

Life, Work, Art!

Lesson Plan
High School ELL



Elizabeth Catlett was born in Washington, D.C., on April 15, 1915. Both her parents were educators, and her grandparents were among the many who had been enslaved. She graduated from Howard University at the age of twenty and planned to become a teacher, but her interest in art led her to a graduate program at the University of Iowa where she studied drawing and painting with the artist Grant Wood.

Elizabeth Catlett
Mis Hijos, 1958

She remembers Wood telling his students to “take as her subject what she knew best”. For Catlett, that was women, African Americans, and working people, subjects she depicted many times in her work because she wanted to celebrate and honor their lives.

After receiving the university’s first Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture in 1940, Catlett dedicated two years to teaching at Dillard University in New Orleans, and later at a night school for adults in Harlem.

Catlett traveled to Mexico in 1946, interested in the work that local artists were doing after the Mexican Revolution. She was so inspired by what she saw and the people she met at the

Taller de Gráfica Popular, a print workshop run by artists, that she moved to Mexico City the following year. There, she met her future husband, Francisco “Pancho” Mora, with whom she had three sons.

The print *Mis Hijos (My Children)* is an autobiographical piece, in which Catlett depicts her children playing outdoors in a dynamic and jovial scene. The masks they are holding are those used in the Mexican celebration of Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead), revealing her personal journey as an immigrant.

**STUDIO
MUSEUM
HARLEM**

Objective

Students will learn about the life of Elizabeth Catlett and discuss how artists represent their experiences in their work.

Guiding Prompts

After reading the introductory text and looking at the artwork reproduction, think about:

- The different places where the artist lived
- Events in her family and personal history that impacted her life
- Her choice of subject(s) and theme(s) in her work
- Historical events happening in her lifetime



Studio Museum print shop with artist Valerie Manyard, 1971
Students work together to create prints in the Studio Museum in Harlem's printmaking workshop. Run by artist Valerie Manyard and located in the Studio Museum's first location, a rented loft just off 125th street and 5th avenue, the print workshop was established shortly after the museum's founding by Edward S. Spriggs, one of Studio Museum's first directors. The museum established the print shop as a way to directly connect to Harlem schools and community members.

Vocabulary

Depict

To represent by or as if by a picture; to portray; delineate. To represent or characterize in words; describe.

Educator

A person who educates, someone skilled in teaching; a teacher, principal, or other person involved in planning or directing education.

Honor

To regard or treat (someone) with admiration and respect; to regard or treat with honor; to give special recognition to.

Immigrant

A person who travels to another country, usually for permanent residence.

Journey

Something suggesting travel or passage from one place to another, usually taking a rather long time; a trip.

Jovial

Characterized by joyous humor or a spirit of good fellowship.

Subject

Something represented or indicated in a work of art; that which forms a basic matter of thought, discussion, investigation, etc.

Art Project

To help you understand Catlett's practice, the following is a pared-down version of a printing process.

Materials:

Pencils, one with a very sharp tip and one with a less sharp one
4 × 6 in. Styrofoam sheets
Tracing paper
8 1/2 × 11 in. sulphite paper for printing
Block printing ink
Brayers and inking plates
Family or personal photographs for inspiration



Studio Museum print shop with artist Valerie Manyard, 1971

Procedure:

1. Select a photograph to use as a source image. Look at it carefully and decide what you want to include in your print.
2. Place a piece of tracing paper over the photograph and using the finely sharpened pencil, trace over the people and objects you selected. Keep in mind that broad, open shapes are preferred, as fine lines and small details will not be easily registered in a print.
3. Remove the tracing paper and place it on a hard surface to draw over the lines to make them clear and visible. Flip the tracing paper over and place it on a piece of Styrofoam. This is necessary so the printed image will look like the original.
4. Using the pencil with the less sharpened tip, carefully and vigorously trace the drawing again to make an indentation in the Styrofoam. Make sure the lines are deep, and that you can see the overall structure of your drawing well.
5. Carefully place a dollop of ink on the plate and spread it with the brayer. You should have a thin coat of ink on the brayer. Then roll it over the Styrofoam sheet a couple times to make sure it's covered with ink.
6. Place the inked Styrofoam sheet on your printing paper and press with a clean brayer. Carefully peel off the Styrofoam sheet and place the print in a dry, clean area. You can make a second print on another piece of paper, called a ghost print, with the remaining ink on the Styrofoam.

Opening Questions

After reading the text, answer the following questions in as much detail as possible:

- What are some important events in Catlett's life?
- Why do you think she made works about women and working people?
- What is happening in the print? How would you describe the style? What does the scene suggest or remind you of?
- What aspects of her life is she representing?

In the text find words that are related to ...

People:

Occupations:

Places:

Descriptions:

Past actions:

ANSWER KEY

People: parents, grandparents, women, African Americans, subjects, adults, husband, sons, children

Occupations: educators, teacher, artist, student

Places: Washington, D.C., university, Iowa, New Orleans, school, Harlem, New York, Mexico, workshop, Mexico City.

