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200 Eastern Parkway

Brooklyn, NY 11238

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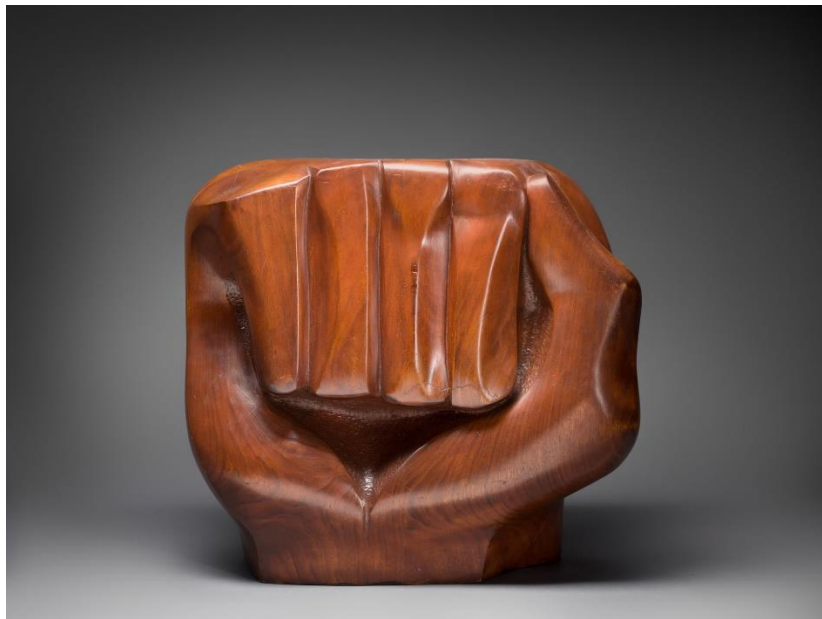
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718.501.6354

press@brooklynmuseum.org

Brooklyn Museum and the National Gallery of Art Announce *Elizabeth Catlett: A Black Revolutionary Artist and All That It Implies*

The major retrospective exhibition brings together more than 200 works across sculpture, prints, paintings, and ephemera, shining a spotlight on a defining artist of the twentieth century.



Elizabeth Catlett. *Black Unity*, 1968. Cedar. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2014.11. © 2024 Mora-Catlett Family / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. (Photo: Edward C. Robison III)

The retrospective exhibition *Elizabeth Catlett: A Black Revolutionary Artist and All That It Implies* showcases the enduring legacy of Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012) as a visionary artist and an unwavering activist. As the most comprehensive presentation devoted to Catlett in the United States, it features more than 200 works, including well-known sculpture and prints, rare paintings and drawings, and important ephemera. The exhibition is co-organized by the Brooklyn Museum and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and presented in collaboration with the Art Institute of Chicago.

Catlett was an avowed feminist, lifelong activist, and deft formalist. Coming of age as an artist during the 1930s and 1940s, an era marked by the Great Depression and global economic turmoil, she witnessed class inequality, racial violence, and U.S. expansionism, which continue to shape the world today. Catlett passionately addressed these injustices through her politically engaged art. Her prints and sculptures draw on organic abstraction, American and Mexican modernism, and African art, centering the trials and triumphs of Black American and Mexican women.

For nearly a century—from Jim Crow segregation to the McCarthy era and the Cold War to President Obama’s first term—Catlett dedicated her life to the pursuit of formal rigor and social justice, which she understood to be mutually reinforcing. A transnational artist, Catlett worked in Washington, DC, Chicago, and New York before settling in Mexico, where she lived and taught for more than sixty years. She embraced a political radicalism that merged the goals of the Black Left in the United States with the lessons of the Mexican Revolution. Through her dual practices in sculpture and printmaking, Catlett remained committed to depicting the strength and struggles of both Black American and Mexican communities.

Organized chronologically and thematically, the exhibition traces Catlett’s career of creative artistry and bold political activism. From protests she staged while in high school against lynchings in Washington, DC, to her academic pursuits at Howard University and the University of Iowa, Catlett’s path was marked by a dedication to developing rigorous formal excellence and progressive social politics that deftly brought together issues of race, gender, and class. After becoming the first-ever recipient of a master of fine arts degree at the University of Iowa, Catlett continued her education studying ceramics at the Art Institute of Chicago, and honing her practice in lithography at the South Side Community Art Center.

