

ELIZABETH CATLETT

(1915, Washington, DC, USA – 2012, Cuernavaca, Mexico)

Elizabeth Catlett (American and Mexican, 1915–2012) was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, whose extraordinary seven-decade practice transformed modern sculpture and printmaking across the United States and Mexico.

Born in Washington, D.C., Catlett came of age within the realities of racial segregation in the United States. Denied admission to the Carnegie Institute of Technology because of her race, she instead earned a BS in Art, cum laude, from Howard University in 1935, and in 1940 became the first African American woman to receive an MFA from the University of Iowa. She went on to study ceramics at the Art Institute of Chicago, lithography at the Art Students League, and sculpture with Ossip Zadkine.

In 1946, at thirty-one, Catlett arrived in Mexico on a Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship to develop prints depicting the experiences of Black women. What began as a temporary stay became a six-decade home and a profound reorientation of her life and work. Rather than diminishing her connection to African American life, her years abroad let her recognize continuities between struggles against racism, colonialism, and oppression across borders. As she told *Ebony* in 1970, “I am inspired by Black people and Mexican people, my two peoples.”

Catlett became a Mexican citizen in 1962 and built a life there with artist Francisco Mora (1922–2002), with whom she raised three sons.

At the center of Catlett’s work is Black women. “Because I am a woman and know how a woman feels in body and mind,” she explained, “I sculpt, draw, and print women, generally black women.” Across sculpture, drawing, and printmaking, she portrayed women as mothers and workers, organizers and historical actors, insisting on their visibility at a moment when Black women remained largely absent from the history of Western art. This commitment was rooted in her own family history, stories of a grandmother born into slavery, and of a mother whose work as a Washington, D.C. social worker brought home accounts of the exploitation Black women endured.

For Catlett, the histories of the United States and Mexico, and of her two peoples, could never be separated neatly, a testament to an art shaped simultaneously by cultural identity, political consciousness, community, and formal innovation.

Her work is held in major public collections including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Museum of Modern Art; the Whitney Museum; the National Gallery of Art; the Museo de Arte Moderno and Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City; the Reina Sofía, Madrid; Tate, London; and the Schomburg Center, New York.

In recent years her work has received renewed institutional attention. *Elizabeth Catlett: A Black Revolutionary Artist and All That It Implies* brought together more than 150 works and traveled from the Brooklyn Museum (2024–25) to the National Gallery of Art (2025) and the Art Institute of Chicago (2025–26). *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett: From the Collection of Samella Lewis*, drawn from the holdings of Catlett’s former student and lifelong friend, is on view at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit through 2027.

The gallery will inaugurate its representation with a solo exhibition in Chicago in November 2027.

MARIANE IBRAHIM



Elizabeth Catlett in her studio, 1942. Courtesy of The Charles White Archives.

MARIANE IBRAHIM