

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ARTIST

Sculpting a Reckoning

Elizabeth Catlett and the Art of Black and Mexican Solidarity

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Contribution Track • ERA V–VII • Washington, D.C. & Mexico City

Who She Is

Elizabeth Catlett was born April 15, 1915, in Washington, D.C., the granddaughter of formerly enslaved people. Denied admission to Carnegie Mellon's art school because of her race, she instead earned her BA from Howard University in 1936, studying under artists including Lois Mailou Jones, and in 1940 became the first person — of any race or gender — to receive a Master of Fine Arts in sculpture from the University of Iowa, where she studied under Grant Wood and produced her early masterwork, *Mother and Child*.

Durham and an Equal-Pay Fight

After completing her MFA, Catlett reportedly taught briefly at Hillside High School in Durham, North Carolina, where she is said to have joined a campaign — alongside a young NAACP attorney named Thurgood Marshall — pressing for equal pay between Black and white teachers in the segregated school system. This detail appears consistently across popular biographical summaries of Catlett's life, but this research pass could not trace it to an independently confirmed, Durham-specific archival source (a local school board record, a contemporary newspaper account, or an NAACP case file), and it is presented here as a widely repeated but not fully documented part of her biography.

Sculpture as Testimony

Catlett spent most of her working life centered on the Black female form as a subject of dignity, labor, and resistance rather than decoration — in works like *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* (1968) and the print series *I Am the Negro Woman* (1946–47), created on a Julius Rosenwald Fund fellowship that took her through the Jim Crow South to document Black women's lives directly. In 1946 she moved to Mexico City, joined the Taller de Gráfica Popular, a print collective committed to social and political art, and in 1962 became a Mexican citizen — a choice that led the U.S. State Department to bar her from the country as an undesirable alien for roughly a decade during the McCarthy era, a restriction not lifted until 1971.

"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

She returned frequently to the United States after the ban was lifted, exhibiting widely and receiving honors including an honorary doctorate from Howard University. She died in Cuernavaca, Mexico, on April 2, 2012, at ninety-six.

NC Local Lens

The one North Carolina connection found for Elizabeth Catlett in this research pass places her in Durham, at Hillside High School — not Fayetteville or Cumberland County. This entry states the Durham tie honestly and flags it as not independently confirmed beyond repeated secondary summaries; readers and future researchers should treat it as probable but unverified rather than settled fact. No source consulted places Catlett in Cumberland County.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Durham teaching stint and Marshall equal-pay campaign: appears in multiple biographical compilations but was not traced to a primary Durham-specific source in this pass — verify against Hillside High School records, Durham NAACP branch records, or contemporary press before citing as settled fact.

Exact dates of the Durham stint: not established — placed generally in the early 1940s, after her 1940 Iowa MFA and before her 1946 move to Mexico.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Elizabeth Catlett," National Museum of Women in the Arts, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://nmwa.org/art/artists/elizabeth-catlett/>.
2. Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
3. "Elizabeth Catlett," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/elizabeth-catlett-4451>.
4. Margalit Fox, "Elizabeth Catlett, Sculptor with Eye on Social Issues, Is Dead at 96," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2012.
5. "Elizabeth Catlett," Howard University Gallery of Art, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.howard.edu/>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.