

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet I Will Not Bend an Inch

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Tools of Sovereignty

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In a portrait of (Nancy) Elizabeth Prophet from 1935, she stands seemingly alone in a broad field, structuring the air (fig. 1). Her gathered hands with arms pointing up, bent at the elbows, form a rectangular enclosure open only to the realm above. As if not content to be framed in the portrait by the landscape alone—trees in an open, manicured ground; buildings in the distance—she creates a portal that suggests protection and self-possession. The shape is reinforced by the white rectangular bibbing on the bodice of her black dress, outlined with lace. It is a shape of sovereignty: Prophet stands as both a vessel and the active sculptor of her own free world.

Prophet was a sculptor of interior ground. She pursued what we find in our stillness. She sculpted her own. She telegraphed this grounded state in forms such as her ca. 1930 sculpture *Youth (Head in Wood)* (fig. 2; see also pp. 122–25), one of the few surviving works she made in the early part of the twentieth century. Carved out of wood, the head covered by a cap is angled down. The eyes, narrowly opened, pupils shown blank, suggest a sight that is directed not outward but within—an interior vision. The figure, too, appears to have found a way to touch their own ground.

What has long been stated about Prophet is that she was solitary. We see it emblemized not only in her diary entries but also in the frequent emphasis on a central moment in the narrative arc of her life—leaving her home in Providence, Rhode Island, for Paris, there to live in near impossible conditions, often and ultimately alone. In Paris, she pursued both her craft and, in the end, her true self. Her willingness to endure solitude is not simply signaled by the formal emphasis on interiority in her works. The reading of Prophet as a solitary figure is mentioned so often that it now seems obvious, a fact. What sustained her?

We often locate power within the network of support for an artist and the discourse surrounding their work. To locate this in the case of Prophet, we might point to advocacy from confidants such as W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), the support of fellowships, or the community at Spelman College and the affiliate Atlanta University Center, where she taught—approaches that expose political and academic leaders' very real contributions to the development of modernism. Yet these forms of support are not the only ways to discern how Prophet sustained a craft born of, as she put it, "the college of serious thought and bitter experience," one "situated on the campus of poverty and ambition."¹

FIG. 1. Nancy Elizabeth Prophet in black, with trees, 1935. Nancy Elizabeth Prophet Collection, MSS-0028, Special Collections, James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College.



FIG. 2. Youth (Head in Wood), ca. 1930. Wood; without base: 12 1/2 × 6 1/2 × 7 in. (31.8 × 16.5 × 17.8 cm). Brooklyn Museum Fund for African American Art in honor of Sandra Williams-Cornwell (2014.3). Brooklyn Museum.

We could also point to the force of her vision itself. Though she began crafting portraits upon graduation, her work as a sculptor meant that others would soon paint hers. A young artist studying in Newport in 1932 was directed to paint Prophet, so clear was it already that she would be known to history. The occasion came after she had received two accolades: the Otto H. Kahn Prize for best sculpture, given at a Harmon Foundation exhibition in 1929, and the Richard S. Greenough Memorial Prize, awarded by the Newport Art Association (now the Newport Art Museum) in 1932 to salute not one but many of her works on display at the exhibition-hall entrance.² Alain Locke (1885–1954) and art historian James Porter (1905–1970) featured Prophet in publications chronicling the achievements of leading Black artists of their day.³ Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney exhibited and purchased Prophet's cherrywood *Congolais* (1931; see pp. 126–29) after careful assessment, seeing the exhibition “in private viewings at least three times.”⁴

Yet Prophet's sustaining force was the transformation of solitude into sovereignty. This is why we are here, in this volume, adding to the

spadework of scholars including Amalia K. Amaki, Lisa E. Farrington, Blossom S. Kirschenbaum, and Theresa Leininger-Miller.⁵ If there is now an expanded audience for Prophet's art, it is because she consciously knew what it meant to work when there was little to no acclaim, to actively choose herself.

Her choice was a conscious one to discern, in her interior stillness, an agency as integral as the wood, plaster, and granite she relied upon for her sculpture. When she worked, it was an attempt to touch that force. She found a “delicious sensation of rightness” during the creative process, describing it as “that harmonic accord of my forces which I have been trying for years to attain.”⁶ Her work let her feel “in contact with myself,” as she put it.⁷ Prophet is one of many who understood the phenomenon specific to the crucible of racial life and American democracy; she experienced a world that, through the force of racial hierarchy, was largely not yet ready for her, and she understood what it required. For a Black artist beginning her work in the 1920s United States, to “feel so much in contact” with herself required a Du Boisian double-fronted stance—an acute confrontation with the world and then the adoption of tactics to avoid its gaze and honor one's own.

