



1954

Terracotta

11 1/2 x 5 3/4 x 6 5/8 inches
(29.2 x 14.6 x 16.8 cm)

ELIZABETH CATLETT

American

125th Anniversary Acquisition.
Purchased with funds contributed
by Willabell Clayton, Dr. Constance E.
Clayton, and Mr. and Mrs. James B.
Straw in honor of the 125th Anniversary
of the Museum and in celebration
of African American art, 2000, 2000-36-1

LET'S LOOK

What adjectives would you use to describe this mother and child?

What feelings does this sculpture give you? Why?

What is it made of?

The figures are simplified.
What details were left out?
Why do you think so?

What solid forms, planes,
and angles are repeated?

Do you think the mother and
child are poor, working class,
middle class, or wealthy? Why?

How would you describe their
racial and ethnic background?

How big is this sculpture?

Is it a portrait of a specific woman
or a symbol of motherhood?
What makes you think so?

MOTHER AND CHILD

"[W]e, Negro artists, are part of a world wide struggle to change a situation that is unforgivable and untenable. . . . Children can no longer be denied the right to food, to clothing and to education. . . . Neither the Negro artist nor American art can afford to take an isolated position." —Elizabeth Catlett

A woman sits solidly before us, holding a young child. Shoulders back, she appears calm and strong. Her feet are planted firmly on the ground. Her lap provides a stable seat for the wriggling child, and her arms let him move and explore without holding him too tightly. Mindful of the child, she also seems attentive to something else. Her posture—straight back and neck, head tilted slightly upward—suggests that she is listening and looking. Her facial expression is thoughtful, yet intent. At a moment's notice, she could stand, lift the child to her hip, and stride off in any direction.

Elizabeth Catlett made this sculpture of terracotta, a brownish red clay, when she was thirty-nine and living in Mexico City with her artist husband, Francisco Mora, and their three sons—ages seven, five, and three. Fourteen years earlier, as a graduate student at the University of Iowa, she had carved a similar sculpture in limestone, which won first prize at the Diamond Jubilee, an exhibition of black artists in Chicago. Catlett carved other versions of *Mother and Child* in mahogany and in pecan wood later in her career. Although these different mother and child sculptures are small—roughly one to three feet high—they all have a monumental quality that makes them seem much larger.

While making her sculptures, Catlett tries out her models' poses to "feel where the stress and tensions are." As the mother of three young sons, she probably already knew how this pose felt! Catlett's semi-abstract style was well established when she made this *Mother*

and Child. In this sculpture, she eliminates the details of the figures' forms and emphasizes the planes, or flat surfaces. Look for different planes and angles in the figures' heads, arms, and legs. Through the repetition and variation of these elements, Catlett captures the essence of the figures' movements and positions, creating a sense of harmony in her sculpture. The warm color of the terracotta gives a nurturing feeling.

Committed to making art that speaks to working people of all races, Catlett chooses to focus mainly on women in their roles as mothers, workers, and freedom fighters. The simplified bodies, facial features, and clothing of this woman and child could be those of people from many different parts of the world. The woman's confident air and direct gaze express her inner strength and Catlett's vision of what the future should hold for mothers and children all over the world.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Elizabeth Catlett was born and raised in Washington, D.C. Her father died soon after her birth in 1915. Her mother and grandparents worked hard to provide an education and a middle-class life for Elizabeth and her older brother and sister. After graduating from high school with honors, she won a scholarship to the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, but was rejected because she is African American. Instead, she attended Howard University in Washington, where she studied with the black artist Loïs Mailou Jones. While a student, she began expressing her political beliefs by protesting against lynching in front of the United States Supreme Court.

After teaching for about a year, Catlett entered the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Iowa. When her teacher, Grant Wood, introduced her to wood carving, she changed her focus from painting to sculpture. Wood's encouragement to make art about what she knew best motivated her to create her first sculpture of a black mother and child.

When Catlett became art department chair at Dillard, a black university in New Orleans, she introduced nude models into the life-drawing classes and challenged segregation by busing her students to a Picasso exhibition, where blacks were not welcome. She married Charles White, an African American artist, and moved to Harlem, where she met black writers and artists and studied with the Russian-born French sculpture Ossip Zadkine. Zadkine pushed her to make art that people of all nationalities could appreciate. Catlett also taught working adults in Harlem in New York City, which awakened her to "the great hunger for art and culture of ordinary black people."

Two Rosenwald fellowships allowed her to travel to Mexico, where she created prints of strong, inspiring black women. She met Mexican artists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Frida Kahlo and worked at the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* (People's Printmaking Workshop) in Mexico City. The *Taller* artists were inspired by the social and political goals of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20). From them, she learned to create art collectively: "We work alone but we also work with and for others. . . . There's the give-and-take and coming together and a separating that are very important in developing ideas."

Catlett's first marriage ended, and in 1947 she married Mexican artist Francisco Mora. While raising a family, she made prints and sculptures, which she exhibited in Latin America, the United States, and Europe. In 1959, Catlett became the first woman to head the sculpture department in the School of Fine Arts at the National University of Mexico. Today, she divides her time between Mexico and the United States, continues to work with themes like mother and child, and creates pieces for major museums as well as smaller organizations like churches, schools, and political groups.

A CENTURY OF SOCIAL CHANGE AND ARTISTIC RESPONSE

"I'm Elizabeth Catlett and what's important to me is first that I am black, and secondly that I'm a woman and thirdly that I'm a sculptor."

Elizabeth Catlett has achieved international fame and recognition in her lifetime while celebrating her African American female identity. As a young woman, she studied art in the United States during the 1930s, the Depression era. At that time, art with a social message was highly respected, and the U.S. government supported public art through the Works Progress Administration and other programs. After World War II, many artists in the United States shifted to Abstract Expressionism, a kind of art in which artists express their emotions through color and form in abstract paintings. Catlett ignored this trend and traveled to Mexico to pursue her goal of making art that is meaningful to working people everywhere. When the Civil Rights and Black Power movements erupted in the United States during the 1960s, Catlett's work gained recognition and was greatly admired. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Feminist movement in art and society brought her even more widespread attention and respect.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

Explore the theme of mother and child in art produced by people from a range of cultures and time periods.

In small groups, discuss the rights that all children should have. Then write a Children's Bill of Rights.

Compare Catlett's work to that of other women artists who made art with a social message, such as Alice Neel, Dorothea Lange, and Käthe Kollwitz.

RELATED ART PROJECT

Discuss what people everywhere have in common and how our experiences differ. What thoughts and feelings do you have about your gender, economic status, ethnic or racial background, and age? Make a self-portrait expressing your identity. At different stages in the creative process, meet in small groups to give and receive feedback on your work. Keep a journal to record the group discussions and your responses to the collective process.

This sculpture is included in Five Women Artists, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by generous grants from Delphi Financial Group and Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company.