Clementine Hunter (c. 1887–1988) the artist in 1945
(Courtesy Mildred Bailey Collection, Natchitoches, Louisiana)
Folk artist Clementine Hunter lived for just over one hundred years, all of those years in Natchitoches parish in northwestern Louisiana, and most of them on the grounds of Melrose Plantation, where she worked as a field hand in her early years and as a household servant in her later years. Her work as a folk artist, according to Melrose historian Francois Mignon, began in the 1940s after she was over sixty years old.

Clementine Hunter was born in the winter of 1887 on Hidden Hill Plantation near Cloutierville, Louisiana, an area made famous by the bayou tales of author Kate Chopin, whose cotton plantation was very near the place where Clementine Hunter was born and lived out her life. Conditions at Hidden Hill Plantation were so cruel that most observers consider that plantation to be the model for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Significantly, that plantation is today called Little Eva Plantation. As a young girl Clementine left Hidden Hill with her family and relocated later when she was sixteen to Melrose with her family.

Clementine’s parents were Creole. Her mother, unmarried at the time of Clementine’s birth, was Antoinette Adams. Her father was Janvier (John) Reuben. Her parents were married when she was four years old in the Catholic Church of St. John the Baptist in Cloutierville. Clementine was the oldest of their seven children, four daughters and three sons.

Of her family, Clementine once said, “All my people were Creoles. They say us Creoles got more different kinds of blood than
Baptizing
any other people. When I was growing up all the folks on the lower Cane River were Creoles and spoke nothing but French.”¹ The genealogy of Clementine Hunter shows French, Indian, Irish, and African roots, a pattern consistent for the population of the area. Her maternal grandmother Idole, who lived to be 110 years old, came to Louisiana from Virginia as a slave.

Clementine Hunter, who was illiterate all her life, had the opportunity for education as a young girl at the Catholic school in her community. The school was run by French-speaking nuns, who were extremely strict. Although the white and black children at the school were separated by a fence, they nonetheless got into scuffles and fights. Early on, Clementine expressed a disregard for education. Her own words tell the story:

After about ten, I quit school. Didn’t like it at all. So I never even learned any of the ABCs. And I have made out all right too. All my life I have had a strong mother-wit, which is better than stuff you learn from books. Leastwise I can say I don’t think I missed anything by not getting reading and writing. It’s a heap of folks got book learning running out their ears, but I can’t say they is smart people.²

Her story of how she left school illustrates her “strong mother-wit”:

Sister Benedict was my teacher and she was mean and I tell her, I say, “Sister, can I go and get some water?” and she say, “Yeah, go ahead and hurry back and get to your lesson.” And that put her all right, and I hurry back. And before she know one thing, I had done gone down to the cistern to get water and done jumped the fence and gone home. Mama would whip me and make me come back with her, go back and run off again, never did learn nothing. I told Mama I’d rather go in the field and
work, I’d rather go pick cotton. And I didn’t learn nothing. I went and pick cotton . . . I didn’t learn nothing. I didn’t want to learn nothing.\(^3\)

So at an early age, Clementine gave up on schooling and took to the fields. She loved to work in the fields and did so until age brought her from outdoor work into the role as laundress and housekeeper and sometimes cook at the main plantation house run by Miss Cammie Henry, owner of Melrose. Essentially Clementine defined herself by her work. In one of her interviews late in life she explained:

> I used to farm, hoe cotton, hoe corn, grow sugar cane, pick cotton, done all that. I was about fifteen or sixteen when I pick cotton. I would pick now, if I could. It was easy to pick. You pull the sack, you know, until it get heavy. When it get heavy, you empty it, pick some more, empty that.\(^4\)

The ways of the farmhand were familiar to Clementine from girlhood to motherhood. In addition to picking cotton, she helped with the pecan crop, although she did complain of the constant stooping associated with the task.

