

The Art of Elizabeth Catlett

Sculptures and Prints

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ANN NORTON SCULPTURE GARDENS

Made possible by support from the Palm Beach County Cultural Council

Introduction

In a career spanning more than 70 years, Elizabeth Catlett has created sculptures that celebrate the heroic strength and endurance of African-American and Mexican working-class women. With simple, clear shapes she evokes both the physical and spiritual essence of her subjects. Her hardy laborers and nurturing mothers radiate both power and a timeless dignity and calm. Whether working in wood, stone, bronze, or clay, Catlett reveals an extraordinary technical virtuosity, a natural ability to meld her curving female forms with the grain, whorls, color, or luster of her chosen medium. The beauty of her subjects is matched by the beauty she reveals in her sculptural materials.

Throughout her career, Catlett has been a political progressive committed to improving the lives of African-American and Mexican women, and she has often used her art explicitly to advance their cause. She has also protested, picketed, and even been arrested in her quest to win justice for those she describes as “my people.” Moving from the United States to Mexico in 1946, she was eventually identified as an “undesirable alien” by the U.S. State Department. For nearly a decade she was barred from visiting the United States.

Despite these struggles, Catlett’s art reveals no trace of bitterness or despair. Indeed, she has remained true to the universal, life-affirming themes that first animated her sculpture in the 1940s—the beauty of the human form and the nobility of the human condition. At age 95, she continues to create, guided by those unshakeable ideals.

Jeff Harrison
Chief Curator
Chrysler Museum of Art

Cover:
Mother and Child, ca. 1970
Wood
19.69” H x 13” W x 8.27” D
Private Collection