Prophet knew that one had to touch one's own ground to stay in the arena. In a note to Countee Cullen (1903–1946), she makes clear where she stands—in the

thick of it: “I don’t want to appear like the hateful critic who stands on the outside criticizing everybody’s effect, but I’m in the ring too you know, so please let me howl from time to time.”⁸ Ending the letter, she writes that she understood she was seen as “temperamental” and “solitary,” but she knew that she had a vital role to play.⁹ Through her practice, she modeled how the creative act translates into a form of subjecthood, a form of self-possession.

What sustained Prophet was the constant attempt to use her tools to turn her works—potentially cast-off and discarded—into what she termed “living things.” She rarely referred to her works as sculptures. In her Parisian diary, an extensive document, she writes, “I remember how sure I was that it was going to be a living thing, a master stroke, how my arms felt as I swung them up to put on a piece of clay.”¹⁰

Prophet called her works “her things” so often that it can be startling to see in her correspondence in the archives. Imagine, if you can, how unusual it would be to refer to a sculpture as one of the artist’s “things” in a scholarly publication or when walking through an exhibition, trying to describe a work to a friend or colleague. Such a description, in fact, occurred as part of the commentary on her work *Head of a Negro* (ca. 1924; see pp. 100–103), in a show in 1928. Featured in the *Exhibition of Work by Former Students and Teachers in Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Rhode Island School of Design*, a male figure—shown stoically facing forward, a knoll of the wood in the middle of his forehead as if a third eye—emerges out of a slab of wood, heavily worked. At the base are markings suggestive of the force required to render it. The reviewer called *Head of a Negro* “a powerful thing—one of the few outstanding things in the show.”¹¹

Prophet’s word choice prompts an epistemic inquiry—what do we call works that so profoundly transform a life? Her choice of the term “thing” is distinct in the history of art. George Kubler begins his landmark volume, *The Shape of Time* (1962), with a chapter on “The History of Things.” His argument is that we need to look less at only works of art and more at what had been considered things in order to more fully grasp the history of the recent past. The term was not merely a way to loosen the strictures of material culture, he explained, but an effort to find a word that would “reunite ideas and objects” into a single visual framework.¹²

The term “thing” can suggest an object that cannot be classified, that can be dismissed. Perhaps Prophet could anticipate the fate of her work—a living thing, both vital, utterly critical for her life, and potentially discarded. Indeed, some of her work comes to us from places people go to find “things,” such as Prophet’s estate sale, where a Rhode Island native purchased *Head of a Cossack* (ca. 1929; see pp. 136–39) and gave it to her granddaughter.¹³ A dealer found Prophet’s *Head in Ebony* (1926–29; see pp. 110–13) in a thrift store and alerted Corrine Jennings of Kenkeleba Gallery in New York City; for years, the bust had sat on Du Bois’s desk at Atlanta University while Prophet was teaching at Spelman College.¹⁴ At least one of Prophet’s works was destroyed to save money on freight from overseas. Many other works are no longer extant, potentially lost to time.¹⁵

The term “thing” also speaks to the proximate—objects that are part of a daily practice, nearly indivisible from us. We may collect our things before leaving; we might send for our things. They are personal effects, not simply objects that connote value but items that sustain our life. There is a paradox in the relationship between Blackness and thingness, or what is called thing theory—from Martin Heidegger (oriented toward the object ontology) to Karl Marx (focused on value and commodity).¹⁶ Deftly summarized by Fred Moten, the very attempt to disentangle the conflation of personhood and thingness—through the reduction of people to commodities through slavery—instantiates the “brutality” of that “philosophical condition.”¹⁷ As Moten states about this “horrible kind of double-bind,” it is a “maneuver that requires you to claim humanness is horrible as well precisely because it may well replicate and entrench the disaster.”¹⁸

