

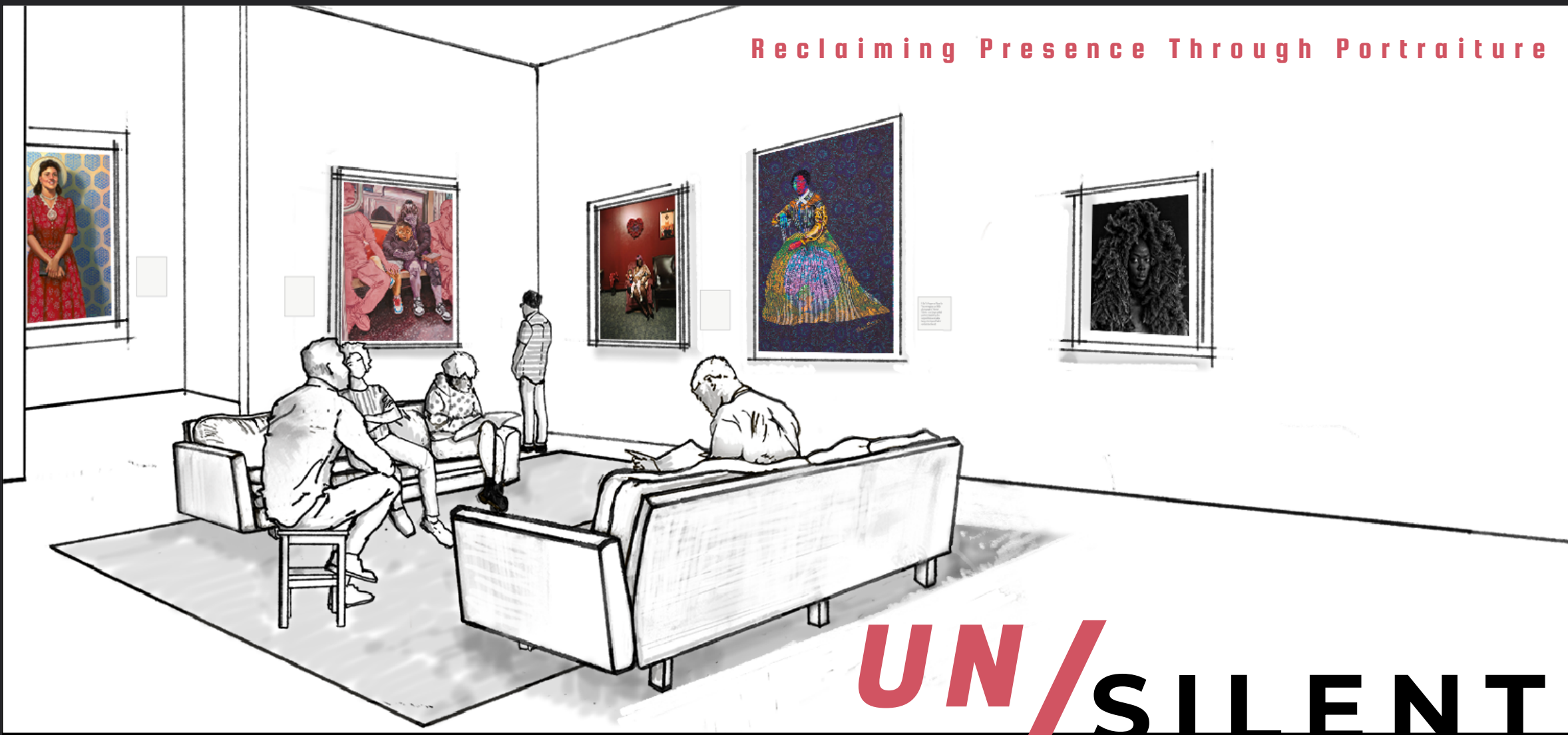
# UN



# SILENT

Reclaiming Presence Through Portraiture

## Reclaiming Presence Through Portraiture

**UN/SILENT**

Inspired by the lives of Henrietta Lacks and Zora Neale Hurston, this exhibit presents portraits of Black women whose presence refuses erasure. It centers around a comfortable conversation space, with warm lighting and accessible interpretation monitors. Visitors are invited and encouraged to sit within view of the gazes of the subjects.

