

Black Women in Art and the Stories They Tell

This exhibition explores the stories embodied in art created by Black women, as well as the narratives expressed and symbolized in artworks portraying Black women, which have been created by artists of differing races and genders. The stories can be quite complicated, especially when artists explore the complexity of the Black identity as it relates to American culture and the African legacies to be found in the United States. Some images are racially charged as the artist confronts stereotypes and prejudices that resulted in the placement of Black women at the very bottom of the hierarchy of race, class, and gender.

Certain pieces provide glimpses into the lives of Black women, with each image recounting more about the life of the sitter than just the moment represented. Two artists do this through realistic portraits: one Black woman is shown in the prime of her youth; the other one after many difficult years. While written accounts still exist about the life of the young female, the details known about the older woman are limited to her first name and the town in which she probably lived. The only remaining story about this mature woman is that conveyed by the painting. Other techniques used by artists to convey content include the use of symbols and allegory to tell personal stories and to consider broader universal values; the incorporation of actual words in the artwork to direct the reading; and the use of an artistic method that in itself contains narrative techniques.

Although the past can be viewed as a fixed entity of singular truth, the making and viewing of art, like the telling and reception of stories, permits a continuing reexamination of bygone events and people as well as a reconsideration of their subsequent reverberations. In this 2012 exhibition the variety of pieces chosen is meant to reveal the diversity of artistic approaches used to tell the stories of Black women in their roles as subject and as creator.

Romare Bearden

Born in North Carolina, Bearden moved to New York City as a child, participating with his parents in the Great Migration of African Americans out of the south to states both north and west during the 1910s and 1920s. The Bearden home in Harlem was a meeting place for Harlem Renaissance luminaries, including the painter Aaron Douglas and the musician Duke Ellington. In the 1930s Bearden studied art at Boston University and New York University, from which he graduated in 1935 with a degree in education. Bearden also studied art with George Grosz at the New York Art Students League.

Bearden's art is colorful and complex, filled with autobiographical references, interesting symbols, and narratives. Widely read in the history of art, his pieces are rooted in western, African, and Asian art, as well as in literature and the musical traditions of jazz and the blues. Bearden also was influenced by various art contemporaries including Matisse, Picasso, and Stuart Davis.

In the 1960s Bearden achieved acclaim with his collages, which included a variety of colored papers, snippets from newspapers and magazines, and patterned fabrics. Method and meaning collide in Bearden's art. His technique incorporates sharp breaks, distortions,

telescoping of time, and blending of styles, all of which Bearden used to address African-American political, social, and aesthetic concerns, and to depict the reoccurring rituals, customs, and everyday activities that bind friends and family together. He later produced lithographs, like the ones included in this exhibition, in which the juxtaposition and relationship of forms and figures directly recall the collage process.

In 1954 Bearden married Nanette Rohan, and in 1973 they built a second home on her family's ancestral land on the island of St. Martin. Bearden spent much of the last two decades of his life in the Caribbean. Bearden was clear about his feelings for the Caribbean: "Art will go where the energy is. I find a great deal of energy in the Caribbean . . . It's like a volcano there; there's something unfinished underneath that still smolders." This tropical environment deeply influenced his later imagery.



Romare Bearden (American, 1911–1988)

Pilate, 1979

Colored lithograph

Museum Purchase (92.83)

Pilate reflects the artist's aesthetic interest in African culture. Bearden expresses this interest through simplified forms inspired by African art and the Synthetic Cubism of Picasso and Stuart Davis. "I work out of a response and need to redefine the image of man in terms of the Negro experience I know best," Bearden said of his work. The Caribbean culture depicted in this print provides another aspect of the African experience.



Romare Bearden (American, 1911-1988)
Conjunction, 1979
Colored lithograph
Museum Purchase (92.81)

Conjunction shows a southern social scene as Bearden recalls his early childhood in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. As the title implies, Bearden shows through conversation and touch the connections that bind and unite friends and family as they participate in everyday activities and rituals.



Romare Bearden (American, 1911-1988)

Firebirds, 1979

Colored lithograph

Museum Purchase (92.84)

Firebirds exemplifies Bearden's bold style. His works are not just mere designs, however, as he portrays connections over time and space in his art in relation to timeless rituals. *Firebirds* may be associated with the legendary phoenix portrayed by many cultures including ancient Egypt. Thought to live for five hundred years, at the end of its life the fabulous bird was consumed by fire and out of the ashes a new phoenix was born. This story relates to ideas about rebirth and the resurrection of the dead found in numerous belief systems.