Prophet seems to anticipate this conflict. Things are objects over which one has dominion. Her unusual focus on the word is key to grasping her stance of sovereignty made evident through her fixation on the tools of her practice. Indeed, an aspect of Prophet’s journey that receives consistent, curious mention is that she spent at least three years in correspondence with President Albert E. Manley of Atlanta University about, of all topics, her tools. When she left her faculty position at Spelman College and the Atlanta University Center, the tools remained in the storage room. She repeatedly asked for them to be returned. It is among the most extensive exchanges in Prophet’s papers.¹⁹

Prophet’s correspondence about her tools was insistent. She detailed where they might be with drawings (fig. 3), sending an ink sketch on blue graph-composition paper indicating what she wanted—among them a halberd to a “wire wrapped in [a] piece of red wool cloth.” Her attendance to her tools signaled more than a request for her property. At stake was more than the small wooden instruments themselves. As she put it in her 1940 article “Art and Life,” civilization itself began with a focus on “tools and articles of utility.”²⁰ More than useful, they were a blueprint. Her hope was not only for their discovery, but for her right to create the world she intended with her chosen tools.

I thought of Prophet when sculptor Simone Leigh (see pp. 87–97) opened the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2022. Entitled *Sovereignty*, the installation included the coauthored film with Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, *Conspiracy* (2022), in the penultimate room of the pavilion. It opens with a slow pan of sculptors’ tools followed by a sequence showing each one held up by a truncated Black hand. The tools appear spotlighted on high: an armature wire, a wire tool for cutting clay, a conical shredder rasp, an embossing hammer, a serrated scraper rib, a wooden anvil for clay. These are the wooden and wire objects Leigh uses to create her work, all critical for the sculptor’s craft. Tools remerge and intersplice the film, held up in the air as if talismans (figs. 4–9).

Leigh and Hunt-Ehrlich offer a reminder through literal elevation: labor is not only what sustains the pursuit but also what leads to a declarative stance about one’s life. After the opening tools sequence, the camera stops when it arrives at