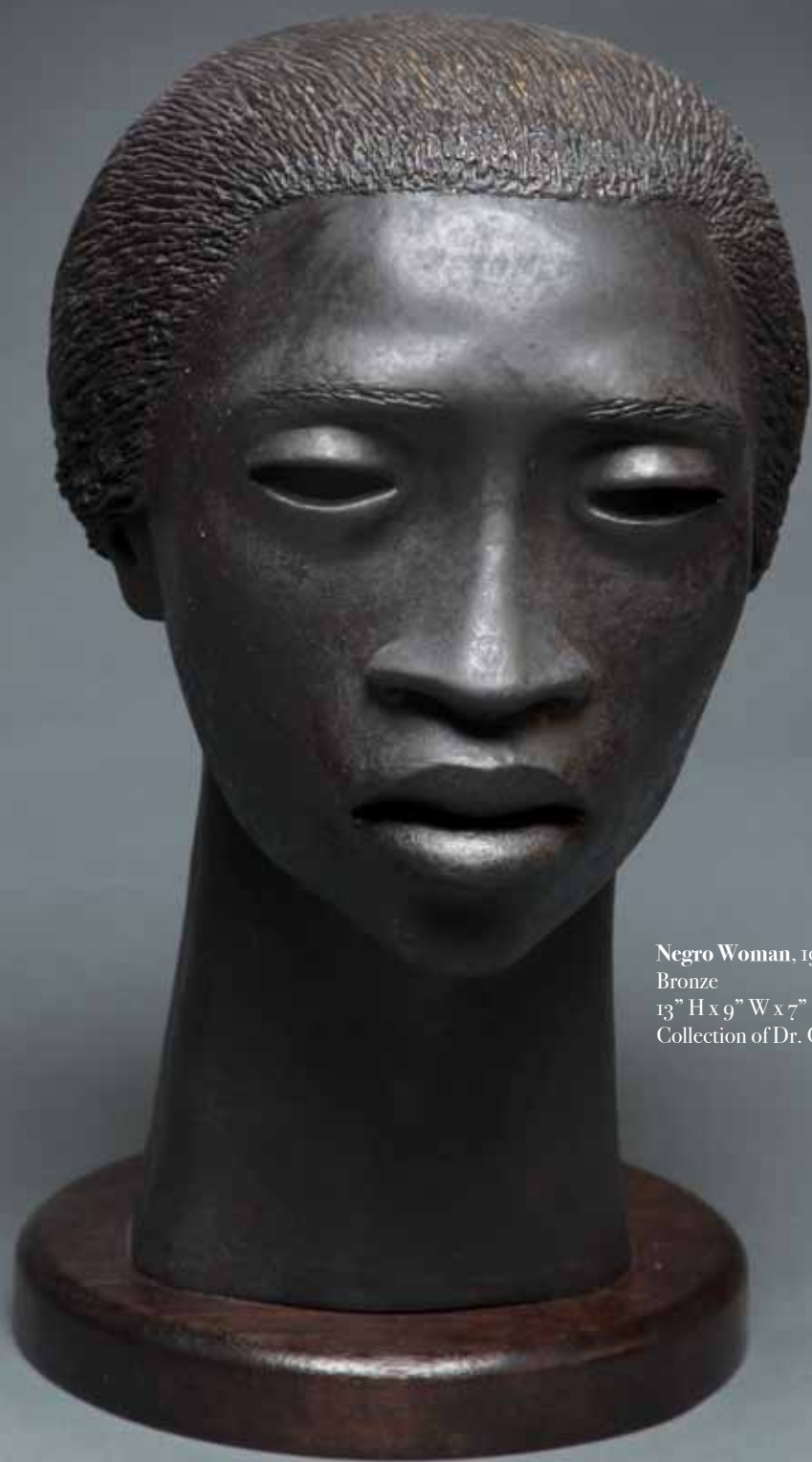
Female Torso, 1998

Marble

14.5" H x 7.5" W x 4.75" D

Private Collection





Negro Woman, 1942
Bronze
13" H x 9" W x 7" D
Collection of Dr. Catherine Lowe

Triangular Woman, 1994
Amber Onyx
23.5" H x 15" W x 9.5" D
Collection of Dr. Catherine Lowe



Elizabeth Catlett: Sculpture Giving Form to Life

by Jane C.H. Jacob

May 2010

Each generation produces artists whose name recognition captures the imagination of art factions around the world, not only by virtue of their talent, but often through the artist's unconventional makeup as well. There is a magnetic mystery attached to art-making and a loyal following from the spectators. When Vincent Van Gogh cut off his ear, he assured a place for himself in art history not only for his misinterpreted art, but for his performance. By their very nature, artists project, reflect, and even shock—their refined and unique visual language boldly expressing or creating emotion that mirrors and shapes society. Artists have a self-imposed authorization to come face-to-face with human nature and expose it. One of the most prominent black figures in art of the 20th century, Elizabeth Catlett is such an artist.

In the artist's beginnings in Washington, D.C., a historical tinderbox of racial conflict, as the granddaughter of slaves, Catlett has embraced, rather than hid, her experiences to reveal the accurate stories of ethnic women surviving all odds to attain greatness—if even in their own backyard segments of culture. Accounts of slavery and abuse of blacks in America recounted by her grandmother and tales of her social-worker mother positioned Catlett's sense of self and her determination to give voice to black women through her art. For close to 70 years, first in the United States and then in Mexico, Catlett—both a graphic and sculptural artist—has produced beautiful and politically poignant works of art that portray the heroines of African-American and Latin American peoples. Their legend is hers.

Elizabeth Catlett's story has been recounted many times from different perspectives; this paper focuses on her work as a sculptor. Best known facts include her admission in 1931 to Howard University in Washington, D.C., in spite of the fact that few African-American women were admitted to art schools at the time. There, she studied with art historian James Herring, who introduced her to Modernism. In addition, Catlett studied with artist James A. Porter (1905-1970), author of *Modern Negro Art* (1943), and Harlem Renaissance graphic artist James Lesesne Wells (1902-1993), who both introduced her to the work of the Mexican muralists. While all strong influences



Mother and Child, 1978
Bronze
16.25" H x 5" W x 4" D
Private Collection

in Catlett's career development, it is James Porter whom Catlett has often credited for instilling her with the discipline to be an artist. In *Modern Negro*, Porter praised Catlett's "...monumental and lofty production in sculpture," describing her as "...one of the brilliant graduates of the Department of Art at Howard University."¹

After graduation from Howard, and a two-year stint at public school teaching in Durham, N.C., Catlett decided to pursue graduate studies at the University of Iowa. Initially, her goal was to study painting; however, she changed her major to sculpture in her second year. There, she was influenced by American landscape painter Grant Wood (1891-1942), who advocated for students to work with the subjects they knew best. This change altered her art forever. In addition, Wood's aesthetic ethic of reworking a subject until it included distortion and overstatement is an approach still used by Catlett in her own art today.

