



1952

Linocut

Block: 17 13/16 x 16 3/4 inches  
(45.2 x 42.5 cm)  
Sheet: 22 1/8 x 19 inches  
(56.2 x 48.3 cm)

**ELIZABETH CATLETT**  
American

Purchased with the Alice Newton Osborn Fund, 1999, 1999-135-1

### LET'S LOOK

What could this be?  
Is this a man or a  
woman? Why?

What adjectives come  
to your mind when you  
look at this person?

Look for different patterns  
and textures (hat, hair, coat,  
shirt, background, face).

Find the highlights (white areas  
that indicate reflected light) on  
her face (cheekbone, nose,  
lower lip, left chin). Which  
areas are in shadow?

What tools and techniques  
did Elizabeth Catlett use to  
make this picture?

How would adding color  
change its meaning and mood?

Imagine what might be beyond  
the picture's edges. Where is the  
sharecropper? Is she alone  
or with others? What could she  
be doing and thinking?

### SHARECROPPER

*"I'm not thinking about doing things new and different. I'm thinking about creating art for my people." —Elizabeth Catlett*

A woman wearing a broad-brimmed hat and a jacket fastened with a safety pin looks intently beyond the edge of this picture. Although her hair is turning white, she is lean and strong. Highlights on her cheekbone, broad nose, and lower lip make a striking contrast with the deep black shadows that define her neck and upper lip. Despite wearing humble clothes, she exudes strength, wisdom, and dignity. We see this sharecropper from below, which makes her appear larger than life, like a hero.

A sharecropper is a person who lives and grows crops on land owned by someone else, paying the rent by giving the owner a share of the crops. After the U.S. Civil War (1861–65), many former slaves became sharecroppers. Because they were obliged to give up huge amounts of their crops, many led harsh lives of poverty. Elizabeth Catlett admired the strength and perseverance of African Americans when faced with such adversity and injustice.

### ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Catlett was born in Washington, D.C., in 1915. After graduating from Howard University, she became an art teacher. She earned a master's degree in sculpture at the University of Iowa and continued teaching in the South and in New York City. In 1946 she traveled to Mexico to study sculpture and to be a guest artist at the Taller de Gráfica Popular (The Workshop for Popular Graphic Art). Her goal of making art for working people meshed perfectly with the philosophy and aesthetics of the Taller artists. In 1947 Catlett married a Mexican artist, then raised three sons and created her own art while also heading the sculpture department at the National Autonomous University of

Mexico. Cosechadora de algodón ("cotton harvester" in Spanish) was the first title of this print.

To make this relief print, Catlett cut away parts of the flat surface of a piece of linoleum with chisels. With a roller, she then covered the surface with black ink. After carefully placing a piece of white paper on top of the ink-covered linoleum, she ran the linoleum and the paper through a printing process. When the paper was lifted off the linoleum, all the cut-out lines and shapes remained white while the paper that touched the uncarved area was coated with black ink. Hundreds of white lines and shapes appear to swim all over the paper in an almost miraculous variety of textures and patterns, creating the three-dimensional forms of the sharecropper's face and clothing and giving energy to the entire composition.

*"We did linoleum prints because that is a suitable medium for public art—easy and inexpensive and you can make the editions as large as you need them."* —Elizabeth Catlett

Catlett learned to work collectively with the artists at the Taller de Gráfica Popular. These artists critiqued, and even worked on, each other's pictures. They also showed works in progress to the groups they served—trade unions and anti-illiteracy campaigns—asking for their comments, and making changes when requested. Catlett became skilled in various printmaking techniques and knowledgeable about the artistic traditions of Mexico, from pre-Columbian sculpture to the frescoes of Diego Rivera.

Elizabeth Catlett's lifelong goal is to create art that anyone can understand and find uplifting. She draws upon her experiences as an African American female artist in both the United States and Mexico to create prints and sculptures that focus on women and their struggles as mothers, workers, and fighters for social justice.

## WHO AM I?

Imagine that you are this sharecropper. Write an autobiography below. Then tell how you feel about the way the artists represented you.

- My name is:
  - I am \_\_ years old.
  - I work as:
  - My family is:
  - I'm thinking about:
  - I wish the artist had:
  - I like the way the artist:

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

### LANGUAGE ARTS/ENGLISH

#### *All Levels*

After looking at and discussing this picture, choose a name for this person. Make up a story about her, or write a brief biography, including some details of her childhood and her life as an adult. What do you think the future has in store for her?

Read the poem "Lineage" by Margaret Walker (1915–1998), which begins:

*My grandmothers were strong.  
They followed plows and bent to toil.  
They moved through fields sowing seed.  
They touched earth and grain grew.  
They were full of sturdiness and singing.  
My grandmothers were strong.*

*African American Literature: Voices in a Tradition* (Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1992), 446

Discuss this poem in relation to *Sharecropper*.

Recommended resource:

- Learn more about Margaret Walker at [aaregistry.com/african\\_american\\_history/994/Novelist\\_and\\_poet\\_Margaret\\_Walker\\_a\\_contributer](http://aaregistry.com/african_american_history/994/Novelist_and_poet_Margaret_Walker_a_contributer).

### SOCIAL STUDIES

#### *Elementary School*

Does this person live in a city or in the country? Is she rich or poor? How old is she? How can you tell? What does the artist think of this person?

#### *Middle School*

What is a sharecropper? How is this sharecropper like today's migrant workers?

#### *High School*

Although the woman depicted in this print is anonymous, Elizabeth Catlett also made prints of

famous African American women such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Research these American heroines and find out how they are similar to *Sharecropper*.

Recommended resource:

- Learn more about Elizabeth Catlett at [clevelandart.org/exhibitions/exhibits/2002/elizabeth\\_catlett\\_prints\\_and\\_sculptures.aspx](http://clevelandart.org/exhibitions/exhibits/2002/elizabeth_catlett_prints_and_sculptures.aspx)

## MUSIC

### *All Levels*

Learn about spirituals, religious songs created by enslaved Africans in the rural southern United States. Choose one that matches the mood and the message of *Sharecropper*. Explain your choice.

Recommended resource:

- Ashley Bryan, comp. and ill., and David Manning Thomas, arr., *All Night, All Day: A Child's First Book of African-American Spirituals* (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1991)

## ART

### *Elementary School*

Try on a variety of hats. Discuss what different hats can tell us about the person wearing them. Draw a picture of a classmate wearing a hat.

### *Middle School*

Look for photographs of ordinary people who are heroes and heroines. Choose one to use as the basis for a linoleum print using a variety of textures.

### *High School*

Choose a photograph of a person who intrigues you. Collect examples of printed texts from magazines that range from light to dark. Create a collage based on the photograph by cutting and gluing pieces of the texts, using different values to create a three-dimensional effect.