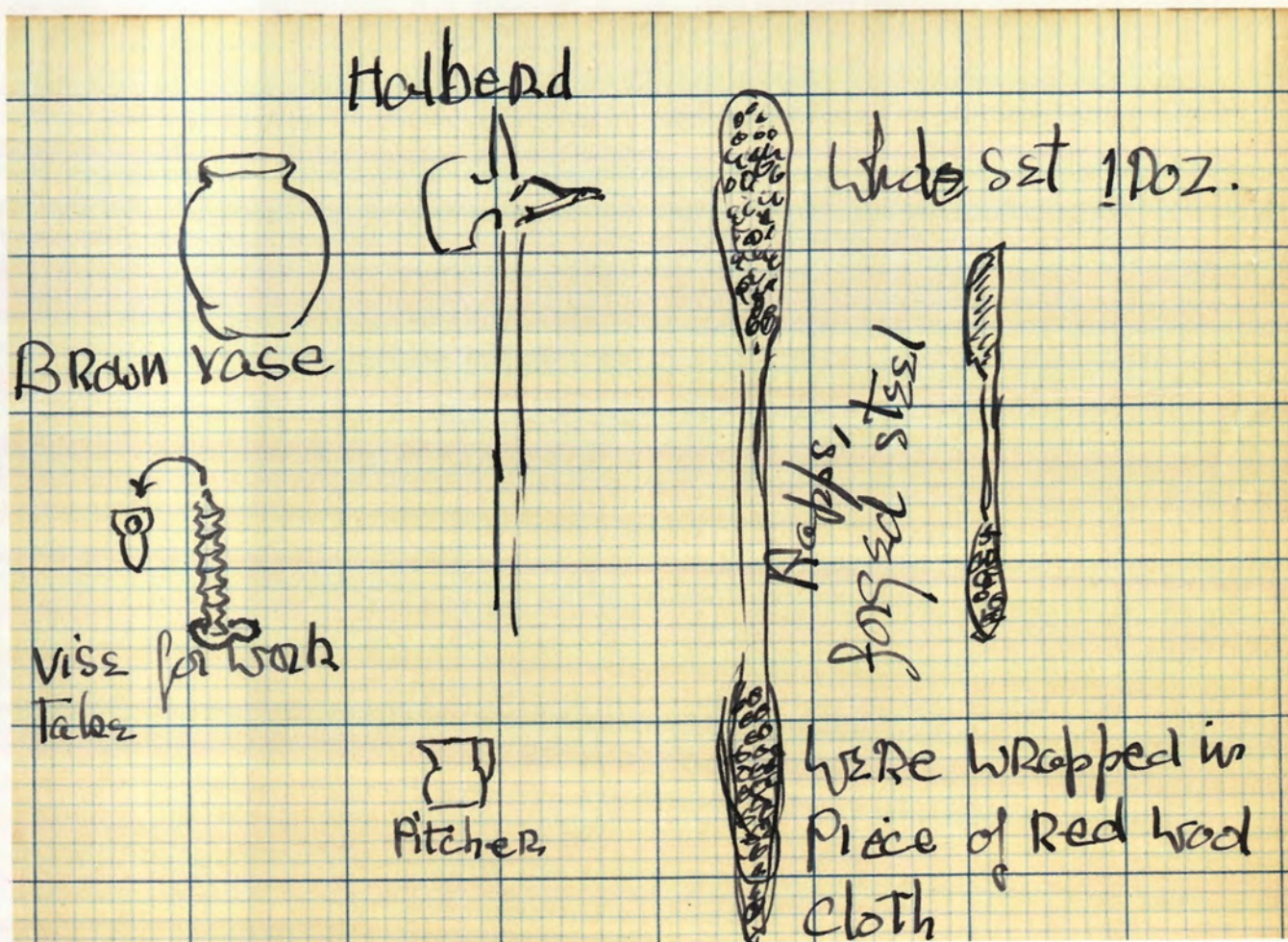


FIG. 3. Prophet, drawing of tools, n.d. Courtesy of the Spelman College Archives.



FIGS. 4–9. Simone Leigh and Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, stills from *Conspiracy*, 2022. Video (black-and-white, sound); 24:00 min.; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artists and Matthew Marks Gallery.



Leigh at work at a wheel, seated next to her tools. She scores a circular ring on which she builds a pot. A vocal sound of longing and release suffuses the air. The camera remains at the act of Leigh's hands tending to clay that creates a circular, lit form, strong enough to become a wall. She molds outstretched lines of rolled clay into circular levels, joining them with a pinch of her fingers. Digits together, held straight and taut, Leigh turns expanse into self-fashioned enclosure. Prophet's life and work had inspired Leigh, as reflected in her essay in this volume. While Leigh's show honored Prophet, the film sequence was not a direct citation but a revenant, an uncanny visitation.

As I was about to complete this piece, I learned that Prophet ultimately received her tools. The discovery felt like a sign from the beyond.²¹ They had been purchased at an estate sale, suggesting that she did get them back. (The archives show that she received notice in 1954 that her box of tools was eventually found; she would send money to cover the cost of freight.)²² On the wooden toolbox, Prophet had written, "Handle With Care." Inside were piled, worn tools—wooden handles smoothed from use, metal surfaces rusted from activity (figs. 10 and 11). There has been no documentation of them until now. Prophet effected a reversal: tools are often considered what one needs care from in an encounter. Our tools, she insisted, need protection themselves.

Tools are meant for the use of subjects—figures with agency—not those at the mercy of one. Embedded in Prophet's letters about her instruments, telegraphed in Leigh's film, is a testimony to what creates foundational sovereignty: having the tools to realize your own vision for yourself.

Prophet's works were both objects worked at her command and borne of a practice that could house her spirit. We see it as if made literal in a double self-portrait by Prophet found in the storage area of the Rockefeller Fine Arts Building on Spelman's campus. On one side of the page is a schematic outline of Prophet. It renders her less as a face and more as a force—rounded and floating—perhaps a model for a new work to come (fig. 12). On the verso is an untitled watercolor in

FIGS. 10–11. Toolbox and sculpting tools owned by Nancy Elizabeth Prophet. Courtesy of Howe/Lightbody Family Collection.



FIG. 12. Untitled (recto), ca. 1937. Watercolor on paper; 9 1/2 × 13 in. (24.1 × 33 cm). Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta.



FIG. 13. *Untitled (verso)*, ca. 1937. Watercolor on paper; 9 1/2 × 13 in. (24.1 × 33 cm). Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta.

which a verdant green dominates the palette (fig. 13). The grounds of the building, a pitched-roof house with two chimneys, are obscured by a grassy expanse in the foreground of the painting with trees behind it and flanking it. (As Amaki notes, the style of the building mirrors those in the Atlanta neighborhood of Ashby Grove, where Prophet had been based.)²³ The double portrait diagrams what Prophet knew and what Leigh, too, understood: “The pot may also be a woman, and the woman may also be a house, and that house may also be a cage. It may have a door, but maybe it hovers on the threshold.”²⁴ To choose herself as an audience, as a mirror, Prophet grasped, is not to choose enclosure but inner expanse, unfurling out from one’s own ground.