In 1940, Catlett became the first woman to receive the master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa. Her 1939 thesis limestone sculpture, *Mother and Child*, won first prize in sculpture at the American Negro Exposition in Chicago in 1940. Catlett's investment in art continued at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1941 with her art studies in ceramics, and in New York in 1942 and 1943 with sculptor Ossip Zadkine (born Russian, 1890-1967) and lithography classes at the Art Students League.

In the summer of 1941, during her semester break from teaching at Dillard University in New Orleans, Catlett set up a studio in Chicago, living with artist Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs (b. 1917), who co-founded the Southside Community Art Center. Through Burroughs, Catlett met her first husband, artist Charles White (1918-1979). He, along with Burroughs, was a member of the Communist Party, which in the 1940s became attractive to the politicized community conscience of many African-American artists who believed they were caught in between racial and class lines. These black Chicago artists believed that they could use their art in the struggle for a more just society. While Catlett did not join the party, she was sympathetic to its socialist ideals, and she married White. Ultimately, Catlett's decision to make her home in Mexico was in part a response to the U.S. government's increasingly fierce attacks on progressive artists, intellectuals, and activists at this time.



Naimi, 1999

Bronze

14" H x 9" W x 7" D

Collection of Dr. Catherine Lowe

In 1942, when Catlett and White moved to New York, she became a student of Modernist sculptor Ossip Zadkine. Under his guidance, she began to experiment with abstraction in the human form through studying African art. This abstraction—minor in that the artist's subjects are always representational—is still employed in Catlett's work today. One of her primary concerns is communication, and while Catlett is cognizant that abstraction came from her African roots, she reins in the form in order to appeal to the ordinary untrained eye of the man on the street.

Both Catlett and White became known among the African-American art community. In 1942, they were asked to be jurors in the Atlanta University Annual Exhibition. In 1943, White received the Julius Rosenwald Fund grant to paint a mural at Hampton University (then Hampton Institute) in Hampton, Virginia, and Catlett accompanied him. There she taught sculpture based on the theory of Austrian art educator Viktor Lowenfeld, who espoused that artists should work the form from their own internal knowledge and feelings. This method provided Catlett with the ability to sculpt and better understand the figural pose with a self-representational approach.

Self-portraiture is a classic art-historical exercise and Elizabeth Catlett's history—emitted in every one of her works of art—portrays the artist-self. A readily recognized element is Catlett's focus on the feminine strength, given birth through her own experience and endurance. She creates with a strength of character that transcends the status quo and reaches for possibilities. Both recording for and challenging the viewer, the artist-self states in no uncertain terms that the power of womanhood is responsible for the continuance of life itself. These self-portraits of young and old, mother and child, peace, power, and struggle are available for the unveiling of truth to the viewer.

Catlett is no different than our other art historical models: her reputation rests among other female artists who have coincided or gone before her. These artists include Marie-Guillemine Benoist (French, 1768-1826), who after studying under Jacques-Louis David exhibited at the Salon de Paris. Benoist's famous painting, *Portrait d'une Nègresse*, completed in 1880, was inspired by the decree to abolish slavery. Benoist exhibited her controversial painting at the Salon and it became a symbol for the emancipation of women and the rights of the black people. It increased her reputation to such an extent



Seated Figure, 2003
Bronze
17.75" H x 8.5" W x 5" D
Private Collection

that she received an annual government grant and regular commissions from Napoleon.²

In addition, Catlett's work and story is similar to that of Anne Whitney (American, 1821-1915), a Watertown, Massachusetts, sculptor who was educated in art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and in Boston, Paris, and Rome.³ Like Catlett, who won a scholarship to Carnegie Tech but was refused enrollment when they realized she was black, Whitney was once rejected for a commission when it was discovered that she was a woman sculptor. Whitney ultimately created sculpture of suffragists and abolitionists, the Revolutionary War hero *Samuel Adams* (now in the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C.), *Africa* (1864), showing a woman awakening from the sleep of slavery, and *Roma* representing the poverty in Rome as a beggar-woman.