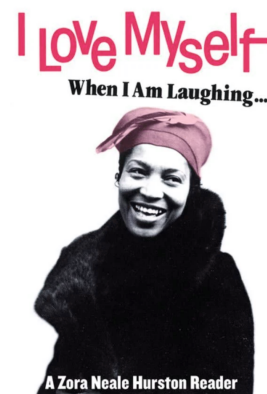
***“I Love Myself  
When I Am  
Laughing. And  
Then Again  
When I Am  
Looking Mean  
and Impressive.”***

---

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

## Reclaiming Presence Through Portraiture

This exhibit presents seventeen portraits of Black women. It starts with the legacy of Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), an amazing writer and anthropologist whose career was nearly destroyed by false accusations in 1948 and by the sensationalist press that amplified them. Though her reputation never fully recovered in her lifetime, Hurston continued to write, report, and create with extraordinary vision.



After her death, her work was rediscovered and republished, most notably through Alice Walker’s 1979 Feminist Press anthology *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing... And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*. That revival made Hurston’s writing widely available again and highlighted its continuing relevance. Her story mirrors the work of portraiture itself: resisting distortion, recovering visibility, and insisting on presence even in the face of misrepresentation.

In this same spirit of reclamation, Kadir Nelson’s *Henrietta Lacks (HeLa): The Mother of Modern Medicine* acknowledges a woman whose contributions to science went unrecognized for decades. Painted with care and gravity, her likeness affirms her place in public memory. Shown alongside these two remarkable lives are portraits by contemporary painters and photographers who continue this work of making Black women visible on their own terms.



## INSPIRATION

# [Portrait of Zora Neale Hurston]

Carl Van Vechten, 1938

- . Photographic print : gelatin silver
- . Gift of Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff, 1941-1971
- . Reproduction number: LC-DIG-van-5a52142
- . Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division  
Washington, D.C. 20540

This 1938 photograph shows Zora Neale Hurston, writer and anthropologist, photographed by her friend Carl Van Vechten, who documented many artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston is shown in direct profile, wearing a dark dress and hat, with her gaze turned away from the camera. Hurston's inclusion in this exhibition connects the photograph to a broader narrative: despite her major contributions to American literature and anthropology, her career was severely damaged by false accusations and public scrutiny in 1948. She continued to work, though largely unrecognized, until her death in 1960.

This photograph functions as a record of her presence at a time when her voice, and the voices of many Black women, were often minimized or ignored.



## Reclaiming Presence Through Portraiture

In 1948, Zora Neale Hurston's career was deeply harmed by false accusations that she had sexually assaulted a young boy—claims later proven impossible, as passport records showed she was in Honduras at the time. The case was eventually dropped, but the damage to her reputation was lasting, and she struggled professionally and financially in the years that followed. Hurston continued to write and work, though largely out of the public eye, until her death on January 28, 1960, in Fort Pierce, Florida, from heart disease.

She died in poverty and was buried in an unmarked grave, which remained unidentified until the 1970s. Her work was revived nearly two decades after her death, most notably when Alice Walker helped bring her writing back into print in 1979.



Zora Neale Hurston beating the hountar, or mama drum, 1937  
Source: Library of Congress.

*“Zora is picturesque, witty, electric, indiscreet, and unreliable. The latter quality offers material for discussion; the former qualities induce her friends to forgive and love her.”*

-Carl Van Vechten



## INSPIRATION

# Henrietta Lacks (HeLa: The Mother of Modern Medicine)

Kadir Nelson, 2017

- Oil on linen
- 151.1 × 125.7 cm
- National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; jointly acquired with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
- Accession no. NPG.2018.9

*Commissioned for the 2017 HBO film [The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks](#)*



A tobacco farmer from Virginia, Henrietta Lacks died from cervical cancer at only 31, a mother of five whose children were not her only legacy. Cells taken from her tumor without her knowledge or consent became known as HeLa, the first immortal human cell line. Her cells enabled countless medical breakthroughs while also raising enduring concerns about ethics, compensation, and patients' rights, particularly in relation to race and class. In this 2017 portrait, Kadir Nelson presents Lacks with dignity, depicting patterned wallpaper that recalls cycles of life, a hat that suggests a halo, two missing buttons symbolizing the purloined cells, and, most notably, her gracious, lovely smile. In **UN/silent: Reclaiming Presence Through Portraiture**, Lacks stands alongside other Black women whose stories and histories are unknown, muted, or ignored, yet whose portraits here insist on presence, authorship, and the right to be seen and remembered on their own terms.