Romare Bearden (American, 1911–1988)

Three Women, 1979

Colored lithograph

Museum Purchase (92.82)

Three Women depicts a group of women dressed in brightly colored clothes with unusual patterns. Later in life, Bearden said his imagery was related to the musical traditions of blues and jazz. Indeed, his paintings, collages, and prints can be compared to musical improvisations in which memories of colors, textures, and sounds are mixed together to create compelling works of art.



Carrie Mae Weems (American, b. 1953)
GRABBING, SNATCHING, BLINK AND YOU BE GONE, 1993
From the series *Slave Coast*
Gelatin silver photographs and serigraph
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (99.10 A, B, & C)

Weems' use of text to accompany her photographs is central to her artistic practice. When considered in relation to the photographs, the words direct the viewer in the reading of the artwork. A full-blown narrative filled with physical and emotional details emerges.

In *GRABBING, SNATCHING, BLINK AND YOU BE GONE*, Weems addresses the issue of slavery. The artist visited Gorée Island, Senegal, and explored the abandoned slave holding facilities. For the ancestors of many African Americans, these premises were their last stop before being sent to the New World. African people were brought to the island to be sorted, sold, held, and shipped to America. Weems' text describes the breakdown of the African social structure as people become valued as commodities.

By placing text between the two photographs, Weems gives a subjective voice to the dispassionate photographs. Image and text work together to create a vivid story that recounts the fear and dread experienced by the African slaves who once inhabited the buildings.



Fritz Winold Reiss (American, born in Germany, 1886–1953)
Harlem Girl, I, ca. 1925

Pencil, charcoal, and pastels on heavy illustration board
Gift of Mr. W. Tjark Reiss (78.183)

The German born painter, designer, and teacher Reiss studied art at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and the School of Applied Arts in Munich. Drawn to the United States because of its ethnic diversity, Reiss emigrated from Germany in 1913.

The artist played an important role in the construction of the African-American image in the 1920s. In 1925 Alain Locke asked Reiss to illustrate a special issue of *Survey Graphic* magazine devoted to the Harlem Renaissance in New York City entitled *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*. For this project, Reiss met and chose his models from a cross-section of the African-American community: laborers, singers, ministers, sociologists, and children, including the girl whose portrait is displayed here.

Reiss' portrayals of African Americans who lived in Harlem were at odds with the stereotyped caricatures that were still prevalent in America. The African-American writer and philosopher Alain Locke discussed the importance of using art to construct new cultural identities for Black people in the United States, writing in his book *The New Negro*: "Art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid." While not invented by Locke, the term New Negro encapsulated the African-American search for self-identity and self-visualization.

A designer at heart, Reiss balances the skilful rendering of the sitter's individuality with an indication of the girl's cultural type. In this instance, the girl's dramatic, Egyptian style hair references the richness of her African heritage.

Elizabeth Catlett (American/Mexican dual citizenship, 1915–2012)
*"My role has been important in the struggle to organize
the unorganized,"* 1947
From the series *The Negro Woman* (Edition 14/20)
Linocut
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2001.10)



