and nine others. The artist had spent most of his life in the North and this new series reflects his encounters with racism in the South, more overt than in other parts of the country. The works were meant to show conditions for Blacks in the South following WWII, and Lawrence traveled to Mississippi and Alabama, and to New Orleans and Memphis.

Only three of the works in the series were published in *Fortune*, in August 1948, in a two-page spread titled "In the Heart of the Black Belt," which was accompanied by



Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), *In the Heart of the Black Belt*, 1947, tempera on board, 20 x 24 inches, Art Bridges, © 2023 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

a brief introductory text written by Walker Evans (1903-1975), staff photographer at the magazine, who noted Lawrence's "deliberately shocking economy of artistic method" and termed the works "daring."

While working on the series, Lawrence observed that "Negroes...are working hard to obtain equality of economic, educational, and social status, which has been denied several millions of Negroes over three hundred years." Lawrence submitted extended captions with his paintings. In his text for *In the Heart of the Black Belt*, he had noted that within a hundred-mile radius of Memphis, around four million Blacks lived—a third of the entire Black population of the US. *Fortune* substituted Lawrence's observation of masses of people being

corralled together into a message of Blacks being part of the efficient operation of modernized agriculture. But the posture of the people in Lawrence's image, along with the downcast faces of many of them, and their working attire, clearly indicates the anxious reality of Black life as he observed it in the South.

*NOTE: portions of this text derive from texts supplied by Art Bridges.*



Eldzier Cortor (1916-2015), *Southern Souvenir No. II*, c.1948, Oil on board on Masonite on wood strainer, 21 x 50 inches, Art Bridges, © 2023 Eldzier Cortor / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



## ELDZIER CORTOR (1916-2015)

### ***Southern Souvenir No. II***, c.1948

Oil on board on Masonite on wood strainer, 21 x 50 inches

Art Bridges

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Eldzier Cortor was born on January 10, 1916, in Richmond, Virginia, but grew up on Chicago's South Side. After high school, he began his art education at the Art Institute of Chicago, obtaining a degree in 1936. He continued his studies at the Institute of Design at Columbia University (1942-1943) and then the Pratt Graphic Art Center, both in New York City. While still in Chicago, Cortor became acquainted with Elizabeth Catlett, including through her association with the South Side Community Art Center, of which he was a co-founder. He and Catlett remained friends and visited later in Mexico.

In both 1944 and 1945, Cortor received Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship grants, which supported his travel to the Sea Islands off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. He was first introduced to Africanism among the Gullah people there, whose female population would become prominent influences in his works. Fascinated by their retention of longstanding African culture and language while living in the Western Hemisphere, Cortor recounts, "As a Negro artist, I felt a special interest in painting Negroes whose cultural tradition had only been slightly influenced by whites." He admired their expression of folk mythology in painting, the symbolism used, and the continuation of their indigenous African language.

In 1946, *Life* magazine included a work by Cortor depicting one of his familiar elongated Black female figures. Shortly after that publication, the artist was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, to support travel to Jamaica, Cuba, and Haiti, and to further examine the world of Western Africanism in his art. For decades, Cortor focused on the depiction of the Black female semi-nude, one of the first Black artists to do so. Of his figural works, he stated, "The Black Woman represents the Black race. She is the Black Spirit; she conveys a feeling of eternity and the continuance of life."

Cortor lived in New York from 1952 until his death on November 26, 2015. An obituary published by the *New York Times* included a striking photographic portrait of him taken years earlier in Chicago by fellow African American artist Gordon Parks (1912-2006).

Although known for his celebratory depictions of the Black female body, in *Southern Souvenir No. II*, Cortor considered a darker representation of Black American life of his time. The "souvenir" referenced in the title of this work recalls the horrifying tradition of lynching in the American South, where body parts were often taken and regarded as trophies. The stylized and fragmented female forms in the painting are not only torn apart physically but also stripped of their identities, calling attention to the racial issues of this period. The newspapers seen at the center of the painting indicate states infamous for lynching. Layered with symbols of decline, the representation of the torn wallpaper, decaying tree, and unkempt brick wall further evokes the dismal existence of Southern Black Americans.

Cortor may be referring in this work to an incident of vandalism that occurred when his 1947 painting titled *Americana*, depicting a Black female nude, was on display at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. As noted in a study by Chantal D. Drake, a letter from the Institute to Cortor described what occurred: "...some vandal knocked the nipples off the breasts of your nude, *Americana*, and slashed the belly with a knife." The nipples had been painted with thick paint (as in *Southern Souvenir No. II*), and after they were found in the trash, they were restored to the work and the slash in it was repaired. This damage to Cortor's painting echoes the mutilation of Black lynching victims, and the artist may have had it in mind when he painted *Southern Souvenir No. II*.

*NOTE: portions of this text derive from texts supplied by Art Bridges.*



Elizabeth Catlett and scholar Melanie Herzog in 2005 (photograph courtesy Melanie Herzog)





Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2021), *Rafaela (Sentada Niña)*, 1951, color lithograph on paper, 9 ½ x 7 ½ inches, Hillstrom Museum of Art purchase with endowment acquisition funds, © 2023 Mora-Catlett Family / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



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