Catlett's unequivocal boldness is also comparable to Vinnie Ream (1847-1914), the sculptor of the statue of *Abraham Lincoln* in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, who made her mark as the first woman and the youngest artist to receive a commission from the United States Government for a sculpture.

Catlett's dedication to teaching is likewise tied to the African-American sculptor Augusta Savage (1892-1962), associated with the Harlem Renaissance, who sacrificed the lasting achievement of her own individual work to train and inspire students. Savage is most remembered for her final significant commission, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, for the 1939 World's Fair, and inspired by a line from a song known as the *Negro National Anthem*.

There are also contemporaries in the group with Catlett, such as Magdalena Abakanowicz (Polish, b. 1930), born near Warsaw to a family that traced its heritage back to Genghis Khan, lived through the occupation of Poland by Germany and then Russia, and refused to leave her country through the years of Communist rule, the changes under the Solidarity movement, and afterwards. Like Catlett's work, Abakanowicz's sculpture often reflects the emotional heritage of her political environment.⁴

Finally, Catlett is much like Louise Nevelson, the Russian-born American Abstract Expressionist sculptor (1899-1988) whose work has been connected



Naimi, 1998
Marble
13" H x 7" W x 12" D
Private Collection

with Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, installation art, and feminism. She has established herself within the male-dominated art world as a woman who made enterprising choices that influenced large-scale pioneering sculpture. These women were unusual and unconventional in order to accomplish what they did in the face of tremendous obstacles. Throughout their lives, these artists maintained their conviction that art must raise its voice and offer a vision of a better world. Elizabeth Catlett still works to speak after more than 70 years of art-making. Her images are powerful and her concern is for the history and hope for all people.

In 1946 Catlett received a Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship that allowed her, with her husband, to travel to Mexico City, where she joined the Taller de Gráfica Popular. While Catlett anticipated spending the year in Mexico, she returned early to the United States to end her first marriage with Charles White.⁵ In 1947, she returned to Mexico and studied wood carving with Jose L. Ruiz and ceramic sculpture with Francisco Zúñiga, at the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura, Esmeralda, Mexico. Ultimately Catlett married the Mexican artist Francisco Mora (1922-2002) and became a Mexican citizen.

Catlett's commitment to contributing to the expressions of other artists is revealed in her participation in instruction throughout her career. Sacrificing precious art-making time, she became the first female professor of sculpture and head of the sculpture department at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, School of Fine Arts, San Carlos, in Mexico City in 1958, and taught there until retiring in 1975.

The life and work of Elizabeth Catlett have fascinated critics, scholars, and collectors since she quietly entered the art scene in the early 1940s. Catlett's work has championed the cause of underprivileged people of all colors. Her work is collected and included in major institutions in America, Mexico, and the Czech Republic. Every new publication and exhibition adds a chapter to the story of the role of the influential African-American as a modernist sculptor. Her development of abstraction as a means of artistic expression has laid open the role of the modern and contemporary black sculptor within the annals of art history. Catlett creates psychologically perceptive portraits of individuals whose lives she believes have been torn apart by race, class, and governments of the North American continent. Her work includes symbols



Mother and Child

Bronze

16.5" H x 6" W x 5.625" D

Private Collection

of the Black Power movement, portraits of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., ordinary African-American women, and ideological indigenous populations. Catlett captures the emotional state as well as the appearance of the persona by blending representational elements of Realism with abstraction in order to communicate the interior turmoil and outer affectation of those she portrays.