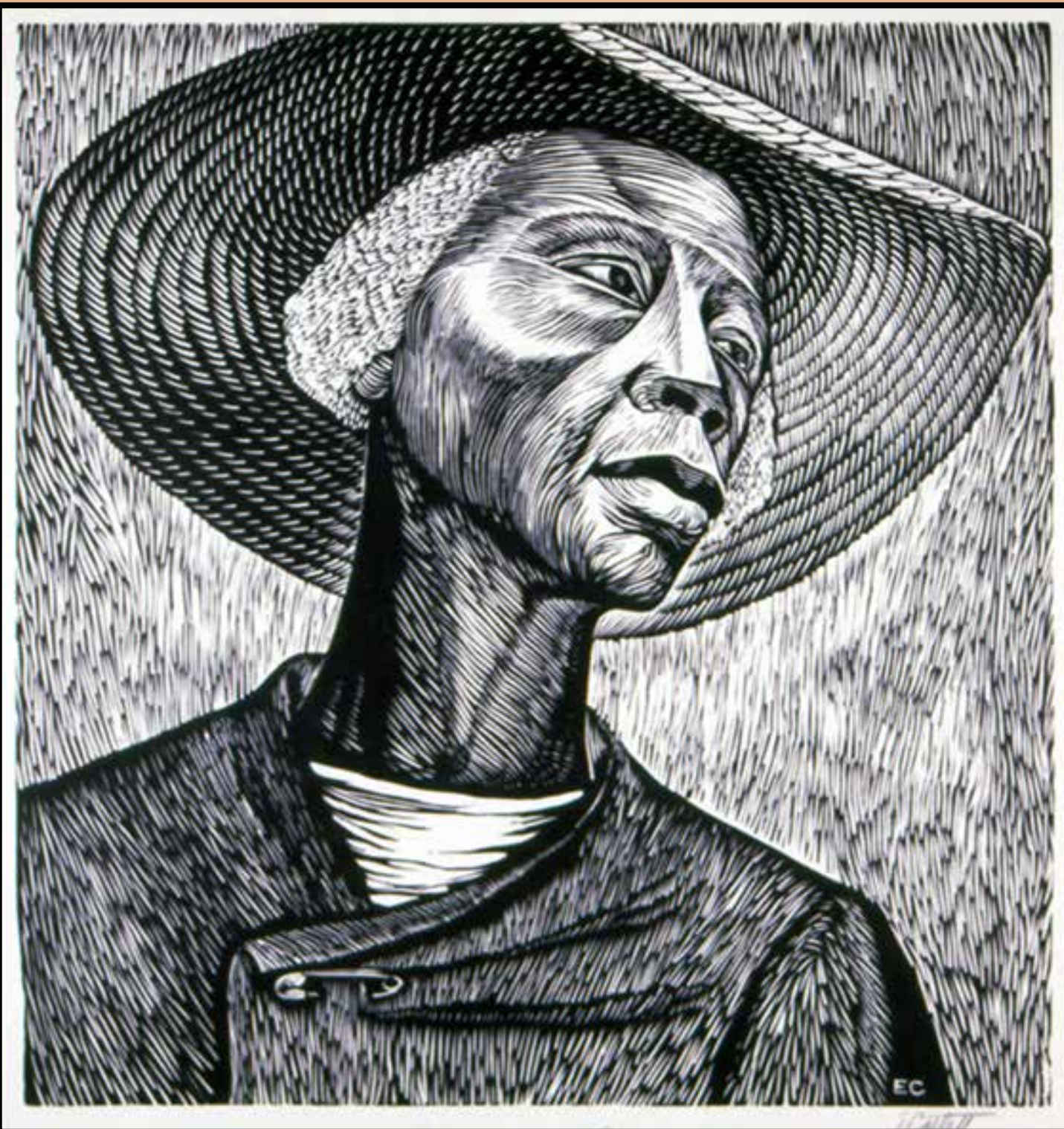
*14/20 My role has been important in the struggle
to organize the unorganized.*

Catlett 47

This print is the ninth of fifteen linocuts that make up *The Negro Woman* series, which Catlett began at the workshop. The images and titles of each print form a narrative that reflects the multifaceted experiences of African-American women in the United States. The series and narrative relate the harsh reality of Black women's labor, honors renowned African-American women, and gives voice to the fears, obstacles, and achievements of ordinary African-American women struggling for equality:

[1] *I am the Negro woman.* [2] *I have always worked hard in America . . .* [3] *In the fields . . .* [4] *In other folks' homes . . .* [5] *I have given the world my songs.* [6] *In Sojourner Truth I fought for the rights of women as well as Negroes.* [7] *In Harriet Tubman I helped hundreds to freedom.* [8] *In Phillis Wheatley I proved intellectual equality in the midst of slavery.* [9] ***My role has been important in the struggle to organize the unorganized.*** [10] *I have studied in ever increasing numbers.* [11] *My reward has been bars between me and the rest of the land.* [12] *I have special reservations . . .* [13] *Special houses . . .* [14] *And a special fear for my loved ones.* [15] *My right is a future of equality with other Americans.*

Through her use of the first person "I," Catlett challenges the traditional objectification of African-American women as she empathizes with her subjects and compels the viewer to also participate in this identification.



Elizabeth Catlett (American/Mexican dual citizenship, 1915–2012)
Sharecropper, 1952

Linocut

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2003.8)

Catlett was the granddaughter of slaves. She began working with linocuts, also known as linoleum cuts when she was apprenticed to Taller de Gráfica Popular (The People's Graphic Arts Workshop) in Mexico City. Printmakers in this artists' collective strove to use their art for social change. A variant of the woodcut medium, the linocut uses linoleum for the relief surface, which can be printed in a press or by hand. Easier and cheaper to make than woodcuts and conducive to large printings, the linocut was in itself an affordable and democratic art medium.