Notes

1. Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes, Nomination Blank, June 30, 1929, Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, 1913–1967, box 79, Library of Congress.
2. Amalia K. Amaki, “Nancy Elizabeth Prophet: Carving a Niche at Spelman College and Beyond,” in *Hale Woodruff, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, and the Academy*, by Amalia K. Amaki and Andrea Barnwell Brownlee (Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 2007), 51.
3. Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and the Negro Theme in Art* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1940); Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936); James Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (New York: Dryden, 1943).
4. Amaki, “Nancy Elizabeth Prophet,” 52.
5. Amaki, “Nancy Elizabeth Prophet”; Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African American Women Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Blossom S. Kirschenbaum, “Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, Sculptor,” *Sage* 9, no. 1 (1987): 45–52; Theresa A. Leininger-Miller, “The Artistic Career of a Near Expatriate: Nancy Elizabeth Prophet in Paris, 1922–1934,” in *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922–1934* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 16–65.
6. Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, “Diary: Paris, France” (1922–1934), November 19, 1925, Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:786291/>; Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 24.
7. Prophet, “Diary,” December 22, 1925. See also Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 30.
8. Prophet to Cullen, n.d., 1929, Countee Cullen Papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans. See also Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 47.
9. Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 48. Cullen had visited Prophet in 1929 to interview her for *Opportunity*, July 1930.
10. Prophet, “Diary,” August 11, 1922.
11. *Boston Evening Transcript*, quoted in “Elizabeth Prophet: Sculptor,” *Crisis* 36 (December 1929): 407. See also Gary A. Reynolds and Beryl Wright, *Against the Odds: African American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark, N.J.: Newark Museum of Art, 1989), 248.
12. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962).

13. Amaki, "Nancy Elizabeth Prophet," 49.
14. Jenelsie Walden Holloway to Amalia K. Amaki, November 3, 1987.
15. For more on the lost works, see Amaki, "Nancy Elizabeth Prophet," 54–55.
16. The history here is too vast to summarize, but key texts include Bruno Latour, "The Berlin Key, or How to Do Words with Things," in *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*, ed. P. M. Graves-Brown, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Routledge, 2000), 10–21; and Miguel Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).
17. Fred Moten, *A Poetics of the Undercommons* (Butte, Mo.: Sputnik & Fizzle, 2016), esp. 14–15.
18. Moten, *A Poetics of the Undercommons*, 15–16.
19. This extensive correspondence can be found throughout files on Elizabeth Prophet in the Albert E. Manley Presidential Collection and the Florence M. Read Collection, Spelman College Collections. See Ruth G. Rush to Elizabeth Prophet, April 3, 1957; Elizabeth Prophet to Ruth G. Rush, April 30, 1957; A. E. Manley to Elizabeth Prophet, October 8, 1957; Elizabeth Prophet to A. E. Manley, December 11, 1957, box 29, folder: Miss Elizabeth (Correspondence, General), Albert E. Manley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Collections. I would like to thank Tempe Stewart for her deft assistance accessing these particular materials and my dear colleague Cheryl Finley for connecting me with her. I would also like to thank Jessica Stark, a fantastic scholar and research assistant, who helped make writing this piece such a pleasure.
20. N. Elizabeth Prophet, "Art and Life," *Phylon: The Atlanta University Bulletin of Race and Culture* 1, no. 4 (1940): 322.
21. Sarah Ganz Blythe, email correspondence with the author, November 17, 2022. Blythe was alerted to this from the family, who now owns the tools and photographed them: Julia Howe, Wayne Howe, Jennifer Lightbody, and Marla Mooney.
22. See A. E. Manley to Florence M. Read, November 1, 1954, box 29, folder: Miss Elizabeth (Correspondence, General), Albert E. Manley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Collections.
23. Amaki, "Nancy Elizabeth Prophet," 58.
24. Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, "Simone Leigh: For Her Own Pleasure and Edification," *The Hugo Boss Prize* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018), 2.