Descriptions: graduate (art program), working (people), local (artists), Mexican (revolution), future (husband), dynamic (scene), jovial (scene), personal (journey)

Past actions: born, were, graduated, planned, led, studied, was, depicted, wanted, dedicated, saw, moved, met, had

Closer Observation

Take a close look at each of the boys in the print:

- How would you describe their personalities?
- What do you imagine they are playing?
- What does their clothing say about them?
- Take a look at the background and the ground. What kind of place might this be?

Reflection

Think about Elizabeth Catlett's life and write a paragraph or two about events that have had an impact on your life. What happened? Who was involved? Where did these events happen? How did they influence or motivate you?

Video

Click on the link below to see and hear Elizabeth Catlett talk about her life. Consider how the events she describes shaped her experiences and informed the work that she made as an artist. Feel free to follow along with the transcript.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KT3lr6kflKM&t=17s>



Transcript

Catlett: I was born in Washington, D.C.

Interviewer: And in what year?

Catlett: 1915.

Interviewer: Tell us about your parents in terms of their economical backgrounds and educational, educational and economical backgrounds.

Catlett: Well my mother, my mother was the daughter of ex-slaves and they had eight children, four boys and four girls, and they sent them to the highest education they could get. The boys went to what's now Johnson C. Smith, they're from North Carolina, Johnson C. Smith University, and the girls went to Bubba Scotia, no Scotia Seminary was then. And my mother came to Washington to help a relative with her dressmaking, she had a dressmaking business, and she met my father. My father, my father's mother was a slave, she didn't know anything about ... she was a little girl when her uncle brought her to Washington and he had to buy all the seats in one of the cars in order to ride on the train. It was somewhere in Virginia, not far from Washington, her uncle. And my father taught, I don't know how, how much he studied because he died before I was born ...

Interviewer: I see.

Catlett: But he taught at Tuskegee, arithmetic and I don't know what else with, with Booker T. Washington and Dr. Carver, and they came back to Washington and taught in the high school.

Interviewer: I see, which high school?

Catlett: Armstrong.

Interviewer: Armstrong High School. And your mother, what did she do?

Catlett: My mother, when my father died, my mother she wasn't, she wasn't prepared to teach in Washington since she had graduated from the seminary, but she had a job scrubbing floors and waiting on ... hanging coats

up in a club at night and she had a cousin in Washington who was a surgeon and other people decided that was terrible and they got her a job as a public school's attendant officer.

We lived in northwest Washington where most of the African Americans who were, who were in more or less medium circumstances lived. There were some slums around the area where the Capitol was, where they lived, and also in southwest Washington but ... and the rest of Washington was white.

Interviewer: But your environment was middle-income African-American, of course, because that was during segregation?

Catlett: We lived in my grandfather, the house that my grandfather built.

Interviewer: I see.

Catlett: He didn't build it, he bought it with my grandmother ... We didn't go into the white area except to shop, or on special occasions like the Fourth of July to see the fireworks or the Russian monument, things like that, or to ride Creek Park at Easter time.

Interviewer: Yes, to hunt for the Easter eggs.

Catlett: We went to the movies on E Street, we went to school in that area.

Interviewer: And of course your primary and high schools were segregated, too.

Catlett: Oh yes, I went to the Lucretia Mott Elementary School, and then my high school which is a very famous high school, was ...

And with my mother also ... you know there was an African, the way I heard her story, she stayed with us one winter after my grandfather died, they had a farm in North Carolina, and there was an African student who would come and sit, he would say let me sit at your feet grandmother and tell me about slavery, and she would tell him different things and I would sit and listen, and later on when I was in, because she had more time then

but we always went to visit, to stay with my grandfather and my grandmother on their farm in the summertime and she was busy, really busy all the time, but later on I would, when my grandfather died and she lived by herself she would sometimes tell me things (inaudible) would upset me terribly especially, especially with the contrast between what I saw of my people during that period in films and what my grandmother would say. They were house slaves, my grandfather was, worked with the horses that people rode. They were young when slavery finished.

Interviewer: I understand they were about eighteen years old when they were freed.

For additional practice, watch art historian Kellie Jones's talk about Catlett's life and work. Watch the whole video once, and if there are any words you didn't understand watch it again with the closed captioning turned on:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2aQT9lhBxl>

Sources

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Catlett

<https://www.moma.org/artists/1037>

<https://www.elizabethcatlettart.com/bio>

<https://whitney.org/artists/4456>

https://studiomuseum.org/collection?search_api_views_fulltext=catlett&field_medium_filters_collection=All&sort_value=&sort_by=created_1&sort_order=DESC



Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012)

Mis Hijos, 1958

Linocut on paper

10 1/2 × 13 3/4 in.

The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of Riva Rosenfield 1999.2.1

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