According to Catlett, the purpose of her art is to “present Black people in their beauty and dignity for ourselves and others to understand and enjoy, and to exhibit my work where Black people can visit and find art to which they can relate.” Blending figurative and abstract traditions with politically charged social concerns, Catlett creates striking works of art that capture the viewer's attention. She strongly believes in the democratic power of the print to reach a large audience.

First created in 1952, the print details the sharecropper's weathered skin, sunken eyes, textured white hair, straw hat, and safety pin neatly keeping her jacket closed. The sharecropping agricultural system emerged shortly after the Civil War. Laborers worked the land for a portion of the crops. Workers often lived in poverty and became indebted to the property owner. By avoiding any visual reference to the particular crop and focusing on the face of the subject, the image appears universal and heroic as it expresses the female worker's dignity in the face of adversity.



Joseph Delaney (American, 1904–1991)

Low Key, ca. 1945

Oil on canvas

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2011.304)

Delaney moved to New York City in 1930 to become an artist. There were more opportunities in the north for a Black artist. He studied art with Thomas Hart Benton at the Art Students League in New York City. Jackson Pollock was studying with Benton at that time, and the two student artists developed a great camaraderie. Delaney's time at the Art Students League had a profound effect on his artistic development, and he decided to commit himself to representing the interests of ordinary people and the vibrancy of American life.

In the painting *Low Key*, the artist tells an elaborate story about music using both abstraction and figuration. Musicians make music as people listen, sing, clap, and dance. Delaney's studies with one of the great anatomy teachers of the time, George Bridgeman, can be seen in his dexterous portrayal of male and female figures in a variety of poses throughout the composition. The abstract shapes that flow through the composition give form to the rhythms and sounds of the music as the story unwinds.

Prior to New York City, Delaney had lived in Chicago, where he witnessed the flowering of jazz, blues, and gospel music during the Black Chicago Renaissance. He knew several of the great performers including Albert Ammons, Big Joe Turner, Pete Johnson, and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. This unusual painting may symbolize the evolution of boogie-woogie from its African influences to modern instrumentation.



Faith Ringgold (American, b. 1930)
The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles, 1996
Colored lithograph
Gift of Museum Associates (99.9)

This lithograph is related to Ringgold's much larger painted quilt of the same title produced in 1991 (now in a private collection). Ringgold developed her story quilts as a way to get people to read her stories. In the words of Ringgold: "My ideas come from reflecting on my life and the lives of people I have known and have been in some way inspired by."

The original story quilt is one of a set of twelve that make up Ringgold's *The French Collection*. The series illustrates the fictional story of Ringgold's alter ego, Willia Marie Simone, an African-American woman who travels to Paris and becomes an artist, an artist's model, and the owner of a café where she hosts famous painters. Through Willia Marie, Ringgold addresses female African-American artists' complex relationship with European art. Although Willia Marie participates in French modernism, her experience as a Black woman affects her understanding of the movement. In *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*, the colorful sunflower field makes reference to Van Gogh's famous paintings. The figure of the Dutch artist, however, is relegated to the right margin of the composition, while the most important figures in the lithograph are the Black women who fought for political and social freedom in America.

Willia Marie stands on the left holding the edge of the quilt. Behind her and standing at the corner is Madame C.

J. Walker (1867-1919), the first African-American female millionaire. Following the East St. Louis Race Riot of 1917, she devoted herself to making lynching a federal crime. Around the corner with white hair stands Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), who fought against slavery and for women's rights. The next gray-haired woman is Ida B. Wells (1862-1931). A journalist, she exposed the horrors of lynching through her writing and lecturing. Standing with tilted head is the civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977). Despite being threatened, arrested, beaten, and shot at, she continued to fight against racial segregation and injustice in the south. Dressed in blue, Harriet Tubman (c. 1820-1913) appears next. She brought over three hundred slaves to freedom via the Underground Railroad. Beside Tubman and wearing glasses stands Rosa Parks (b. 1913-2005). Arrested in 1955 for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man, Parks helped launch the civil rights movement. At Parks' side wearing a red jacket is Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), who founded a college for Black Americans and was a special adviser to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Lastly, at the right corner of the quilt stands Ella Baker (1905-1986), who ceaselessly worked for civil and human rights, helping to improve housing, jobs, and education among the poor.

