



Dancing

In this vibrant lithograph, famed sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett captures a group of dancers in mid-boogie. The five figures in this piece are a study in movement, not only in the position of their bodies, but in the implied swing of the women's dresses. This incredible sense of movement is supported by the perfectly balanced, almost neutral composition. The central figure gestures downward as the two dancers on either side raise their arms. The dancers seem almost as if their steps have been choreographed. The two figures at the extreme right and left seem to be engaging with other, unseen partners. The blank white background also gives little detail about where they are; it could be a scrim on a stage or the wall of a dancehall. Only the figures' shadows play there, and of course, they only mirror the dancers themselves.

This piece also makes spare but carefully considered use of color and shadow. Solid blocks of red, blue and green call attention to the dancers' clothing, but also coax the eye into travelling up toward their faces. There is also very little ornamentation, except for one dancer's floral headpiece. This lends a timelessness to this piece, as well; one can see aspects of Minimalism, Cubism, Post-Modernism and Art Deco represented here.

Catlett was primarily known as a sculptor of solid yet graceful pieces. Her aesthetic can clearly be seen in this print. She was known for creating a sense of vibrancy and life with very simple shaping of her medium. The curves of her dancer's bodies are implied by expert shading. And the sharpness of the facial features reminds one of traditional African masks. Additionally, notice how very faint crisscrossing on the central dancer's arms indicate that she has pushed her long sleeves up, and that her male companion's cuffs are creased at his ankles.

1990

Color Lithograph on paper
97/100 in series
Signed, bottom right
35 ½" w x 30 1/5" h

ELIZABETH CATLETT

American
(1915-2012)

Commissioned by the Stevie
Wonder Foundation,
inscribed "Stevie Wonder, the
Stevie Wonder Foundation"
with inked fingerprint

LET'S LOOK

Where are the people in this piece? Is it a private or public setting?

What is the mood of this piece?

What role does color play in this work?

Describe the interplay between curves and sharp lines and angles.

About the Artist

"I have always wanted my art to service my people—to reflect us, to relate to us, to stimulate us, to make us aware of our potential." - Elizabeth Catlett

Elizabeth Catlett is considered one of the most important sculptors of the 20th century. Her elegant, simple work mainly focuses on the stories and experiences of African-American and Latinx peoples, especially working-class women and children. Catlett has consistently demonstrated an instinctive knowledge of her materials, whether working in wood, stone or print, and conveys the intrinsic strength and beauty of both the medium and her subjects.

Born in Alice Elizabeth Catlett in Washington, D.C. in 1915, Catlett attended Howard University School of Art where she graduated cum laude in 1936. She had not originally intended to attend Howard; she had won a scholarship to the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, but, upon learning that she was Black, the college refused to allow her to matriculate. In 1940, she achieved two great heights: she became the first student to earn an MFA degree in sculpture from the University of Iowa, and she received the "first honor" in sculpture at the American Negro Exposition in Chicago. She went on to study ceramics at the Art Institute of Chicago, and later, she studied lithography at the Art Students League in New York.

Catlett is also the winner of two prestigious Rosenwald Fellowships, in 1941 and 1946. Given by the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which focused on creating equal opportunities for all Americans, the Rosenwald Fellowship was awarded to African-American artists, writers, and scholars, as well as Southern whites with interests in race relations. With the first, she traveled with her first husband, fellow artist Charles White, to the southern U.S. to study and make sketches for a proposed mural for Hampton Institute (later Hampton University.) Her experience with the extreme racism she encountered there led her to dedicate her art to Black awareness. During this time, she also taught at Dillard University in New Orleans, Prairie View College in Texas, and Hampton Institute in Virginia. With the second fellowship, she traveled to Mexico City to work with the Taller de Grafica Popular (TGP), a collective graphic arts and mural workshop. There she cultivated the primary theme for her work, the African American woman. It was here that she created a series of 15 prints entitled "I Am The Negro Woman" in 1947, celebrating black women's contributions as field laborers, domestic workers, educators, and activists.