# I Go To Prepare a Place for You

Bisa Butler  
2021

- Quilted and appliquéd textiles (including cotton, silk, velvet, African wax prints)
- 170.2 × 149.9 cm
- Based on a historical photograph of Harriet Tubman
- Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
- Accession number: 2021.38
- Source photograph: Carte-de-visite of Harriet Tubman by Benjamin F. Powelson, c. 1868–69

*I Go To Prepare a Place for You* reimagines an 1860s photograph of Harriet Tubman as a large quilted portrait, translating the original black-and-white image into layered fabric and stitched detail. By giving Tubman a full-scale, tangible presence, the work invites viewers to consider the person behind the photograph, someone who escaped slavery, led others to freedom, served as a Union scout, spy, and nurse during the Civil War, organized the Combahee River Raid, and later advocated for suffrage and community care. The portrait restores Tubman to view as a complete figure shaped by a long life of resistance and responsibility.

*weaving presence into visibility*





# Transit

Jordan Casteel  
2023

- . Oil on canvas
- . 198.1 × 152.4 cm
- . Private collection

*Transit* shows two people on a New York City subway, a woman and a child seated together, close in posture and definitely not performing for a viewer. Casteel paints them in careful detail from life, using scale, color, and direct observation to give time and attention to a moment most often unseen or unnoticed. Like much of her work, it focuses on ordinary public life and makes space for the visibility and individuality of Black subjects in everyday settings.





## Untitled (from The Kitchen Table Series)

Carrie Mae Weems  
1990, printed 2003

- . Portfolio of 20 platinum/palladium prints and 14 screenprints
- . 50.8 × 50.8 cm
- . National Gallery of Art
- . Accession number 2017.4.1.1-34
- . Gift of the Collectors Committee, and Robert B. Menschel and the Vital Projects Fund

In *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990), Carrie Mae Weems stages and photographs a fictional narrative in which she plays the lead role. Every image centers on the same room, her kitchen table under a single overhead light, while different figures appear and disappear around her. By being both photographer and subject, Weems claims control over how she is seen, framing herself through her own lens rather than through an outside gaze.

*"The kitchen, traditionally considered a female space, has rarely been pictured as a site of importance. Weems turns this idea on its head. She suggests the kitchen table is the real stage where life's biggest moments play out, and where the full range of human emotions is expressed. The series boldly asserts, in particular, Black womanhood's complexity, strength, and beauty."*

- National Gallery of Art







# Young Grandmother

Deana Lawson  
2019

- Pigment print
- 162.5 × 129 cm
- Courtesy the artist; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles
- Included in The Hugo Boss Prize 2020: Deana Lawson, Centropy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2021)

Deana Lawson's portraits are carefully composed and collaborative, often made in domestic or personal spaces, but with the intention of creating images that feel monumental rather than casual or incidental. Lawson has said her work is about "setting a different standard of values and saying that everyday Black lives are beautiful, powerful, and intelligent."

*Young Grandmother* reflects this approach, presenting its subject with self-possession, made in collaboration with the person pictured, without needing to explain her presence.

