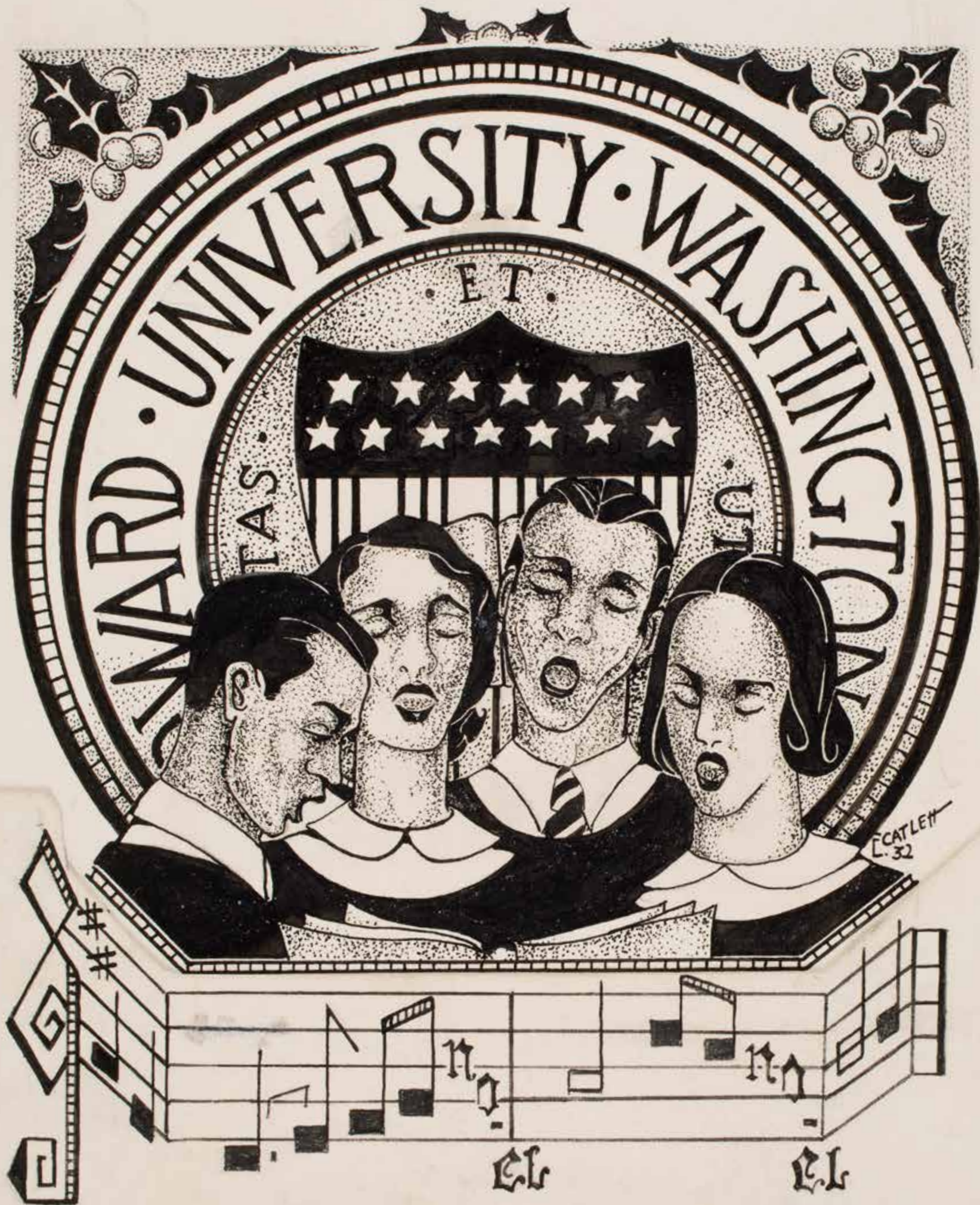




MELANEE
HARVEY

BECOMING AN
ARTIST-ACTIVIST
AT HOWARD
UNIVERSITY IN
PURSUIT
OF TRUTH

Since its founding in 1867, Howard University has instilled in its student body a sense of social responsibility through its motto *Veritas et Utilitas* (truth and utility). As one of the university's most prestigious art graduates, Elizabeth Catlett actualized the university's motto across her career by creating *useful* art that advances equality, Black empowerment, and global revisionist Black histories. Akin to the first generation of art students educated at Howard University during the 1920s and 1930s, Catlett established a reciprocal relationship with Howard, where she was shaped by this community and in turn impacted it.¹ This art community comprised the foundation upon which Elizabeth Catlett built a practice of aesthetic activism, anchored in a commitment to Black creative legacies and Black women.

Carnegie Institute of Technology's rejection of Catlett's application for admission became a part of her artist biography as a testament to the racism inherent in the American art landscape during the first half of the twentieth century.² This encounter with systemic racism was swiftly met with assurance from her mother, Mary Carson Catlett, who restored her confidence with these words: "We'll send you to Howard, they have an art department."³ Far from an inferior, alternative educational path, Howard University was a leader among historically Black educational institutions in establishing degree programs in art. Howard's art department and gallery provided students with access to practicing art professionals as faculty, rigorous art education, and art itself—often inaccessible to African Americans due to segregation policies and practices. Catlett's admission into the art department at Howard placed her in one of the leading art and design programs defining pedagogy and art practice for American art. It also introduced her to Howard's rich art communities—which laid the foundation for her aesthetic activism.

THE CAPSTONE

When Catlett, who went by Alice Elizabeth during her early years at Howard, entered as a first-year student during the fall of 1931, she arrived at a campus rapidly evolving in its curricular constitution, physical character, and national stature as the "Capstone of Negro education."⁴ The art department was an integral component of the university's development. During the early 1930s