The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles relates the story of an imaginary group of women called the National Sunflower Quilters Society of America. The narrator Willia Marie Simone (the alter ego of Faith Ringgold) takes the

participants, consisting of African-American women freedom fighters, to Arles where they work on a quilt in a sunflower field. Vincent Van Gogh can be found nearby carrying the blooms that he will make famous in his paintings. The actual 1991 quilt painting, from which this lithograph derives, incorporates text that tells the narrative. The following is an excerpt from that text:

The Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh came to see the Black women sewing in the sunflower fields. "Who is this strange-looking man?" they ask. "He is un grand pientre [a great painter]" Willia Marie tells them . . . Harriet said, "Make him leave. He reminds me of slavers." But he was not about to be moved. Like one of the sunflowers, he appeared to be growing out of the ground. Sojourner wept into the stitches of her quilting for the loss of her thirteen children, mostly all sold into slavery . . . "I am concerned about you, Willia Marie. Is this a natural setting for a Black woman?" Sojourner asked. "I came to France to seek opportunity," I said. "It is not possible for me to be an artist in the States." [The women answered], "We are all artists. Piecing is our art. We brought it straight from Africa . . . That was what we did after a hard day's work in the fields to keep our sanity and our beds warm and bring beauty into over lives. That was not being an artist. That was being alive." When the sun went down and it was time for us to leave. The tormented little man just settled inside himself and took on the look of the sunflowers in the field as if he were one of them.



Beulah Ecton Woodard (American, 1895–1955)

Maudelle, ca. 1937–38

Painted terracotta with added glaze

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2007.40)

Woodard's *Maudelle* is a masterpiece of realistic portraiture achieved through incisive modeling and detailed description of the sitter's features, braided hair, and colorful earrings. Her dramatic beauty combined with the medium of terracotta (baked clay) gives the bust a potent presence. A fundamental medium of artistic expression, clay, even after firing, reveals traces of the artist's touch. This sensation of the presence of the artist combined with the slight tilt of *Maudelle*'s head lends a forceful immediacy to the portrait.

The model, Maudelle Bass Weston (1908-1989), was a well-known African-American concert dancer. She was the first Black American to study with the choreographer Lester Horton. In 1940 she danced with the American Ballet Theater in Agnes de Mille's ballet "Black Ritual", and in the 1950s she appeared with the dancer and choreographer Pearl Primus. As a model, she posed for numerous artists including Diego Rivera, Edward Weston, and Weegee.

An African-American artist, Woodard often explored the portrayal of Africans and African Americans from an ethnographic and anthropologic perspective. In this instance, great attention is given to the sitter's braids, which reflect her African legacy. The primary purpose of art was to educate, according to Woodard. She wanted African Americans to take pride in their African heritage.

Woodard was the first African-American artist to show at the Los Angeles County Museum. Thanks to artists like Woodard and the cultural diversity of the state, important California museums began exhibiting art from African countries and the Pacific Rim. Sadly, Woodard died in 1955 at the height of her career just before an exhibition of her work in Germany.



Charles White (American, 1918–1979)

Birth of Spring, 1961

Charcoal

Gift of the Childe Hassam Fund of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (63.33)

An African-American and Social Realist artist, White participated in Chicago's Black Renaissance. This mid-twentieth-century Black aesthetic movement, like the earlier Harlem Renaissance, saw a flowering in the arts. For many of the artists, this creative environment also spawned a growing political awareness. White felt "that the job of everyone in the creative fields is to picture the whole social scene . . . Paint is the only weapon I have with which to fight what I resent. If I could talk I would talk about it. Since I paint, I must paint about it." His artworks celebrate African- American heroes and everyday people trying to lead dignified lives in a racially segregated society.

The Birth of Spring was drawn in 1961 during the American Civil Rights movement and reflects an aspect of what Black Americans were experiencing at that time and the artist's positive outlook about life. Rather than depicting a specific individual, the work shows an anonymous Black woman with weathered hands that testify to a hard life. She leans forward and places her large hands on her thighs. The rhythmic lines in the background and the empty space in the upper part of the composition provide the viewer with a sense of upward movement. Historian Peter Clothier described the figure as an "ancestral presence" removed from time and place, "existing somewhere between America and Africa."