***"It's about setting a different standard of values and saying that everyday Black lives are beautiful, powerful, and intelligent."***

— Deana Lawson, interview with *The Cut* (New York Magazine)





# Somnyama Ngonyama II Oslo

Zanele Muholi  
2015

- . Gelatin silver print / pigment print (varies by edition and exhibition)
- . 97.8 × 80.3 cm
- . Produced in editions of 8 + 2 artist proofs (example: edition 6/8)
- . Series: *Somnyama Ngonyama* ("Hail the Dark Lioness")
- . Guggenheim Museum (*Hugo Boss Prize 2020* exhibition), Tate Modern (UK), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), Fotografiska (various cities), and others

In this self-portrait, Zanele Muholi, a South African visual activist focusing on race, gender, sexuality, and self-representation in Black LGBTQ+ communities, turns the camera on themselves, continuing their ongoing series *Somnyama Ngonyama* ("Hail the Dark Lioness"). Muholi uses their own body and gaze as the subject, photographing themselves with high contrast and controlled lighting to focus on expression, and identity. Rather than documenting others, they take on the role of both photographer and sitter, making self-portraiture a form of authorship..

*"A sense of unapologetic selfhood"*  
Tate Museum





## Mama, Mummy and Mamma (Predecessors #2)

Njideka Akunyili Crosby  
2014

- . Acrylic, color pencil, charcoal and transfers on paper
- . 213.4 × 365.8 cm
- . Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs

Crosby makes portraits that center the people and histories that shaped her, especially the women in her family. In this work, she portrays herself with her mother and sisters, using a mix of painting, drawing, and photo transfers from family albums and Nigerian popular media. She gives private memory a larger scale and permanence, treating domestic life and maternal influence as worthy. The piece speaks to how presence and legacy are built within families, even when those stories rarely appear in official archives or public portraiture.





## Witch Doctor Revisited

Njideka Akunyili Crosby  
2011

- Acrylic, charcoal, pastel, colored pencil, collage and Xerox transfers on paper.
- 192 × 129.5 cm
- Collection of the artist

Crosby draws from family photographs, Nigerian magazines, and her own memories to create portraits that connect personal and cultural history. In *Witch Doctor Revisited*, she includes people from her life rather than public figures. The work shows family, memory, and everyday life as the private made visible.

Her works are “visual tapestries that vivify the personal and social dimensions of contemporary life while evocatively expressing the intricacies of African diasporic identity.” —Davis Zwirner Gallery





## Huxtables, Mom and Me

*from the series The Notion of Family*

LaToya Ruby Frazier  
2008

- . Gelatin silver print
- . 40.6 × 50.8 cm
- . Institute of Contemporary Art / Boston 800.16.05
- . Courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels

Frazier uses portraiture to bring visibility to the intimate, everyday lives of herself and her mother in their hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania. In *Huxtables, Mom and Me*, she photographs herself wearing a T-shirt with the cast of *The Cosby Show* and includes the reflection of her mother in a mirror, creating a layered image of relationship, memory and representation. Her work treats family history as a subject for portraiture, insisting that stories often left out of public display belong in the frame and deserve attention.



## Portrait of Mnonja

Mickalene Thomas  
2010

- . Rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel
- . 243.8 x 304.8 cm
- . Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

Thomas creates portraits that celebrate the beauty, style, and self-awareness of Black women, often using rhinestones, enamel, and acrylic to draw attention to her sitters. She began working with rhinestones because they were affordable, and kept using them for the way they highlight skin, texture, and adornment.

As Thomas has said, "Beauty has always been an element of discussion for Black women, whether or not we were the ones having the conversation."

"We've been supportive characters for far too long and ... my art gives Black women their flowers and lets them know that they are the leading role."

—Mickalene Thomas





# The Many Ways To Work It Out

Toyin Ojih Odutola  
2017

- . Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper
- . 101.6 × 76.2 cm
- . Collection of Drs. Carlos Garcia

Ojih Odutola said the allure of the selfie can be found in “the enhancement of what we believe to be our true self, or what we want to portray. In this moment I looked raggedy, but I felt so good. I wanted to show a very satisfied black woman.”

The artist worked hard to get the subject’s gesture down. “There’s this nonchalance. A lot of that has to do with occupying space,” she said. “If you’re looking upon a person who does not care what you think of them, who is not there to entertain you, who couldn’t care less if you are there looking at them—it takes a lot to build a picture into that.”

