

# Elizabeth Catlett

## Sculpting the Truth

Time: 15 minutes

## Study Guide

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### INTRODUCTION

**Elizabeth Catlett: Sculpting the Truth** is a film about a strong woman, an outstanding African-American artist, whose sculptures reflect both African and Mexican cultures. Her work embraces the universal themes of struggle, femininity and motherhood. She considers her audience the main mass of people, especially the black people . . . I am thinking of what they will think about this. Elizabeth Catlett is called a technically impeccable: artist, but her work is emotionally stunning whether it is in wood, ceramic stone or paper. Her sculpted figures have the rounded forms portrayed by the murals of Mexican artists and the stylized features of African mask design. However, in her linocuts, the faces and bodies of the figures are more realistic. This versatile artist primarily lives and works in Cuernavaca, Mexico, which she considers a more nurturing and motivating environment. She says she admires what is true and always wanted her art to service my people - to reflect us, to relate to us, to stimulate us, to make us aware of our potential...We have to create an art for liberation and for life.

### TO THE TEACHER

This video is appropriate for students from upper elementary (Grade 3) to adult learners. However, the student guide is targeted for Grades 3 - 8. The objectives of the guide are to:

- stimulate active viewing that engages students' minds;
- provide questions for reflection;
- suggest experiential activities that involve many areas of the curriculum.

The intent is to give students an opportunity to interpret the artist's work, understand the social and historical context of the artist's life and to make connections to their own lives and learning.

### SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTIST

*You may want to begin by sharing some information about the artist and her accomplishments with the students. Adapt the language to the appropriate age level of the class.*

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Elizabeth Catlett (1919 - ) is a descendant of slaves who were liberated with emancipation. She grew up in Washington, D.C. and spent summers with her grandparents in North Carolina. She was always making art as a child and her mother bought her all the materials she needed, even though they were very poor. She gives her mother credit for helping her become an artist.

She graduated from Howard University's School of Art with honors in 1937 and received an M.F.A. degree at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. During this time she changed her major from painting to sculpture. Her thesis project was a sculpture entitled *Mother and Child*, the first of many works which explored the theme of maternity.

She taught at Dillard University in New Orleans, where she met and married the well-known African American artist Charles White. They both taught at Hampton University in Virginia before settling in New York City. She taught art at the George Washington Carver School in Harlem and studied lithography at the Art Students League.

A turning point came in her life when she was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1946 to go to Mexico to do a series on African American women. She studied at the famous Taller de Grafica Popular (Graphic Arts Workshop) which developed her skills and influenced her style. During this time her marriage to White fell apart. They divorced and she married Mexican painter Francisco Mora in 1947, a union that has lasted over 50 years. Through studies at local art schools, she improved her ability to sculpt in various media. In 1959 she became the first female teacher at the School of Fine Arts at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (one of the oldest art schools in America), serving as the head of the sculpture department. She retired in 1976 and she and her husband moved to Cuernavaca where they continue to work in adjacent studios.

Her work has won acclaim in Mexico and the United States and is found in major collections in both countries, including the Institute of Fine Arts, Mexico, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Library of Congress, Schomburg Collection, the High Museum in Atlanta, the Metropolitan Museum, and Studio Museum of Harlem in New York. Elizabeth Catlett has received numerous awards and honors, including the Women's Caucus for Art and an international peace prize. She is a remarkable woman who is a powerful role model as an artist, wife, mother and teacher.

## **WHAT TO WATCH FOR**

*Help students actively view the video by giving them things to watch for and questions to think about, as appropriate for their age and grade level.*

- Watch for the sculpture of a head she works on throughout the video.
- Watch for where the artist lives and works.
- Watch for different sculptures, materials and forms she creates.
- Watch for different views of the same sculptures.
- Watch for how she uses tools.
- Watch for how she describes drawing an elephant and listen for sounds.
- Watch for information about her life and work, especially why she went to Mexico and how it affected her work.
- Watch for thoughts about being an artist, wife, mother and teacher.
- Watch for explanation of using tools and how she works differently with wood and stone.
- Watch for how she describes her work.

## **QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS**

*Begin by reviewing selected items from **What to Watch For** as preparation for interpretative questions about Elizabeth Catlett and her work.*

**?** Where does Elizabeth Catlett live? Why did she move from the United States? What was different about Mexico?

? When Elizabeth Catlett says she always wants to show the truth, what does she mean?

? What does the artist do with different tools in working on the sculpture of her granddaughter? Beyond showing a likeness of the girl, what does she say the sculpture means?

? What does Catlett think develops creativity?

? What did you learn about Elizabeth Catlett's family? How did they help her become an artist?

? What effect did the Great Depression have on her career?

? What does Catlett say being a woman artist means?

? Elizabeth Catlett has been working as an artist for over 50 years. What are her favorite subjects/themes?

? How does the artist compare differences in materials of wood and stone?

? Is Catlett's work realistic or abstract? Give a good explanation for your opinion.

? What can you learn from Elizabeth Catlett?

## **EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS**

*The following suggestions are designed to help students express ideas and interpretations about the meaning of Elizabeth Catlett's message and work to their own lives. Feel free to select from the curriculum applications that follow or adapt to meet the needs of your students and learning goals.*

1. Look at other images of women and family, e. g. Renoir, Monet, Tanner, Cassatt, Henry Moore, Charles Alston. Write a comparison of style, materials and mood/feeling.

2. Examine a three dimensional figure from all sides. Ask a friend to be a model and draw him/her from several perspectives.
3. Do rubbings of different textures - polished wood, rough stone, metal, fabric- and write down descriptive words about each.
4. Work with modeling clay and mold it into a ball. Think about what your subject matter will be: head, figure, animal, bird. Will your sculpture be realistic or abstract? Make sketches to guide your work. Use wire loop carving tools (made from paper clips and wooden clothes pins) to carve away the clay and create your sculpture.
5. Try another clay technique. Shape the clay into an oval, working with it until it is smooth and elastic. Place it on a wooden surface. Now squeeze, poke and pull the clay to produce different expressions. Get inspiration by making faces in a mirror.
6. Write about the main themes and meaning of Catlett's work in a story about her 50 years as an artist. Give examples of different sculptures that illustrate your point.
7. Develop questions to ask the artist. Use the Internet to find out if she has an e-mail or address and ask her to respond.
8. Think about people you know and how you feel about them. What are the things you like to do with them? Make a drawing or painting showing you with the person and express the feelings you have in your choice of color, line, shape, texture, composition.
9. Research information about what was happening in the United States during the time Elizabeth Catlett was growing up. What was life like for African Americans, women and artists? Imagine you are the artist and write a letter to a friend expressing how you feel.
10. Select some examples of Catlett's work and find examples of Mexican and African art. Create a poster that shows the influence of each culture on the artist's work with appropriate written captions.

## **VIDEO SERIES**

**Elizabeth Catlett: Sculpting the Truth**, created and produced by Linda Freeman, is one of a series of videos that provide an intimate look at both the lives and work of famous African American artists. Art history is being made on film, as the artists create right before our eyes. These documentaries profile the personal relationships, joys and struggles of these extraordinary human beings - and give them the recognition they richly deserve. The goal of the series is to teach students about the art-making process and to inspire them to reach their own life goals.

For more information about *Elizabeth Catlett: Sculpting the Truth* and the other videos, contact Linda Freeman at L & S Productions, tel: 914-238-9366; fax: 914-238-6324.

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