Howard's art activities were lauded in *The Crisis* (the publication of the NAACP) for the institutional encouragement of artistic "talent among Negro students and ... the appreciation of art."⁵ Catlett arrived at Howard primed to excel in her social and academic endeavors.

She entered the art department, then housed in the College of Applied Science, to pursue a bachelor of science degree in art with a concentration in design.⁶ Howard passed several milestones during her first year in 1931: the ten-year anniversary of the founding of the art department, the first year since James Herring's promotion to associate professor, and the second year of the Gallery of Art, which boasted an increasingly full exhibition and lecture calendar.⁷ Catlett's courses included introductory design taught by Lois Mailou Jones; anatomy studios and sketching with James A. Porter; as well as drawing freehand and composition with James Wells.⁸ Catlett was also required to take a quarter-long course on mechanical drawings with Darnley Howard, assistant professor of mechanical engineering, and Howard H. Mackey, assistant professor of architecture.⁹

Curricular offerings were augmented by art exhibitions sponsored by the College Art Association of America (CAA) and mounted in Howard's Gallery of Art. For example, Catlett and her peers viewed and engaged a collection of seventeenth-century Dutch artworks as well as an exhibit of high quality reproductions of modern art during her first semester. *The Hilltop's* coverage of the exhibition dubbed "The Little Dutch Masters" conveys the enthusiastic response of the campus. Under the subtitle "Exhibition Is First Showing of Masters in the United States," the university's newspaper emphasized Howard as a premier venue for international art, noting, "The eyes of the art world at large has turned its eyes Washington wise wondering how such a thing happened. It is the signal honor of having in the Art Gallery an exhibition of genuine Masters painted in the time when Holland was coming to the fore in art production."¹⁰ Catlett and her peers had access to Dutch genre paintings and a "smaller room of the gallery" dedicated to prints composed after paintings by Johannes Vermeer. These exhibitions are significant as they brought international prestige to Howard University and shaped the artistic paths of students like Catlett. She identified her experience with the modern art exhibit as a significant moment in her artistic development, recalling:

I remember an exhibition by Van Gogh, reproductions in the gallery. But they were so good, that you could see the texture, the thickness of the paint he used. That inspired me as to what a painting should look like. I never had any idea of how you were an artist. How you should be an artist. That inspired me to want to go to New York. Washington was Jim Crow then and we didn't have a chance to go to many things. In New York, I saw plays and went to exhibitions and I remember going to New York especially to see a big Van Gogh exhibition.¹¹

Catlett gained a sense of direction and orientation as a first-year art student through her experience in the gallery. She began critically studying canonical artists and techniques while also identifying specific design elements that captured her attention. Close study of the impasto surfaces of Van Gogh initiated her sustained interest in texture. Although it may seem exceptional for a historically Black college or university to offer art curriculum steeped in Western aesthetics, HBCUs like Howard University and Wilberforce University have maintained a rich tradition of cultivating such interest among students since the nineteenth century. Howard's art gallery was a portal that encouraged students to explore art centers like New York, significant chapters of global art, as well as contemporary art trends.

Fig. 1—Alice Elizabeth Catlett, *Untitled (Wynona Wing Seated)*, 1932, Howard University Gallery of Art [© page: Photograph by Jada A. Brooks]



Student artwork by Catlett from her first year indicates her stylistic range in rendering the human figure (fig. 1). This drawing was completed during the winter session of Porter's Sketch and Anatomy course sequence, which required "conceptual and memory drawings," full-length charcoal figurative renderings, as well as anatomical studies.¹² Catlett demonstrated drafting skills across line, modeling, and textural variety in this composition, conveying tension across the surfaces of the loose T-shirt and projections of the body, most prominent in the shoulders, arms, torso, and legs. Even at this early stage, she renders the human form through sharp, rounded geometric shapes. This drawing also



Fig. 2—Herman Rogers, *Wynona Wing*, c. 1929, pastel, Howard University Gallery of Art



Fig. 3—At Howard, Elizabeth Catlett (far left) standing next to Lois Mailou Jones, with other students, c. 1933, Lois Mailou Jones Collection, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University

shows Catlett's interaction with her peers. The sitter appears to be Wynona Wing, an advanced art education major. Catlett and her classmates frequently used Wing as a model, as indicated by student art in the Gallery of Art's permanent collection (fig. 2). Catlett represented Wing much differently than her male peers did. Under Catlett's hand, Wing is a modern woman, as evidenced by her hair, attire, and attitude—exuding confidence in her direct gaze and posture.

Catlett also created *Howard University Choir* during the winter quarter of the 1931–1932 academic year (p. X49). This design was submitted to Jones as an assignment in the introduction to design course, which focused on “a study of lettering and construction of design.”¹³ Her decision to retain Catlett's student work marks Jones's investment in Catlett during her first two years as a design student (fig. 3). For instance, at the close of her first year, Catlett was one of ten art and architecture students selected by Jones to attend a dinner party at a studio owned by playwright, actress, and stage director Gertrude P. McBrown. The gathering was a gesture of appreciation for students who assisted Jones and Catlett's classmate Henry Hudson in painting “Egyptian panels used as decorations for the Alpha Phi Alpha spring prom.”¹⁴ Other members of Howard art faculty attended, including Porter and Wells. These events exemplify the aesthetic, academic, and social experiences Howard University art faculty facilitated for students.

