“Art is important only to the extent that it helps in the liberation of our people,” proclaimed printmaker and sculptor Elizabeth Catlett, who has been fiercely committed to the social responsibility of art throughout her entire career. “It must answer a question, or wake somebody up, or give a shove in the right direction.” *Sharecropper*, 1970, assuredly accomplishes those goals. [See slide 15]

Born in Washington, D.C. to schoolteacher parents, Catlett acquired a career in art when few opportunities existed for women or blacks. She received her B.S. from Washington’s Howard University in 1937, where she studied under the noted art historian James Porter*. In 1940, she became the first person to receive an M.F.A. from the State University in Iowa, where her teacher was Grant Wood (1891-1942). His depiction of a Midwestern couple—*American Gothic*—was exhibited at the Art Institute in 1930, immediately acquired by the museum, and quickly became one of America’s most popular paintings. It was Wood who encouraged Catlett to find her lifelong subject matter. As she recalled: “Grant Wood, one of the first white people that I had contact with, emphasized that we should paint what we know most intimately … and my people have always been just that.” Her thesis project, a sculpture depicting what would become one of her major images, a mother and child, won the first prize in sculpture in Chicago’s *American Negro Exposition* in 1940.

In Chicago, Catlett met and married artist Charles White (see pages 55-57), and the two of them taught in and travelled throughout the rural segregated South during 1942 and 1943. They returned to New York where Catlett taught in public school in Harlem. [See map page 23] “I came from a middle class family…. The school brought me into contact with working people. For the first time I began to get an understanding of the great hunger for art and culture of ordinary black people.”

The award of a *Julius Rosenwald Fund* fellowship in 1946 enabled Catlett to travel with White to Mexico. Her burgeoning social commitment was reinforced by the ideals of the great *Mexican muralists* and their use of *Social Realist* art to teach and reach the masses. Working collectively at the legendary populist printmaking studio, Taller de Gráfica Popular (People’s Graphic Arts Workshop) in Mexico City also had profound impact. “In the Taller de Gráfica … I learned that art is not something that people learn to do individually,” she said, “that who does it is not important, but its use and its effects on people are what is most important.” Among Catlett’s first works at Taller de Gráfica was her powerful *Negro Women* series of the mid-1940s that a later critic declared had “foreshadowed the women’s movement of the 1970s.”

Catlett chose to make Mexico her home. After she and White divorced, she
married Mexican artist Francisco Mora, eventually acquiring Mexican citizenship. In the 1950s, she also resumed her teaching career and became the first woman to head the sculpture department at the National School of Fine Arts at the National Autonomous University in Mexico City.

A compelling example of Catlett’s dominant theme—black women—is the Art Institute’s print entitled Sharecropper. The woman’s gaunt, strong face dominates the composition. Her features are sensitively evoked, revealing the artist’s fascination with African physiognomy. Catlett’s striking point of view, in which she positions the image so that we look up, inspires awe. She also favors realism because, as she professed, when “you use your art for the service of the people, struggling people, ... only realism is meaningful.” A realistic depiction “reflects us ... relates to us ... stimulates us ... makes us aware of our potential.”

Catlett’s profound empathy for black people and their suffering, combined with her masterful technique, gives the image its strength. A dazzling variety of strokes and textures, from the thatching of the straw hat to the sharp staccato lines, create the composition. There is a hardness and strength to the lines that mirror the durability and toughness of this woman farmer, down to the sharp pin that fastens her shirt. “Technique was the main thing to learn from art schools,” Catlett declared. “It's so important—technique—how to do things well. It's the difference between offering our beautiful people art and offering them ineptitude....”

With the print’s reference to the South and its dignified depiction of the rural worker, Catlett’s work resembles Harvest Talk by her former husband. [See slide 13] Sharecropping—renting farmland, then paying rent to the owner in crops instead of money—was a frequent occupation of African Americans after the Civil War. Farm mechanization and decreased cotton acreage have largely ended the practice. Catlett cut the linocut, or linoleum block, in 1957. She didn’t print it, however, until 1970—perhaps as a forceful reminder to Lyndon Johnson, president from 1963 to 1967, that despite his vast anti-poverty programs of the mid-1960s, rural impoverishment and backward social conditions still remained.

Catlett’s commitment to the rights of the underclass made her an ideal spokesperson during the civil rights unrest in the 1960s. She delivered a powerful keynote address at the 1961 National Conference of Artists, a new group of art teachers from southern black colleges. In the speech, she advocated all-black group activities, including exhibitions that rejected museum representation as a goal. “We have to find a way, collectively—not working alone,” she proclaimed. “That’s the art that’s going to carry over to other people throughout the world. It may not win prizes and it might not get into museums, but we ought to stop thinking that way, just like we stopped
thinking that we had to have straight hair.” To further the civil rights cause, she also produced compelling prints exposing inequality and police brutality.

In *Malcolm X Speaks for Us*, 1969, Catlett portrays the familiar face of the militant black nationalist leader, Malcolm X*, who was assassinated in 1965. [See figure 15] Here Catlett shows him as he was in life, surrounded by the evocative, eager faces of young African Americans. The linocut won first prize at the National Print Salon in Mexico City in 1970 and was purchased by the National Institute of Fine Arts there. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, also owns a print of the portrait.

Today, Catlett is considered one of Mexico’s leading artists. Her work is in such collections as The National Institute of Fine Arts, Mexico City; The National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; and New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Studio Museum in Harlem. She has also created a number of public sculptures, including a work on the campus of her alma mater, Howard University in Washington, D.C.. With her dynamic prints and stylized, smoothly polished sculpture, she continues to create, in her words, “an art for liberation and life.”
Slide Fifteen: Elizabeth Catlett

1. When Catlett printed *Sharecropper* thirteen years after she cut the linoleum block, its subject still had great relevance in the United States. Would the subject of rural impoverishment and backward social conditions have validity today? Have students research and discuss.

2. Given the information on Catlett’s commitment to social issues as well as that of the Taller de Grafica Popular, why was printmaking an appropriate artistic process for them? Have students cite examples of the dissemination and effectiveness of printed material in today’s culture.

3. Catlett’s artistic and racial sensitivities were developed throughout her life by a number of key individuals as well as by various policies, programs, and movements that she experienced. Have students research one of the following influences: Grant Wood, Charles White, the Taller de Grafica Popular, or President Johnson’s “Great Society” program.

4. Catlett studied with American artist Grant Wood in 1940. Have students compare *Sharecropper* and *American Gothic* (in the Art Institute collection) and discuss similarities in style, subject, and intent.