Elizabeth Catlett (b. 1919)
*Sharecropper*, 1970
Color Linocut on cream Japanese paper
1992.182

Between the onset of the Great Depression and the beginning of the Civil Rights Era, a period which embraces the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Americans collectively experienced the New Deal and World War II. For most African Americans, both were sources of moderate optimism: the New Deal with its concessions to African Americans in the vast overall program of economic recovery, and World War II with Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s slogans of “Four Freedoms” -- Freedom from Want, Fear, Hunger, and Oppression -- and their domestic implications for the future. Within the narrower confines of the intellectual and artistic milieu of Black America, the Harlem Renaissance (1920s) fueled a commitment in the arts to social concerns in the 1930s and the war paved the way for an increasingly militant emphasis on civil rights in art and literature.

As a university student in the 1930s, Elizabeth Catlett inherited the optimism of Black America and the aesthetic ethnocentrism of the principal participants of the Harlem Renaissance. Most influential was Black philosopher Alain Locke, a professor at Howard University which Catlett attended. Locke led the movement to encourage Black artists to reclaim their ancestral heritage as a means of strengthening
and enriching their own expressions. Catlett’s study of African art greatly influenced the form and spirit of much of her work.

Catlett’s artistic and racial sensitivities were further developed by her work with two WPA-art programs: the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago and the Harlem Community Art Center in New York. (See Miner Joe, slide 17.) By 1942, she had established relationships with Margaret Burroughs, Archibald J. Motley Jr. (see Nightlife, slide 20), Aaron Douglass, and Jacob Lawrence. In 1945-46, with support from a Rosenwald grant, she went to Mexico and studied with the Tailler de Grafica Popular, a printers’ studio with the mission of expressing proletarian needs and ideals directly through popular art. Catlett adopted this use of art as a vehicle for expressing social concerns and worked on a series of prints about African American women. It was a subject to which she would return throughout her career in both sculpture and prints.

Sharecropper was created by Catlett in response to President Johnson’s “Great Society” program of the 1960s which established domestic programs intended to improve education, eliminate poverty, and provide medical care for the aged. This towering portrait of a tenant farmer serves as a powerful reminder that backward social conditions prevailed in spite of policy changes and rhetoric to the contrary. Stylistically, the print reflects Catlett’s studies in Mexico and at Howard University; the Tailler de Grafica Popular introduced her to hard-edged patterns and African art inspired her use of multi-directional planes and surfaces and mask-like features. The image also bears some similarities to the work of
Grant Wood (see American Gothic, slide 16), with whom Catlett studied briefly in 1940. Both artists were highly disciplined in procedure and delineated form with painstaking clarification. MR

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. A linocut is a print made from a carved piece of soft cork linoleum. The processes of carving and printing are similar to those used in making a woodblock print (see “Printmaking Processes” in “Sample Lessons” section). After explaining the process to students, have them examine Sharecropper and indicate which marks and areas were carved or incised and which areas were left largely untouched.

Given the information on Catlett’s commitment to social issues as well as that of the Tailler de Grafica Popular, why was printmaking a very appropriate artistic process and medium for them?

2. Catlett studied with Grant Wood in 1940. Have students compare Sharecropper and American Gothic (slide 16) and discuss similarities in style, subject, and intent.

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. Influences noted in the above information include: the Harlem Renaissance and Alain Locke; WPA programs and Margaret Burroughs, Archibald J. Motley, Jr., Aaron Douglass, and Jacob
Lawrence; the Tailler de Grafica Popular; President Johnson’s “Great Society” program; and Grant Wood.

Have each student select and research one individual or program/movement that influenced Catlett as an artist and an individual. Is each influence apparent in Sharecropper? How?