It was in Mexico that Catlett met her second husband, printer-engraver Francisco Mora. They were married in 1947, and the couple were an integral part of an artistic community that included Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. From 1958 through 1976, she directed the sculpture department at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico in Mexico City, where she was the university's first female professor of sculpture.

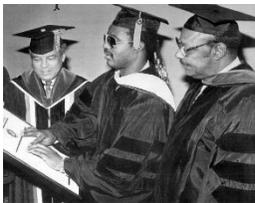
Catlett's commitment to social justice for the most vulnerable in the United States and Mexico led her to decades of vocal activism and protest. She was suspected of being a Communist because of her association with TGP. After her arrest during a railroad workers' strike in 1949, she was even declared an "undesirable alien" by the U.S. State Department, had her citizenship revoked and was barred from entering the country for 10 years.

From 1946, Catlett made her home in Mexico, where she was embraced as a national treasure. Today, she is also hailed in the country of her birth. In 1998, she was honored with a 50-year retrospective by the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York, and in 2003, she received the International Sculpture Center's lifetime achievement award. Her paintings and sculptures have been in the collections of the Instituto de Bellas Artes and the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., the Baltimore Museum of Art and the New Orleans Museum of Art.

Stevie Wonder

At the bottom of this print, one can see the inscription from the Stevie Wonder Foundation, with a thumbprint from the great Stevie Wonder himself. Not only content to be one of the greatest musicians of the 20th century, if not all time, Wonder has spent almost his entire life as a crusader for social and political causes. Ever since he met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the young age of 15, this multifaceted artist and Academy Award winner has used his talent and his position to bring attention to civil rights causes, from fighting AIDS to ending poverty. He also campaigned for decades to make King's birthday a holiday. He is best known, however, for raising funds through music, with a little help from his friends. Songs such as "We Are The World" for African famine relief, and "That's What Friends Are For" for AIDS research, gained overwhelming popularity and brought great awareness to these causes.

Wonder has both founded and supported over 60 foundations and charities, including the United Negro College Fund, the YWCA, the Elton John AIDS Foundation, Habitat For Humanity, the Jackie Robinson Foundation and Music For Relief. His own foundations include the We Are You Foundation, which contributes Christmas donations to the Junior Blind of America, and the Wonder Foundation, which encourages the inclusion of children with visual and mental disabilities in society. To benefit those affected by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Wonder donated proceeds from his single "Shelter In The Rain". For his efforts, Wonder was awarded the Nelson Mandela Courage Award in 1995, was made a United Nations Messenger of Peace in 2009, and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama in 2014. He even has a street named after him in his hometown of Detroit.



Wonder has also had a special relationship with Xavier University of Louisiana, beginning in 1986, when he received an honorary doctorate in humanities. This relationship continued in 1989, when Timothy Francis the son of Xavier's longtime president Dr. Norman C. Francis, became chief operating officer of Stevie Wonder Enterprises. So it is no "wonder" that when he commissioned this piece from Catlett, that one of the prints should come to the Xavier Art Collection.

Let's Look Again

The faces of the dancers don't exhibit much expression. Some are looking away and some are looking out at the viewer. In what way do they express their own individual personalities?

Catlett's use of color is simple and saturated. What effect does this have on the image overall?

Catlett's contemporaries in Mexico included celebrated muralist Diego Rivera, and she herself worked as a muralist in the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). What similarities can you find between this piece and Rivera's work?

Writing Activities

Mexico became a safe haven and a home for Catlett. Write a paragraph about a place you consider to be "home."

Imagine that you are in this print. Where does the action take place? What sort of atmosphere is prevalent?

Hands-On Activity

Catlett's works make a great impact with simple, elegant shapes. Try drawing one of your friends with as few lines as possible.

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