Catlett's use of color and a variety of materials, such as marble, stone, terracotta and bronze, evokes a similar sense of feeling evident in the work of the African-American sculptors Sargent Claude Johnson (1888-1967), Nancy Elizabeth Prophet (1890-1960), and William Ellsworth (1914-1977).⁶ Portraying the strength of character within a similitude of poise, Catlett's influential role in America's African-American and Mexico's revolutionary art communities in the mid-20th century has set her work apart from others. Catlett is best known for her work during the 1960s and 1970s, when her work focused on politically charged, Black expressionistic sculptures. The excellence of Catlett's work assures her undeniable achievement. In carefully choosing her subjects, the artist achieves a powerful, accurate and original vision that rejects traditional sentiment and convention. Relying on visual clarity and directness, Catlett emphasizes life and life's struggles in her work. She blends these visual qualities together through her own honesty, skilled effort, and genius, producing a body of work that is among the most important in modern art today.

Catlett's contribution to the African-American art movement has gained her wide recognition for her work. She has had more than 50 solo shows, and the 1998 *Fifty-Year Retrospective* held at the Neuberger Museum of Art, State University of New York, demonstrates Catlett's place in the lexicon of art history. She has received many awards throughout her life, and in 2003, the International Sculpture Center awarded her its Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award. Today, Catlett divides her time between New York City and Cuernavaca, Mexico, and still is actively producing work.

In the words of Bobbie Wallace Wright's poem *Elizabeth Catlett: Grace Against Gravity*:

*It comes of clay, wood and stone,
carried, refined, molded somehow
into one great moment
that never stops talking....*⁷



Torso, 2008

Marble

25.25" H x 12.5" W x 8.5" D

Private Collection

Elizabeth Catlett's work is represented in permanent collections including The Art Institute of Chicago; Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; Smithsonian American Art Museum, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Library of Congress, and Howard University Art Collection, Washington, D.C.; The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia; Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock; Fogg Museum, Harvard University Art, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois; University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City; Philadelphia Museum of Art and Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; and Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kansas.

Jane C.H. Jacob is a Chicago-based art historian, fine art advisor and appraiser. She is president and CEO of Jacob Fine Art, and teaches African-American art history in the SCPS Arts Programs at New York University.

- 1 James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art*, Arno Press and the New York Times, NY, NY 1969
- 2 *Dictionary of Women Artists*, ed. Delia Gaze. Vol. I, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, Chicago, IL, 1997
- 3 *The Grove Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner, Oxford University Press, USA (February 11, 2003)
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: an American Artist in Mexico, The Jacob Lawrence Series of American Artists*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA, 2000
- 6 Reynolds and Wright, *Against the Odds: African-American Artist and the Harmon Foundation*, The Newark Museum, Newark, NJ, 1989
- 7 Elizabeth Catlett: *Grace against Gravity-Poem*, *African American Review*, Winter, 1999 by Bobble Wallace Wright

General Notes:

Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: In the image of the People*, the Art Institute of Chicago, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2005

Elizabeth Catlett: Sculpture: A Fifty-Year Retrospective. ed. L. H. Gedeon, Neuberger Museum of Art; First Ed. (January 1, 1999), Univ. of Washington Press, Seattle, WA

Social Activism: Elizabeth Catlett, Arts and Culture - Art Focus. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/arts/catlett.html>

Margery Gordon, *Eyes on the Prizes, Art + Auction*, February 2, 2008

Michael Brenson, *Form That Achieves Sympathy: A Conversation with Elizabeth Catlett, Sculpture Magazine*, Vol.22 No.3, International Sculpture Center, April 2003



Elizabeth Catlett: A Chronology

- 1915 Is born in Freedmen's Hospital, Washington, D.C. Her father dies soon after. She is raised by her mother and spends summers in North Carolina with her maternal grandparents.
- 1931/35 Attends Howard University, Washington, D.C.; majors in painting and graduates with a Bachelor of Science degree in art.
- 1938/40 Attends graduate school at the University of Iowa; studies painting with Grant Wood; graduates with a Master of Fine Arts degree.
- 1940 Becomes chair of the Art Department, Dillard University, New Orleans, La.
- 1941 Studies ceramics at the Art Institute of Chicago, where she meets painter Charles White; marries him soon after. Wins "First Honor" for her sculpture *Mother and Child* at the American Negro Exposition in Chicago. Participates in the exhibition *American Negro Art from the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery, New York.
- 1941 Works around racial barriers to find a way for her Dillard University students to see the Pablo Picasso exhibition at Delgado Art Museum in New Orleans. Since the museum was located in a city park closed to

African-Americans, Catlett pressed the museum to allow her class to visit the exhibition on a day when the building was closed to the public.