Howard's art community accelerated momentum in gallery programming and departmental growth during this period. During the winter quarter, the gallery opened another CAA sponsored exhibition featuring mural painting, organized by the New York's Roerich Museum. According to Wells, this exhibit was the first show in the history of Howard's gallery that exclusively featured tempera paint. He explained the significance:

*This exhibition is very timely because of the great interest manifested in mural painting. Probably the most outstanding exhibition of the season has been that of the Mexican mural painter [Diego] Rivera. Many critics are saying that the future of American art lies close to the Mexican group. They probably take this attitude not only because of the fresh vision the Mexican artist brings to him from his native soil, but because the medium usually employed by the Mexican painter of murals will be more adapted to the buildings of future thought and easel pictures. This view is probably far-fetched but it does indicate that the return of an art form... the fact that the process of c[ontemporary designers] to employ almost exclusively murals for the interior decoration of its buildings indicates the significance of mural painting as an art form.*¹⁵

At the time of this exhibition, Catlett was enrolled in Wells's composition courses, where he required students to demonstrate “an understanding of tempera painting, each student having to prepare the board and the ground on which he ultimately placed his decoration.”¹⁶ Catlett's interest in mural painting developed during this quarter as a direct result of this exhibition, Wells's instruction, and her personal research.¹⁷

In addition to exposure to canonical Western art, Catlett and her peers received lessons on the current state of African American art through exhibits at Howard's gallery. One, *Exhibition of Paintings by Negro Artists*, assembled sixty-five paintings from private collections and the Harmon Foundation, with the sponsorship of the Cultural Committee of the Washington Branch of the NAACP.¹⁸ Students observed the stylistic range of Chicago modernist Archibald Motley Jr., from the precise naturalism of the portrait *Uncle Bob* (1928) to the round forms of *Brown Girl after the Bath* (1931). The exhibition promoted African American artists as engaged with global perspectives by featuring Haitian views

by William E. Scott and Parisian scenes by Laura Wheeler Waring, William H. Johnson, and Palmer Hayden. The exhibition also provided Catlett with popular approaches to racialized maternal iconography popular during the New Negro Movements across urban centers, best exemplified by Charles C. Dawson's *Quadroon Madonna*. As art historian Rebecca Van Diver has argued, in many ways, Catlett's maternal artworks from the 1940s advances this tradition of maternal imagery, insisting on the recognition of Black mothers' labor.¹⁹

Catlett and her peers gained more insight into the practice of Howard's core art faculty (Herring, Jones, Porter, and Wells) in the winter quarter of 1932 when Howard's gallery mounted an exhibition of "Rare Negro Paintings" that prominently featured their work—including Jones's tempera painting *Buddha* (1927); Wells's *Plowman* (and two other oil paintings); as well as Porter's *Reflections* (with two more pastels).²⁰ Herring's research agenda for the summer of 1932 suggests his interest in developing Howard into a global art center specializing in African Diasporic art. Herring joined Fisk University linguistics professor Lorenzo Dow on a research trip to the islands off the coast of South Carolina. Herring investigated "the weaving and pottery found on the islands to discover if the original motifs of the textiles are close to African art and design or influence."²¹ Across exhibitions, faculty research, and creative production, Howard's Gallery of Art and art department shaped one of the first spaces dedicated not only to recovering stories of aesthetic African retentions but also to emphasizing contemporary art by African American artists.

One under-recognized aspect of the art activity at Howard during the early 1930s is the trailblazing organizational development that connected Howard students, faculty, local art enthusiasts, and practicing artists in DC. On March 26, 1932, the *Afro-American* reported "110 Organize New Arts Guild," noting that Herring sponsored "the movement."²² Bringing together visual and performing artists as well as community supporters of the arts, this new organization took up art appreciation as its mission and endeavored "to foster an interloan system with public schools and other colleges, to establish scholarship funds, and to create the taste for art through free Saturday morning classes and through civic recognition." This large group was divided into nine committees and Howard art faculty were prominent, with Porter serving as vice president and Wells chairing the finance committee. The art guild also attracted the support of educators Mary Church Terrell and Nellie M. Quander. This example of active engagement with cultural practitioners and local community provided an important precedent and context for the communities Catlett would shape with her art practice during the second half of the twentieth century.

