

Impact Statement

Clare Hassell, Grade 12

Shaping Tomorrow, 2025

Acrylic and pastel on canvas, 40 x 30 inches

Spring Valley High School, Columbia, SC

Ungsung Hero: Elizabeth Catlett

I have always been passionate about art, and recently, I've realized I want to bring light to societal issues through my artwork. As an African American woman, my journey has been one of growth and perseverance. Growing up, I witnessed the struggles of underrepresented groups, which fueled my passion for activism and strengthened my belief in the power of change. I believe that using art as a tool for activism can bring about positive change, and Elizabeth Catlett did just that. Elizabeth exudes strength, purpose, and endless possibility. I was inspired by her story, seeing as how she overcame racial discrimination to pursue her passions through education, art, and activism. Her story stood out to me because she and I share the same passion for social justice and the arts. She turned setbacks into stepping stones and used her talents to uplift the voices of African Americans, no matter what obstacles she faced. Whether that be teaching, sculpting, or even learning, she never lost sight of her roots or her mission. Her work not only depicted the beauty and struggle of Black culture but also challenged injustice and sparked dialogue.

Elizabeth was born in 1915 as the granddaughter of enslaved people. She faced systemic racism early in life, being denied admission to Carnegie Mellon University simply because of the color of her skin. However, she did not let this setback hasten her stride; instead, she used it as an opportunity to pursue her education at Howard University. Later, she became the first woman to earn a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa. Catlett centered her work on the everyday experiences of African Americans, especially women and children. Her art became a beacon of social change, blending the beauty of her art with bold commentary on social justice. From teaching in Harlem to working with the People's Graphic Workshop in Mexico, it is truly inspiring how Catlett used her talents to empower others and uplift marginalized groups. In the fall of 1940, she joined the faculty at Dillard University in New Orleans, where she not only taught but also advocated for her students' access to opportunities in a deeply segregated city. In one memorable act of quiet resistance, she transported her students by bus to the steps of the Isaac Delgado Museum so they could see a Picasso exhibition, defying the constraints of Jim Crow laws. Through her sculptures, prints, and portraits of civil rights icons like Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks, she challenged oppression and inspired countless individuals, including me. Her legacy continues to influence generations of artists and activists, proving that creativity combined with conviction can change the course of history.

My painting *Shaping Tomorrow* is a portrait that reimagines a young Elizabeth Catlett sculpting the older, wiser version of herself she eventually becomes. It reflects the idea that we shape our own destinies through determination, passion, and resilience. I was particularly inspired by the colors and technique with which she created her piece, *War Worker*, when I was creating the background for my painting. As I learned more about her life and how she overcame racial discrimination, fought for equal opportunities, and used her art as a tool for social justice, I knew I wanted to honor her through my own artistic vision. My painting symbolizes growth, self-determination, and legacy. I used acrylic paint on canvas to capture bold contrasts and expressive detail in the sculpture, emphasizing Catlett's gaze on the viewer in a sense, urging them to take control of their future. My color palette was carefully chosen to reflect warmth, resolve, and empowerment. This painting expresses not only the incredible journey of Elizabeth Catlett but also the message she left behind: no matter how society may try to limit you, you have the power to shape who you become.

Elizabeth Catlett's journey has shifted the way I approach both my art and my sense of purpose. Her courage, vision, and refusal to let societal barriers define her have inspired me to stay true to my values and use my creativity to make a meaningful difference. Her story encourages me to be bold in the face of challenges and to use my work not just to express myself, but to spark awareness and encourage others to think critically about the world around them. I see my art as a bridge between personal experience and collective understanding. I hope to share my piece, *Shaping Tomorrow*, with broader audiences through local exhibits, school showcases, and community events where people of all ages can connect with the themes of resilience, transformation, and empowerment. I'm also exploring digital platforms like social media and online art communities to expand my reach and start conversations beyond my immediate circle.