

Margaret Burroughs: A Closer Look

Take a deep dive into *Birthday Party* by Chicago artist Margaret Burroughs. Engage in slow looking, learn about Burroughs and her work, and get new ideas for your own art making.

Students can [view the work](#) online or as a classroom poster.

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Margaret Burroughs (American, 1915–2010)

[*Birthday Party*](#), 1957

Linocut on cream wove paper

Joyce Turner Hilkevitch Collection in memory of
Jonathan Turner

© Margaret Burroughs

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

- Look closely at the work of art. What do you notice?
- Where do your eyes go first? What do you notice about that part? What else do you see?
- What patterns and textures do you notice? How do you think the artist created these textures?
- How do you think this artwork was made? What clues tell you this?
- Think of this scene like a story. What is the setting? Who are the characters? What is happening? What is the mood?
- What conversations do you think are taking place? With a partner, choose a character or two and imagine what they might be saying.
- What do you wonder about the work?
- See the back of this resource to learn about the artist and this work. Look at the artwork again when you're done. How have your observations and thoughts about it changed?

CREATIVE RESPONSES

Think about a favorite celebration you have attended with your community or family. Where was it held? Who was there? What did it look like? What was the best part? Create your own drawing or poem about the celebration. • Styrofoam printmaking is a simple process that uses basic materials. Search for instructions online and create a print based on one aspect of your celebration. Choose a particular scene that took place or an object that was present, like a cake or a party hat. • Music is often central to parties and celebrations. Create a birthday party playlist of favorite songs that you would play for your guests.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Margaret Burroughs was an artist, poet, educator, and activist whose work had a significant impact on Chicago's cultural scene in the mid-20th century. In 1922, Burroughs moved with her family from Louisiana to Chicago's South Side as part of the Great Migration, when millions of Black southerners relocated to cities in the Midwest, Northeast, and West in search of better opportunities. In Chicago, she began to explore the arts, painting in watercolor and selling her creations at local fairs. After graduating from Englewood High School with friend Gwendolyn Brooks, who would go on to become a famous poet, Burroughs sought a teaching certificate and continued to practice art, developing relationships within Chicago's community of artists.

Continued on the back

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Margaret Burroughs
Art Institute of Chicago Institutional Archives



Later, Burroughs returned to school and earned both bachelor's and master's degrees in art education from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Soon after, she traveled to Mexico to study printmaking with the Taller de Gráfica Popular, a group that used art to create political and social change. She was particularly influenced by the powerful graphic style used by members of this group in their popular prints, as were other African American artists like Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White, both of whom Burroughs connected with there. Burroughs often used a type of printmaking called linocut, or linoleum cut, to produce her work. Printmaking is the process of transferring an image from one source onto another, and it can be used to create multiple works of the same design, enabling the wide distribution of images. For her linocut prints, Burroughs carved her designs into a piece of linoleum and layered its surface with ink before pressing the linoleum onto paper and revealing the final image, like the one we see in *Birthday Party*.

Family, community, and history are themes that Burroughs explored in both her visual art and her writings. "Art is communication," she said. "I wish my art to speak not only for my people—but for all humanity." This can be seen in *Birthday Party*, in which children of different (dark and light) skin tones dance and chat, excitedly waiting for a slice of the cake a woman is cutting. This classic image of neighbors and family enjoying a special day together is brought to life through Burroughs's skill at carving patterns and textures into the linoleum. Details such as the polka-dotted party hats, draping streamers, hair ribbons, and candle-lined cake capture the vibrancy of a festive party.

In addition to being a writer, artist, and educator, Burroughs was also an institution builder who believed in the importance of Black-centered spaces. Alongside other artists such as Archibald John Motley Jr., Charles White, and Eldzier Cortor, Burroughs co-founded the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC) in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. The center, one of the oldest Black art centers in the US, continues to thrive today. SSCAC was founded in 1941, a time when racism limited opportunities for Black artists. Its founders created a vibrant space for Black artists and community members to openly share their work and engage with art. In 1961, Burroughs helped establish the DuSable Black History Museum and Education Center, which began in the livingroom of her Bronzeville home before moving south to its current location in Washington Park. The DuSable Museum continues to celebrate the achievements of African Americans and serves as a hub of culture and community on Chicago's South Side.

A longtime and influential educator, Burroughs taught for many years in Chicago Public Schools—at DuSable High School and later as a professor of humanities at Kennedy King Community College. She also taught art and poetry to incarcerated people in prisons and correctional facilities across the state of Illinois. Burroughs's writings include the poem and book *What Do I Tell My Children Who Are Black (Reflections of an African-American Mother)*.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Learn more about the work of Margaret Burroughs and thousands of other artists by searching the museum's [collection](#) by name, title, or keyword. Below are suggestions of artists and artistic movements that relate to Burroughs's work. What connections and differences do you find among their works?

[Elizabeth Catlett](#), [Archibald John Motley Jr.](#), and [Charles White](#) were friends and collaborators of Burroughs. [Leopoldo Mendez](#), founded the [Taller de Gráfica Popular](#). [José Clemente Orozco](#) and [David Alfaro Siqueiros](#), were influential Mexican muralists.