

**“Phenomenal Woman: The Art of Margaret Burroughs”**



# Script

This is “Phenomenal Woman.” It celebrates artist, activist, poet, educator, and museum founder, Dr. Margaret Burroughs. In 1961, she began DuSable Museum in her home right here in Chicago. She would travel back and forth to Africa and gather artifacts and objects, and display them in her home. Her community members and people from abroad would use her collection to learn about African and African American History. Her collection grew as did her audience. In 1973, the museum moved to our current location. Dr. Burroughs also helped found the South Side Community Arts Center, the Lake Meadows Art Fair and many other cultural institutions.

## **Artwork Exploration:**

Here is a self portrait of Dr. Margaret Burroughs. When she did portraits of others, she would ask them questions about themselves. Their answers would let her know what objects should be present in the background of the image. Let’s look closely at this portrait. What do we see? (Allow them to answer) What do these things tell us about the type of person Dr. Burroughs was? (Allow them to answer)

The African Mask tells us that she was proud of her African Heritage. She wanted all of us to be proud in that way too. Dr. Burroughs wrote a poem called “What Shall I Tell My Children Who Are Black?” In the poem, a child comes to his mother upset because the other children have made fun of his brown skin, “nappy” hair and full facial features. The mother responds by telling him he is as beautiful. She goes on to teach him that his African ancestors, who looked similar to him, discovered the laws of mathematics and learned to measure the stars. She teaches her son that he can achieve greatness partially because he is a descendant accomplished Africans and African Americans. The poem describes the basis for Dr. Burroughs’ mission. She wanted African Americans to take pride in the truth of their heritage. Dr. Burroughs was a distinctive poet and an editor of poets. The bulk of her poems are published in the volumes *What Shall I Tell My Children Who Are Black?* (1968) and *Africa, My Africa* (1970), which she also illustrated.

We also see a book in her self portrait. Education was certainly important to her. Dr. Burroughs was a teacher and a professor. She attended the public schools of Chicago, including the Chicago Teacher's College. In 1946, she received a BA in education and in 1948, an MA in education from the Art Institute of Chicago. From 1940 to 1968 she taught art at DuSable High School in Bronzeville. She was a professor of humanities at Kennedy-King College in Chicago (1969–1979.) Dr. Burroughs also received several honorary degrees including a Doctorate from the Art Institute of Chicago.

The paint brushes tell us that she valued art. She wanted everyone to have access to uplifting artwork. In fact, she used printmaking often because it enabled her to provide artwork for people who couldn't afford more expensive mediums. She also ensured local prison inmates had access to artwork by teaching art classes to them. Dr. Burroughs had a national reputation as a visual artist and arts organizer. Her long exhibition record as a painter and printmaker began in 1949. Her work is exhibited throughout the United States and abroad.

Who would like to tell me their favorite “Phenomenal Woman” work of art?

(Ask group 3 of the following questions. Allow them time to answer. Then have someone else choose their favorite artworks and ask 3 more questions.)

**Questions for Artwork Exploration**

1. What is currently happening in this work?
2. What does this work remind you of?
3. What is something you’re seeing that you think no one else has noticed?
4. If this was music, how would it sound?
5. If it were mobile, how would it move around this room?
6. Why do you think the artist used this medium?
7. What does this work mean to you?
8. What do you think the artist is using this work to tell us?

**Additional Information** (We should all know this information in case guests ask questions, but we don't have to mention it as part of our script.)

Dr. Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs (1915 - 2010)



Poet, visual artist, educator, arts organizer and activist, Margaret Burroughs was born on November 1, 1915 in St. Rose, Louisiana, which is near New Orleans. In 1922, her parents, Alexander and Octavia Pierre Taylor, brought her to Chicago. There she grew up, was educated, and her distinctive career unfolded.

She attended the public schools of Chicago, including the Chicago Teacher's College. In 1946, she received a BA in education and in 1948, an MA in education from the Art Institute of Chicago.

Dr. Burroughs had a lifelong passion for education. From 1940 to 1968 she taught art at DuSable High School in Bronzeville. She was a professor of humanities at Kennedy-King College in Chicago (1969–1979).

Dr. Burroughs had a national reputation as a visual artist and arts organizer. Her long exhibition record as a painter and printmaker began in 1949. She had exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad. A retrospective of her work was held in Chicago in 1984. She felt a special affinity to Mexican muralists and studied and collaborated with artists in Mexico.

She was associated with the founding and direction a number of arts organizations. The first of her many contributions to African American arts and culture occurred when she helped found, at age twenty-two, the South Side Community Arts Center, a community organization that serves as a gallery and workshop studio for artists and students. The Center remains active more than sixty years after its formation.

