

Creating What You Know

An Art With Kids Art Making Workshop based on the Art of Elizabeth Catlett (b.1915)

by Trish Maunder, Creative Programs Director 2005/2006

This art making workshop is designed for students Grades 2 – 6.



Homage to my Young, Black Sisters 1968

Cedar, 68 x 12 x 12 inches. Collection of Charles D. Storer. © Elizabeth Catlett/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Background Information

Elizabeth Catlett is an African American sculptor and master printmaker whose work is both social and political in nature. She has been an artist for many years. Born in 1915 she creates sculptures and prints with a recurring "female" and "mother and child" theme. These have become her trademark. She feels the role of women in society and the relationships between a mother and her child are very important and likes to explore these through her work.

During her postgraduate years at the University of Iowa in 1938–1940 Catlett was encouraged by tutor and artist Grant Wood (1892–1942) to paint what she knew the most about. She says, "I feel it quite natural to paint or sculpt or draw what I know the most about and I know the most about Black women, about mothers and children, about working people and that's the kind of art I do." (*Elizabeth Catlett: Sculpting the Truth*. Chappaqua, NY: L & S Video, 1998)

Students should look at the posters of Catlett's sculptures to see how she refines the angles and shapes of the human form. Following Catlett's lifetime philosophy of creating what she knows best, students are asked to consider what they feel *they* know best. They will be asked to prepare a small three dimensional sculpture in response to this.

Special Note for Art Teachers: It is self-empowering to discover what you feel you know the most about but it requires encouragement and the brainstorming of ideas with

the art teacher. This could be done as a class activity, a small group discussion, or even a one-on-one between the art teacher and the student.



Mother and Child 1972

Pecan Wood. © Elizabeth Catlett/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Objectives

To encourage students to examine Catlett's philosophy, style, and technique and then create a small sculpture based on something they feel they "know best."

To introduce the notion of abstracted form: students should note that detail is sometimes excluded in Catlett's work in favor of simple expressive line, shape and form

To experience working with three dimensional materials to create a piece of art

Ideas for Small Sculpture

Students should come to the workshop prepared to spend 45 minutes (or more) concentrating on making a three dimensional piece of artwork that represents something they feel they know the most about.

It could be a sculpture of himself or herself, a family member, a friend, a pet, or an instrument. If it is a sculpture of a person, that person might be engaged in a favorite activity, such as a sport for example. Perhaps baseball or skating, or other sports. Students will select a single image to create as a small 3D sculpture and decide what features to include and which ones to leave out.

Let's look at the form of a cat as an example:

The student should focus on the important features of a cat such as its body shape, the proportions of the body relating to the head, legs, ears and tail, and be discouraged from spending time trying to create a fur effect or detailed whiskers. Students should be guided to pay attention to basic forms in the object they are creating. Realism and abstraction should be introduced to younger students and reinforced for those already familiar with the concepts.

Materials

clay, modelling material
tools for modelling
newspaper to cover work surfaces
tempera paint to paint sculptures if desired
use of kiln if firing clay
posters of Catlett's work for ideas and inspiration



Triangular Woman 1997

Amber Onyx, 23 1/2 x 15 x 19 1/2 inches.
Collection of Dr. Catherine Lowe. © Elizabeth
Catlett/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Activity

Prior to the classroom activity students may gather a resource of materials such as images from magazines and newspapers as references to use as they model.

Since Elizabeth Catlett and her work are the inspiration behind the concept, students are asked to express their ideas through modeling materials. (e.g., clay, model magic, etc.) to express their ideas in a manner similar to Catlett's.

Sculptures may be fired if clay has been used or painted with tempera paint if another modeling material has been used.