Catlett then spent four years in New York, where she studied the tenets of modernist European sculpture and became a part of a community of artists and intellectuals who coalesced around Popular Front politics. *Elizabeth Catlett: A Black Revolutionary Artist and All That It Implies* includes a number of Catlett’s early paintings and sketches from this period, defying notions that she was exclusively a printmaker and sculptor and underscoring her versatility as an artist.

Catlett's early interest in art and politics was cemented in 1946 when she went to Mexico City to pursue printmaking at the highly regarded Mexican artist collective Taller de Gráfica Popular. Catlett ultimately became a Mexican citizen and an active participant in leftist cultural circles in Mexico City and

Cuernavaca. While raising a family and teaching in Mexico, Catlett never lost sight of the Black liberation struggle in the United States. As she told *Ebony* magazine in 1970, “I am inspired by Black people and Mexican people, my two peoples.”

Through bold line work in prints and voluptuous forms in sculpture, Catlett draws parallels between the female experience in the United States and Mexico. In *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* (1968) and her public monument, *Floating Family* (1996), Catlett examines intersectional feminism and familial bonds through the medium of sculpture, referencing Brancusi, Henry Moore, historical African and Mesoamerican sculpture. The exhibition includes a selection of Catlett’s most iconic prints, from the *Sharecropper* and *Black Woman* series of the 1940s and 1950s to works such as *Watts/Detroit/Washington/Harlem/Newark*, inspired by radical political activism of the 1960s and 1970s.

“Elizabeth Catlett’s artistry and activism resonate powerfully in today’s world, reminding us of ongoing national and international struggles against inequality and injustice. The exhibition not only celebrates Catlett’s contributions to the art world but also brings a historical voice into the present—showing how generations of Black feminists continue to inspire us to fight for a more equitable and just society,” says Catherine Morris, Sackler Senior Curator, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum.

“In honoring Elizabeth Catlett’s legacy, we hope that her work will resonate as a poignant reminder of art’s power to ignite change and unite communities in the ongoing struggle for equality and liberation. A Black revolutionary artist, Catlett made real, material sacrifices—including nine years of political exile—to speak truth to power and to make art for all. Her political conviction was matched by her aesthetic principles. She was capacious in her artistic influences, and while she loved abstraction, she loved her people more,” says Dalila Scruggs, Augusta Savage Curator of African American Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The exhibition title takes inspiration from a talk Catlett gave in 1970, following a decade of exile from the United States in response to her political activism in Mexico. Catlett said: “I have been, and am currently, and always hope to be a Black Revolutionary Artist and all that it implies.” Her impassioned speech highlights the exhibition’s core themes: a commitment to formal rigor, Black empowerment through progressive activism, and a belief that everyday people deserve access to fine art. The works throughout the presentation are evidence of Catlett’s enduring legacy of driving social change, both through her contributions to the art world and the movements she championed.

ACCOMPANYING PUBLICATION

The traveling retrospective will be accompanied by a book offering a revelatory look at Catlett and her nearly century-long life, highlighting overlooked works alongside iconic masterpieces. Edited by Dalila Scruggs and co-published with the University of Chicago Press, the book’s essays address a range of topics, including Catlett’s early development as an artist-activist, the impact of political exile on her work,

her pedagogical legacy, her achievement as a social realist printmaker, her work with the arts community of Chicago's South Side, and the diverse influences that shaped her practice.

CREDITS

Elizabeth Catlett: A Black Revolutionary Artist and All That It Implies is organized by Dalila Scruggs, Augusta Savage Curator of African American Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum; Catherine Morris, Sackler Senior Curator, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum; and Mary Lee Corlett, Associate Curator of Modern Prints and Drawings (retired), National Gallery of Art; with Rashieda Witter, Curatorial Assistant, National Gallery of Art, and Carla Forbes, Curatorial Assistant, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum. The exhibition is organized by the Brooklyn Museum and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in collaboration with the Art Institute of Chicago.

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