—*‘Mark-Making As a Land Your Eyes Traverse’: Toyin Ojih Odutola Talks with Zadie Smith*





## Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama

Amy Sherald  
2018

- Oil on linen
- 182.9 × 152.4 cm
- Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- Accession Number: NPG.2018.15
- Commissioned by: National Portrait Gallery (official portrait of the First Lady of the United States)
- Unveiled: February 12, 2018

“The portrait celebrates Michelle Obama, the former first lady of the United States and the wife of the 44th president, Barack Obama. In this elegant and enigmatic painting, she gazes directly out at the viewer, hand under her chin, inviting contemplation. Painted using the artist Amy Sherald’s signature grayscale, Mrs. Obama’s unnaturally colored skin asks us to consider both her race and her humanity. While the use of gray in lieu of more natural skin tones reduces the reference to her race, the blunt removal also draws attention to her skin color, highlighting her racial identity. The gray tones, in particular, reference nineteenth-century photographic traditions, wherein the emerging photographic medium allowed free African Americans to celebrate themselves and craft their own unique (and positive) identities.” [Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery](#)



# Saint Woman

Amy Sherald  
2015

- . Oil on canvas
- . 137.2 × 109.2 cm
- . Private collection (widely exhibited)

Sherald paints her subjects with a calm, deliberate presence that resists stereotype. In *Saint Woman*, she applies the same approach she has become known for: the grayscale skin tones, simplified background, and an emphasis on the act of being seen rather than “performing” for the viewer. This piece was completed shortly before her Michelle Obama commission; part of the body of work that established her signature style.

The portrait invites stillness and attention, giving space to a subject who is not a public figure but is treated here with the same care and scale. In the context of this exhibition, she is quiet, self-defined, not needing to be overly explained.





SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER,  
THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED,  
ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY.

## The Water Bearer

Lorna Simpson  
1986

- . Gelatin silver print with engraved text on plastic plaque
- . 101.6 × 76.2 cm
- . Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York
- . Accession Number: 672.1999

Simpson began using photography and text together in the 1980s to examine how identity is represented and understood. *The Water Bearer* is an early example of this approach. Like much of Simpson's work, it withholds full narrative or identification, asking the viewer to consider how people, especially Black women, are framed, remembered, or overlooked in visual and historical records.

*Simpson "traces the history of visual representation, challenging the ways Black women view themselves and the way society perceives and categorizes them." [Black Women Radicals](#)*



## Afro Goddess Looking Forward

Mickalene Thomas  
2015

- Rhinestones, acrylic, and oil on wood panel
- 243.84 × 304.8 cm
- Exhibited in *All About Love* mid-career retrospective (The Broad, Los Angeles)

Thomas uses rhinestones, acrylic, and oil on wood panel to present herself in *Afro Goddess Looking Forward*, merging self-portraiture, pattern, and materials into one image. Her work often places the Black woman's body and gaze at center, demanding attention through a larger scale, eye-catching texture, and directness.

*"To see yourself, and for others to see you, is a form of validation. I'm interested in that very mysterious and mystical way we relate to each other in the world."* -Mickalene Thomas





16/20 in other Catlett '46  
folks' homes...

## In Other Folks' Homes...

from the series *The Black Woman*

Elizabeth Catlett  
1946, printed 1989

- . Linocut on paper
- . 20.3 × 7.6 cm
- . From *The Black Woman* series, printed in an edition of 20
- . Examples held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the National Gallery of Art
- . Accession (MoMA): 224.2003

Catlett, who lived during the same challenging times as Hurston and also explored themes of activism, cultural belonging, and the struggles and strength of Black women, made this print as part of a series that portrays the lives of working Black women with clarity and respect. She does not idealize or dramatize the figure, but gives her a direct and steady presence. The work acknowledges labor that was often seen but rarely recorded, especially from the worker's point of view. Through a simple, unembellished image, Catlett gives this woman the space to exist within her own history.

# UN SILENT

## Reclaiming Presence Through Portraiture

In this show, Black women occupy space in history, in memory, in the gallery, and in the present moment, with complete disregard for what or where anyone else thinks they should be.

Presentation by Lauren Thomson  
Museum Interpretation - Fall 2025  
Assignment: Graduate Homework B

---