DEEMED MERITORIOUS

Catlett continued to excel in her academic and social pursuits during her second year at Howard. In watercolor painting classes with Porter, she refined her use of elongated soft lines and developed her eye for the sculptural by adjusting how she articulated the human form through fabric. In one design (fig. 4), Catlett's interest in visual weight and mass remains consistent in her control of value to render volume. While Porter and Wells taught the majority of her courses this year, she enhanced her graphic designs in Jones's design course. She was recognized for her stellar work across her courses at the 1933 university commencement, where she was presented with the Cohen's Inc. Company Prize of "\$5 to the student whose work is deemed meritorious by the head of the department of art."²³ Catlett earned a full scholarship for the 1933–1934 academic year, her third at Howard.²⁴

Her junior year marked a period of profound personal development in her academic and social life as well as her sense of self-definition. Catlett changed

Fig. 4—Elizabeth Catlett, *Dress Model*, 1932, watercolor, The D. L. Demps Collection



her major from design to painting during the summer of 1933, which allowed her more latitude to enroll in classes taught by Porter and Wells. Art students navigated a fall semester of exhibitions “dominated by African subjects” in Howard’s Gallery of Art. Students investigated the formal and cultural possibilities of African art traditions under the tutelage of faculty (including Jones and Wells), who frequently engaged African aesthetics in such modernist compositions as Jones’s *Ascent of Ethiopia* (1929) and Wells’s *Looking Upward* (1928).²⁵ Howard art faculty and students were highly visible in the 1933 *Exhibition of Works by Negro Artists*, sponsored as a part of the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Negro Life (now known as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History) and mounted at the Smithsonian Institute’s National Gallery of Art.²⁶ Art historian Tobias Wofford articulates the significance of this exhibition to Howard’s art community, noting “the participation of Herring as curator, [Alain] Locke as theorist, and Porter as the artist



Fig. 5—James A. Porter, *Twelfth Street YMCA Mural*, c. 1933–1934, from *The Hilltop*, February 16, 1934, 4, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

scholar reveal the discourse that emerged to interpret, celebrate, or even resist [race as a frame for exhibiting work by African Americans].²⁷ It certainly demonstrates the integral role of visual art in African American public scholarly discourse during the 1930s.

Catlett defined her junior year with her struggle to balance academic responsibilities and extracurricular commitments. During the spring semester, Catlett took courses in composition and life drawing with Porter in addition to taking landscape painting with the departmental chair, Herring.²⁸ As a promising student on a merit scholarship, Catlett faced pressure to excel in the classroom as well as professional art opportunities extended to her, such as her appointment as a muralist for the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). Catlett recalled that while a classmate (Hudson) “went about doing his mural very conscientiously...I was taking classes from nine to five and leading a big social life.”²⁹ Although Catlett viewed her experience with the PWAP as a missed opportunity, it facilitated an intensive study of the contemporary Mexican Muralist Movement as well as the mural practice of Porter, who was completing his mural for the Twelfth Street YMCA (fig. 5).³⁰

By the middle of her junior year, her social activities centered on her membership with at least three student organizations. Catlett had selected the Daubers’ Art Club as one of the first organizations to join at Howard. Under the supervision of the core art faculty, members of this group engaged in art enrichment beyond the classroom “through constant contact with contemporary art and artists and ancient masters and masterpieces... [as well as] frequent visits to museums, art galleries and other centers of interest.”³¹ By her third year, Catlett was serving as business manager for the club (fig. 6) and was initiated into the Stylus Literary Society, a selective student group dedicated to cultivating “original compositions in art, literature and music.”³² Perhaps revealing her leadership tendency to reform and improve, Catlett immediately went to work on the Stylus committee for revision of initiation rituals.³³ In December 1933 Catlett was elected vice president of the founding chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, the second oldest historically Black sorority in the US. She had joined during her sophomore year and quickly emerged as a leading voice.³⁴

