

● BROOKLYN MUSEUM ●

200 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, NY 11238

PRESS RELEASE
Tuesday, November 19, 2024

718.501.6354
press@brooklynmuseum.org

The Brooklyn Museum Announces *Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: I Will Not Bend an Inch*

The canon-expanding exhibition, opening March 14, 2025, will celebrate the work and legacy of the twentieth-century sculptor, offering fresh narratives about women artists of color in the modernist era.



Nancy Elizabeth Prophet. *Youth (Head in Wood)*, ca. 1930. Wood. Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Museum Fund for African American Art in honor of Sandra Williams-Cornwell, 2014.3. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

The retrospective exhibition *Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: I Will Not Bend an Inch* honors the work and legacy of Nancy Elizabeth Prophet (American, 1890–1960), an underrecognized sculptor best known for her work in Paris during the interwar years. Organized by and first shown at the RISD Museum, this concise survey features twenty works, including sculptures in wood and marble, polychrome wood reliefs, watercolors, and documentation of archival materials and lost or destroyed work. The exhibition is presented across two galleries of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art. The first gallery offers a close look at this artist's small existing but remarkable output, while the second gallery provides insight into the artist's life and studio practice. In addition, the exhibition features a collaborative film project titled *Conspiracy* (2022), made by artist Simone Leigh and artist and filmmaker Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich. The presentation of *Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: I Will Not Bend an Inch* is organized by Catherine Morris, Sackler Senior

Curator, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, with Carla Forbes, Curatorial Assistant, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.

Born in Rhode Island in 1890 to a Narragansett father and a Black mother, Prophet graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1918. She was the first known woman of color to graduate from the prestigious art and design school. Despite her parents' disapproval, she worked as a housekeeper after completing her public school education to pay for her tuition at RISD. Following a brief period in New York, she moved to Paris in 1922. The twelve years Prophet spent working in Paris mark the pinnacle of her career. Upon her arrival, she enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts and showed regularly at the Salon d'Automne, Salon d'Août, and the Salon des Artistes Français. Throughout her career, despite poverty and isolation, she remained entirely dedicated to her practice.

In Paris, Prophet sculpted a series of portrait heads primarily carved from hardwood. These works form the core of the exhibition. Prophet's nine extant sculptures in the round powerfully demonstrate the artist's skill at treating distinctive features with an idealizing and remarkably nuanced hand. The Brooklyn Museum holds in its collection one of Prophet's wooden portrait busts, currently on view in the newly reinstalled American Art galleries, [Toward Joy: New Frameworks for American Art](#). The 1930 sculpture, titled *Youth (Head in Wood)*, is one of only about a dozen known works by Prophet still in existence.

"The Center for Feminist Art is particularly proud to present this groundbreaking show directly after our exhibition *Elizabeth Catlett: A Black Revolutionary Artist and All That It Implies*," says Catherine Morris, Sackler Senior Curator, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. "In so doing, we hope to contribute to building an expanded understanding of the transformative contributions of Black women artists to modern art and the emergence of feminism across the twentieth century."

"We are so pleased that Nancy Elizabeth Prophet's work and story will be shared with visitors of the Brooklyn Museum," says Tsugumi Maki, Director of the RISD Museum. "*I Will Not Bend an Inch* celebrates her lasting impact on the art world, particularly inspiring a new generation of artists."

While only a handful of Prophet's works in wood are known, her marble carvings, reliefs, and works on paper are rarer—seventeen of which will be included in the exhibition, along with the artist's remarkable Paris diary and her carving tools, which she significantly modified for her own use and treated with great care. The exhibition also includes revealing historical documents, such as studio photographs of works that have been lost, and Prophet's correspondence with W. E. B. Du Bois, a lifetime supporter of the artist's work. These materials provide insight into how she navigated the art world and sought to position her work as an Afro-Indigenous woman artist, resisting racist and sexist expectations. The exhibition's title, *I Will Not Bend an Inch*, references a diary entry from Prophet in 1929, embodying her fiery and tenacious spirit and commitment to her craft in the face of immense adversity.

Prophet returned to the United States in 1934. With the support of Du Bois, she settled in Atlanta, where she cofounded the art program at Spelman College, building on her legacy as an influential and transformative teacher. Ten years later, Prophet returned to Rhode Island, where she died in 1960. *Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: I Will Not Bend an Inch* offers the first museum examination of this singular artist, providing a timely discussion about women artists of color of the early modern era, which preceded the emergence of the feminist, Native American, and civil rights movements of the twentieth century.

CREDITS

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: I Will Not Bend an Inch is organized by the RISD Museum. The exhibition is curated by Dominic Molon, Interim Chief Curator & Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art; Sarah Ganz Blythe, former Deputy Director of Exhibitions, Education, and Programs; and Kajette Solomon, Social Equity and Inclusion Specialist, RISD Museum. The Brooklyn Museum presentation is organized by Catherine Morris, Sackler Senior Curator, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, with Carla Forbes, Curatorial Assistant, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum.

Generous support is provided by the Maurer Family Foundation and Tina Estes Novogratz.

This exhibition originated at the RISD Museum thanks to generous federal, private, and endowment support.

ABOUT THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM

For 200 years, the Brooklyn Museum has been recognized as a trailblazer. Through a vast array of exhibitions, public programs, and community-centered initiatives, it continues to broaden the narratives of art, uplift a multitude of voices, and center creative expression within important dialogues of the day. Housed in a landmark building in the heart of Brooklyn, the Museum is home to an astounding encyclopedic collection of more than 140,000 objects representing cultures worldwide and over 6,000 years of history—from ancient Egyptian masterpieces to significant American works, to groundbreaking installations presented in the only feminist art center of its kind. As one of the oldest and largest art museums in the country, the Brooklyn Museum remains committed to innovation, creating compelling experiences for its communities and celebrating the power of art to inspire awe, conversation, and joy.