

ART ACTIVITY

Reflecting on the Black Experience

Background

Printmaking is unique in its ability to make multiple works of art from one engraved plate. Since the origins of printmaking around the 2nd century, the medium has taken on many forms that use different materials, tools, and processes. In the 20th century, African-American artist Elizabeth Catlett used printmaking techniques to explore themes of race and feminism in America. Her 1946 linocut series *I am the black woman* depicts the experiences of Black women in the 20th century.

Task

Students will consider Elizabeth's Catlett's artistic process and inspirations for the series *I am the black woman*. Students will begin by analyzing a selection of four prints from the series, and discussing the subjects and themes Catlett explored in her work. After thinking about how these works of art respond to the both Catlett's identity and the time period in which she lived, students will be tasked with creating their own prints presenting an interpretation of their personal identity.

Materials

- Foam plates
- Card Stock (approximately the same size as the foam plates, or smaller)
- Pencils
- Rubber Brayers (suggested brand: Speedball)
- Water-soluble Block Printing Ink (suggested brand: Blick)
- Plastic spoons
- Newspaper or Brown Kraft Paper Roll to cover tables

Art Vocabulary

- **brayer:** A roller used in printmaking to apply ink to the surface.
- **linocut:** A printmaking technique used to create a relief print.
- **relief print:** A printmaking process where the raised surfaces are inked.

Steps

- Invite students to analyze the four prints from Elizabeth Catlett's *I am the black woman* linocut series. Have them look at each one individually, and then consider them as a group. Discuss the following:
 - What do you notice about each of these images?
 - Who are the people being depicted? What are they doing?
 - What did the artist include in the foreground and background of these images?
 - What does this imagery tell you about the lives of the people you see here?
 - What do you think the artist is trying to tell the viewer about these people? What do you think she is trying to convey about herself?
 - Why might she have created these works of art?
 - Each of the prints in this series has a different caption. What information does the caption give you about the image? How does it enhance the way that you interpret it?
 - When you read the captions together, what story do they tell? What is different about the story that the images tell and the story that the words tell? How do they work together to give the viewer a greater sense of Catlett's experiences, and the experiences and contributions of Black women in America in the 1940s?
- Next, pass out the **background information** for the images. Discuss the following:
 - What was happening in America when Elizabeth Catlett created these works?
 - Catlett's mentors encouraged her to create art in response to what she knew and experienced. How is this reflected in her work?
 - How does *I am the black woman* comment on the challenges that Black women faced in post-war America?
- Students should now use these conversations to consider their own motivations for creating works of art. Ask them to think about the following (you can choose to hand out paper and pencils so that they can sketch while they reflect):
 - What are the different aspects of your identity?
 - How do each of these aspects impact your life and your view of the world?
 - Catlett's work reflected on her experiences during the 1940s. What modern events or trends might inspire your work?
 - What is one aspect of your identity that you would like to convey through art? What imagery could you use to represent this? How might this connect to bigger themes in America today?
- Once the students have had time to think about the type of imagery that they want to create, pass out the supplies. Each student should get a foam plate and a pencil.
- Introduce the printmaking process to students. Their final product will be the print itself, but in order to create their prints they will first need to etch their image into a foam plate. Once they have created a plate, they will print their final work onto a piece of paper.

- Once students have had time to sketch their ideas, they can etch their image into their foam plate. Remind students that their final prints will be a mirror image of their plates, so they should keep this in mind as they are planning their composition. When etching into the plate with their pencil, they should be sure to press hard into the foam to create clear and deep indentations. If students are having trouble with this step, see “Printmaking Tips” below.
- When students have finished their plates, invite them to ink the plates and create their print.
- Give each student another blank foam plate and a brayer. (To save on supplies, provide one foam plate and one brayer per group and ask students to take turns printing.) If multiple paint colors are available, invite students to choose the color of ink they would like to use.
- Have students put a spoonful of block printing ink on the blank foam plate and use the brayer to roll the ink out. They should roll the brayer across the plate vertically and horizontally until the brayer is covered with a smooth, even layer of ink.
- Next, students should use the brayer to ink their etched plate. They will need to roll the brayer in ink a few times to make sure that there is enough to cover the entire plate. The ink should also be rolled vertically and horizontally across the etched plate to make sure that it is completely covered in a smooth, even layer of ink.
- Once their etched plate is inked, have them place a sheet of cardstock on top of it. They should smooth the paper down onto the plate using the palm of their hand, starting from the middle and smoothing it out all the way to the edges. After they’ve finished, they can slowly peel the cardstock up off of the plate.
- When they are finished printing, they should set their wet plates aside and hang their finished prints to dry.
- While students are waiting to print or for others to finish, ask them to reflect on their art-making process. This reflection can be written or a discussion with another student:
 - What aspects of your identity and experiences did you choose to convey in your image? How did you represent them visually?
 - What inspiration did you draw from *I am the black woman*?
 - What was it like to engage with the printmaking process? What did you gain from going through each step?
 - What did you need to consider when making a plate that would then create your final images?
 - How did this process feel different from just drawing an image directly onto a piece of paper?
 - What did you like about it? What was difficult?
- To extend learning, invite students to write a personal statement or present their work to the class.

Printmaking Tips

Remember that whatever you etch into your plate will show up backwards on your print. This can get particularly tricky when including text. Encourage students to follow Catlett's example and not use words in their work.

Since their images are made using only lines, students can use hatching and cross-hatching to create shadows and depth.

Block printing ink can sometimes separate, so it should be stirred before use.

If (water-soluble) block printing ink is drying out or becoming too sticky, it can be thinned out by adding small amounts of water.