Because of her record of academic achievement and leadership, Catlett secured access to the African American Greek community (often referred to as the Divine Nine), akin to her early instructor Jones and mentor Porter, who were members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, respectively. But as Catlett evolved in her activist orientation, she increasingly became critical of exclusionary aspects of sorority culture. In a 1989 interview with artist Camille Billops, Catlett shared this memory of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority: “At Howard University, I joined Delta. As a pledge, one of my first problems with the sorority was that I wanted them to pledge a friend of mine who is brown-skinned. They didn’t want to but finally did...the question of color in Alpha chapter annoyed me no end. From then on, I began to see other things within the chapter that turned me off. I went from social life with Delta Sigma Theta and the sororities and frats straight into the Liberal Club.”³⁵ Although she maintained her critical stance, Catlett actively participated in her sorority and continued to serve as an executive officer (p. XXchron1934).

VERITAS ET UTILITAS

During her senior year Catlett was an impassioned participant in the Liberal Club’s anti-war protest planning—a movement across DC area universities including Howard and Georgetown.³⁶ She also continued to mature into a focused, socially conscious artist. Howard’s art department was also evolving within a rapidly expanding university. In addition to Wells’s craft course, which

Fig. 6—Elizabeth Catlett (second from the left) in Daubers' Club, 1934, from *The Bison* (Howard University yearbook), 64, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University



included sculptural instruction, Catlett registered for courses in life drawing, portraiture, and still life, for which she produced the 1935 untitled pastel portrait during her final semester (p. X53). Her senior instruction was rounded out with one semester of both illustration and landscape painting. Other experiences planted seeds that she would tend and investigate as themes during the late 1930s and 1940s. The Gallery of Art hosted in November 1934 the exhibition *Kuan-Yin, an Outstanding Example of Chinese Sculpture*, which introduced Buddhist Kuan-Yin iconography as “an Eastern counterpart of the Madonna and Child.”³⁷ The sustained interaction with a range of sculptural materials and techniques across this exhibition cemented Catlett’s interest in sculpture. She created studies as well as an oil painting entitled *Head of Kwan Yin*, thus demonstrating her aesthetic contemplation of this show.³⁸ Moreover, the mother and child imagery featured in it quite likely resonated with Catlett, considering the social and political issues of the 1930s.

Throughout Catlett’s time at Howard, the concerns of African American mothers maintained visibility in the press with events such as the Scottsboro Boys Trial.³⁹ Catlett confronted the social issues of motherhood in her work with Delta Sigma Theta. Serving as parliamentarian for the sorority chapter during her senior year, Catlett would have been actively engaged in the chapter’s responsibilities of “partial guardianship of little two-year-old Delores Sapp.”⁴⁰ *The Hilltop* provides more insight: “On a visit to a FERA Nursery School, in the poor section of the city, Flaxie Pinkett was attracted to Delores and soon learned her story. Her father died when she was 5 months old; her mother Works in Maryland for a small salary which is barely enough for sustenance... the Delta girls have undertaken to see that the little Miss is well provided with clothes in the future and that she and her 8-year-old sister will have a warm home during the coming months.”⁴¹ Catlett would further explore the realities of Black motherhood and the sculptural solidity of religious deities in her graduate studies at the University of Iowa. In 1940 she would arrive at her award-winning sculpture *Negro Mother and Child*—a work whose subject seems akin to her active engagement with social issues as a Delta.

Catlett graduated cum laude with a bachelor of science degree in art and a painting concentration in 1935. Through both her academic pursuits and extracurricular affiliations at Howard, she established the foundation of her artist-activist philosophy. Her years there laid the groundwork for her maturation into a focused, socially conscious artist. Throughout her career, Catlett remained a part of the fabric of Howard University—engaging with its art community and returning to celebrate fellow alums, former instructors, and lifelong mentors. Elizabeth Catlett is an important link in Howard University’s aesthetic “proud continuum,” which connects generations of visual artists advancing innovative approaches to *Veritas et Utilitas*.⁴²

