

Elizabeth Catlett: Works on Paper, 1944-1992

reviewed by Barbara A. Brannon

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Black and white.

Black ink on white paper, and the experience of the black woman in a white-dominated world.

It is impossible to view the current exhibition at the Tubman African-American Museum without being acutely aware of these contrasts. And that, after all, is how sculptor/printmaker Elizabeth Catlett would have it.

Living in Mexico since the 1940s, the Washington, D.C.-born Catlett has dedicated her long career to creating art that is as pointed in its social commentary as it is careful in its crafting. "Elizabeth Catlett: Works on Paper, 1944-1992" chronicles nearly half a century in Catlett's artistic development in two-dimensional media and ranges from her earliest days as a printmaker through her present position as one of the premier artists of our time.

Not all of the thirty-five works (lithographs, linoleum cuts, serigraphs, a drawing, and a lithograph/collage) are limited to monochrome. Several of the later prints, including the well-known "Malcolm X Speaks for Us" and "Angela Belle," are executed in a bright array of colors. But it is still her predominantly black-and-white pieces that exhibit the greatest power here.

In Catlett's first series of prints, fifteen images created in 1946-47 under a Rosenwald Fellowship and titled "I Am the Black Woman," only three of the otherwise starkly black-and-white linocuts include a second accent color. The messages the prints convey are at times bold with hope, at times cuttingly ironic. "I have special reservations" portrays a woman seated in the colored section of a Jim-Crow era bus; "...special houses..." shows a row of tenements in the background; "...and a special fear for my loved ones" dramatically depicts a lynching. But in amongst these indictments shine the portraits of black female courage and ingenuity: poet Phillis Wheatley and reformers Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. In the last print an African-American everywoman, angular face uplifted to the sky, declares, "My right is a future of equality with other Americans."

Catlett, educated at Howard University at the University of Iowa, took a strong stand on behalf of black women and black artists. In the 1960s, teaching in Mexico and occasionally lecturing in the United States, she challenged disenfranchised artists not to consider black-only exhibitions a dishonor, not to think of such shows as "segregated." Instead, she suggested, they should take pride in separately creating and exhibiting an "essentially American art."

It is especially fitting, then, that this impressive selection of her works should be displayed at Macon's Tubman Museum. There, the prints may be viewed within the context they occupy, in the larger and longer struggle. They vividly illuminate the pathway from slavery and oppression to civil rights. The exhibit was ably curated by Karen Comer and is supported by Riverside Ford of Macon. It remains at the Tubman through February 28. The prints are on loan from the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Hampton University Museum.

"Art is important only to the extent that it helps in the liberation of our people," Elizabeth Catlett said in 1971. "It is necessary only at this moment as an aid to our survival." In this exhibition, her message comes through loud and clear, in full color as well as in the extremes of monochrome. I take exception with Ms. Catlett on but one score: I hold that art is necessary, period. Art is an aid to survival, no matter what the color of one's skin, and it can serve as a common ground just as effectively as it serves as a rallying cry. Plain and simple, cut and dried, black and white. Her work speaks to all of us.

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