- 1942 Resigns from Dillard University; moves to New York City and settles in Harlem. Studies with the sculptor Ossip Zadkine in New York. Like Grant Wood, Zadkine helps her refine her sculptural vocabulary of simple, reductive forms. (Zadkine's gilt bronze sculpture *Bust of Carol Janeway* is on view in the Museum's Oval Gallery.)
- 1944 Teaches sculpture and dressmaking at George Washington Carver School in Harlem.
- 1945 Receives a Julius Rosenwald Foundation grant to produce a series of prints, paintings, and sculptures on the theme of black women.
- 1946/47 Wins Rosenwald grant renewal; creates linoleum cut series, *I Am a Negro Woman*. Moves from New York to Mexico City; meets the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and the artists in his circle. Joins the print-making collective Taller de Gráfica Popular (People's Graphic Workshop); meets the artist Francisco Mora.
- 1947 Establishes permanent residence in Mexico; divorces Charles White; marries Mora. Mounts her first one-woman exhibition, Barnett-Aden Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1958/59 Is arrested during the Union of Railroad Workers' strike in Mexico City. Becomes Professor of Sculpture, National School of Fine Arts, National Autonomous University of Mexico; becomes the first woman head of the Sculpture Department.
- 1962 Is criticized by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City for her political affiliations; becomes a Mexican citizen and is proclaimed an "undesirable alien" by the United States State Department.
- 1963 Travels to Havana, Cuba, with the National Union of Mexican Women to attend the Congress of Women in the Americas. Creates the poster for the World Congress of Women, Moscow.
- 1968 Supports students who were attacked by government troops in Mexico for protesting against the National Strike Council.
- 1969 Learns of her mother's death; receives First Purchase Prize for print *Malcolm X Speaks for Us* in Mexico. Organizes the Mexican Provisional Committee of Solidarity with Angela Davis, the American Black Power militant; creates the poster *Freedom for Angela Davis*.

- 1971 Is featured in one-woman exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The United States government grants her a visa to attend the exhibition, her first visit to America in 10 years.
- 1975 Commissioned to create bronze sculpture of Louis Armstrong for the City of New Orleans' Bicentennial Celebration.
- 1976 Retires as professor of sculpture at University of Mexico; moves to Cuernavaca, Mexico.
- 1978 Is commissioned to create a bronze relief, *Students Aspire*, for Howard University.
- 1970s to present Receives a string of prestigious awards and is highlighted in major exhibitions throughout the country; her reputation grows in the United States.
- 2003 Is commissioned to create a monumental bronze relief of *Invisible Man: A Memorial to Ralph Ellison*, Riverside Park, New York.

(Chronology adapted from Lucinda H. Gideon, ed., *Elizabeth Catlett Sculpture*, Neuberger Museum of Art: Purchase, New York, 1998.)



Elizabeth Catlett at work in her studio, circa 1983



*It comes of clay,
wood and stone,
carried, refined,
molded somehow
into one great
moment
that never stops
talking....*

Elizabeth Catlett: Grace Against Gravity
Bobbie Wallace Wright

Left:
Mask, ca. 1970–80
Wood
12" H x 4" W x 4" D



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Gallery open Wed-Sun 10-4pm.

Our thanks to the Chrysler Museum of Art of Norfolk, Virginia, for its curatorial oversight for this collaborative exhibition. To the "Private Collector" whose vision and collection was the genesis for this exhibition, thank you for your collaboration and work on behalf of the entire exhibition and to Dr. Catherine Lowe and The University of Alabama–Paul Jones Collection for their loan of works. Further our thanks to the Palm Beach Cultural Council for its work on behalf of grantee which made this exhibition possible.

Art images by Ed Pollard and Lucien Capehart

