



Elizabeth Catlett  
*A Second Generation, from For My People*  
1992

Elizabeth Catlett (Mexican, born United States, 1915–2012)

***A Second Generation, from For My People, 1992***

Illustrated book with six color lithographs with text by Margaret Walker (1915–1998)

Sheet: 21 7/8 x 18 3/8 inches

Published by The Limited Editions Club, New York

The Carol and Seymour Haber Collection

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Elizabeth Catlett is celebrated as one of the foremost Black artists of the twentieth century. She is renowned for her commitment to social and political justice, subjects that recur in her prints, paintings, and sculptures. “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,” she declared.

Born into a middle-class home in Washington D.C., Catlett was the granddaughter of formerly enslaved people and learned their stories of struggle at an early age. She dedicated her life to art, enrolling at Howard University, then earning an MFA degree at the University of Iowa, where she studied under Grant Wood, who encouraged her to depict images from Black culture. After jobs and training in New Orleans and Chicago, Catlett moved to New York. A turning point came in 1946, when the artist won a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship, enabling her to move to Mexico City. She became involved with the Taller de Gráfica Popular (The People’s Print Workshop) and developed a talent for printmaking. Life in Mexico offered Catlett a respite from the racism she experienced in the United States, and she found like-minded artists who shared her commitment to the rights of workers, Black people, and women. In 1962, she became a citizen of Mexico.

*A Second Generation* comes from an artist’s book. Often paired with text, artists’ books are a hybrid artform combining fine art, literature, and bookbinding. In 1992, in honor of Margaret Walker’s first poetry collection with its seminal poem “*For My People*,” The Limited Editions Club commissioned Catlett to make six lithographs to accompany Walker’s work. (Walker and Catlett had become friends and roommates at the University of Iowa in 1940.) Rather than illustrating the poem literally, Catlett transforms Walker’s powerful words about the Black experience into iconic images. Together, Catlett’s words and Walker’s text explore hope and despair, as well as the simple joys of life.

*A Second Generation* is the final sheet in the series. Catlett depicts the heads of a young man and a young woman facing towards the future with hope and determination. The figures have a sculptural power, as if they had been carved out of onyx like Egyptian deities or royalty. Bright orange and red flames surround them, evoking the fires of revolution. In the bottom margin, a silhouetted frieze of figures marches, fists raised in the Black Power salute. Catlett suggests both the power of collective action—symbolized by the anonymous figures in blue—and the importance of the individual, each figure is slightly differentiated by height, hairstyle, and gesture.

Walker ends “*For My People*” with a call to action that is as resonant today as it was in 1937:

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born.  
Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.

**Art Terms**

**Lithography:** A printing process that works on the principle that oil and water repel each other. The artist draws on a flat stone or metal plate using a greasy substance so that the ink will adhere to them, while the non-image areas are made ink-repellent. (Adapted from the [Tate Glossary of Art Terms](#))

See Pressure + Ink: [Lithography Process from the Museum of Modern Art](#)

**Artists’ Book:** Artists’ books are books made or conceived by artists. There are fine artists who make books and book artists who produce work exclusively in that medium, as well as illustrators, typographers, writers, poets, book binders, printers and many others who work collaboratively or alone to produce artists’ books. ([From the Victoria & Albert Museum](#))

**Discussion and Activities**

1. What is going on in this picture? Write a paragraph describing what you see. How do you relate the portrait of two people framed in red, gold, and white to the blue figures along the bottom of the image?
2. What do you notice about the way Elizabeth Catlett uses line, shape, and color in this picture? How does her use of these elements make you feel? What parts of the image suggest movement and what parts suggest stillness? How does this contrast or tension between movement and stillness contribute to the overall impact of the work?
3. Consider this image, *A Second Generation*, in relation to the five other images in the book *For My People* (viewable in Portland Art Museum Online Collections). What scenes does Catlett portray? What does she convey about Black people’s lives and experiences in twentieth-century America?
4. Catlett created these prints in 1992 in response to Margaret Walker’s poem “*For My People*,” originally published in 1937. Read Margaret Walker’s poem (available at [poetryfoundation.org](#)). What is Walker giving to or wishing for her people? How do Elizabeth Catlett’s prints provide a visual interpretation of Walker’s poems and create a dialogue between word and image?
5. There is a 50-year span between the writing of the poem and the creation of the images, yet Walker’s words felt just as relevant at the end of the twentieth century as they did in the 1930s. Do they resonate with your sense of the world today? In what ways?
6. While, in this case, Catlett’s visual art was inspired by Walker’s poem, often artistic inspiration flows in the other direction. An ekphrastic poem describes or responds to another work of art. Spend time looking closely at Catlett’s *A Second Generation* or at any other work of art that interests you. Then, write a poem in response. See Jonathan Aprea’s resource “[10 Ekphrastic Poems](#)” for contemporary examples.

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