Dr. Burroughs work as an educator led her to produce many children's books. Her *Jasper, the Drummin' Boy* (1947) and the anthology, *Did You Feed My Cow?* (1956) each had several reprints.

During the mid-1950s, she married Charles Burroughs. After extended travels together, the Burroughs' made their best-known contribution to African American posterity. In 1961, they, along with eight of their friends, founded the DuSable Museum of African American History. Initially, the museum was on the ground floor of their Chicago home. The founding of the DuSable Museum placed Dr. Burroughs among the outstanding institution builders of her generation. She served as Director of the museum until her appointment as a Commissioner of the Chicago Park District in 1985.

Dr. Burroughs also had a commitment to progressive politics, exemplified by her writing contributions to such publications as *Freedom ways* founded by, among others, W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson. Both were special heroes to her. Dr. Burroughs began her writing career by doing articles and reviews for the Associated Negro Press, founded and directed by Claude Barnett.

Dr. Burroughs was a distinctive poet and an editor of poets. The bulk of her poems are published in the volumes *What Shall I Tell My Children Who Are Black?* (1968) and *Africa, My Africa* (1970), which she also illustrated.

Her notable work as an editor was her collaboration with Dudley Randall in production of the commemorative document, "For Malcolm" (1967). Forty-three poets were represented in this work; noted poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, and Robert Hayden as well as a younger group of poets associated with the Black Arts movement, such as Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Mari Evans. Burroughs' own poem on Malcolm X was included. In this poem, "Brother Freedom," Burroughs places Malcolm in a pantheon with Toussaint L'Ouverture, Joseph Cinque, Nat Turner, and other heroes of black consciousness. Burroughs also contributed to the rediscovery of the poet Frank Marshall Davis by editing *Jazz Interlude* (1987).

Burroughs's poems exulted African and African American culture, taking imagery primarily from the urban milieu of Chicago in which she spent her life. Her connection to Africa was solidified by annual trips to the continent beginning in the late 1960s and continuing to the 1990s.

As an early and often lonely pioneer of black consciousness, Burroughs welcomed the apparent explosion in the ranks of those subscribing to her vision, particularly among the young. Her welcome, however, was tempered by a critical stance created by her own progressive politics. In the poem, "Only in This Way," for example, she downplays "way-out hairdos" in favor of blacks "knowing and accepting" themselves.

Although she also worked in sculpture, painting and many other art forms, it was her exceptional skill as a printmaker that earned her a place within the history of art. She worked with linoleum blocks to create images evocative of African American culture. Dr. Burroughs wanted everyone to be able to afford art. Since paintings take a lot of time and are therefore costly, she used linocuts and etchings in order to make many prints that were affordable.

Dr. Burroughs received many awards and honors throughout her lifetime. Her work was featured in exclusive shows at the Corcoran Art Galleries in Washington, D.C. and at the Studio Museum in New York. She served as art director for the Negro Hall of Fame. In 1975, she received the President's Humanitarian Award. In 1977 she was named one of Chicago's Most Influential Women by the *Chicago Defender*. February 1, 1986, was proclaimed "Dr. Margaret Burroughs Day" in Chicago by the late Mayor Harold Washington. She was awarded the Legends and Legacy Award from the Art Institute of Chicago in 2010 for her contributions to the worlds of art, education and history.

Dr. Margaret Burroughs died in her sleep on a Sunday morning, November 21, 2010 at the age of 95.

The influence of her legacy, a distinctive contribution to black culture, reached across the spectrum, from schoolchildren to presidents.

Cheryl Blackwell Bryson (1950-2012), then Chairman of the DuSable Museum Board of Trustees stated: "She understood the role of a museum like this in the lives of all people, especially children, who she felt needed heroes in their lives. To the end, she was sharp, passionate and a critical thinker."

Sculptor Doug Williams (student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago) said she "guided me through the art world. She was a lady, a teacher, a confidant, an idol and an artist. . . .She constantly encouraged people to focus on what their legacy would be. . ." "She enjoyed life but also knew her time here was important." said Lester McCarroll Jr., Co-chair of the Legends and Legacy Award Art Institute of Chicago event.

U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr. said Dr. Burroughs was "an artist with a conscience."

"Chicago is a better place because of Dr. Burroughs," Mayor of Chicago Richard M. Daley said in a statement. "Through her artistic talent and wide breadth of knowledge, she gave us a cultural gem. But she herself was a cultural institution. She spent a lifetime instilling a love of arts and culture in people young and old."

United States President Barack Obama said in a statement, “She was admired for her generosity and commitment to underserved communities through her children’s books, art workshops and community centers that both inspired and educated young people about African-American culture.”