In 1907 Clementine gave birth to her first child, a son nicknamed Frenchie. His real name was Joseph. Joseph’s father was Charlie Dupree, also the father of Clementine’s second child, Cora. Clementine and Charlie, fifteen years her senior, were never married. Clementine said they were “just keeping company.” In 1914, Charlie died. Ten years later Clementine married Emanuel Hunter, who also worked at Melrose. Of her marriage to Emanuel, Clementine said, “I was scared when I got married . . . But I had a good husband, a good Christian husband and he loved to work and he loved to have something . . . and just like that I’m is right now.”\(^5\) Together Emanuel and Clementine lived in the workers’ cottages at Melrose. They had five children, two of whom were
stillborn and never named. The surviving children were Agnes, King, and Mary. Like her mother before her, Clementine gave birth to seven children in all. She was proud of this accomplishment. Even as a mother of several children, she was obliged to continue working every day. She remembered, “I picked cotton one morning just before I borned one of my babies. I remember how much it was—seventy-eight pounds. Then I went home, called the midwife, and borned my baby. It didn’t worry me none. In a few days I was back in the fields.”

She tended her children in the field as she picked. Here is the description of her day in the field:

Put my children under the tree in the field. Pick cotton, 150 pounds, sometimes 200, I pick. All that was fifty cents a hundred, that all they was getting. Fifty cents a hundred and I done dragged my children all in the field. I didn’t have no help. Sometime I’d find some of them fast asleep in the weeds. They never die. I raise them all . . . I work hard in my days.

In the 1920s, when she was in her sixties, Clementine Hunter was moved from field work into domestic chores at the plantation. She was expected to tend the vegetable gardens, clean, sew clothes for the children of the household, do laundry and ironing, help with cooking and childcare. She made quilts and baskets, which examined now, show that she was already an artist. She was expected to take work home, usually laundry, at the close of her workday and complete it before the next day’s chores. This was the custom of the country at that time.

The change of assignment to the primary residence was a fortuitous event for Clementine Hunter and for the world of folk art. Because the owner of the plantation, Cammie Henry, was greatly interested in art and culture, she invited guest artists to spend extended periods of time in residence at the plantation. They were
given staple support so that they could work on their creative endeavors. Writers, painters, musicians, and photographers came and visited at Melrose, usually for several months. One guest stayed for over thirty years. That person was Francois Mignon, usually credited with the discovery of Clementine Hunter’s artistic talent. Mignon was a favorite of Cammie Henry, and she chose him to be the historian and archivist of her plantation. Mignon did not leave Melrose until after the Henry family sold the place off and it became a corporate farm, a status that it has today even though the plantation house and outbuildings have been given to the historical society of Natchitoches. Melrose is today a pecan plantation. The buildings are now historical sites open to the public.

When the artist Alberta Kinsey of New Orleans left Melrose after a stay at the plantation, she left behind some tubes of paint in the wastebasket. When Clementine Hunter went to clean the quarters that Alberta Kinsey had occupied, she found the paints and asked whether she could have them. Since they were discards, there was no objection to her taking them. She had paints but not surfaces on which to paint. Francois Mignon, the curator of Miss Cammie’s papers, gave Clementine Hunter an old window shade. Her first painting was on that throwaway surface. She painted all night on her first work and showed it to Mignon the next morning. He was amazed at her imagination and flair. From that humble start on castaway materials, Clementine went on to paint over four thousand works. Her works are usually described as primitives, although Alice B. Toklas did not agree with this characterization. Toklas said, “Her painting impressed me. It is really not at all primitive. It is very civilized—as Gertrude Stein said of the African wood carvings that influenced Matisse and particularly Picasso, almost fifty years ago.” Some observers and critics used the word “primitive” to mean that Clementine Hunter had no formal training as an artist. Still her work has an undeniable appeal. Many consider Clementine Hunter a reflector of the plantation life which was passing away, a chronicler of twentieth-century country life among the folk. In recording the day-to-day lives of workers on
the plantation, Clementine Hunter may be regarded as a pictorial historian of a vanishing culture.

Poor as she was, she could not afford canvas boards. She painted on whatever she found—shingles that had blown off the roof, old snuff bottles, milk bottles, boards, papers—whatever was available. Her paints came mail order from Sears and Roebuck. Mignon and his friend James Register considered Clementine Hunter to be a refreshing primitive artist, and they became her advocates and agents. They worked to get her paintings into exhibits and into the hands of collectors. The few sales did not cover expenses. Clementine continued to work at Melrose as a house servant. She would sell her paintings along with the vegetables she grew at a little stand on the grounds. People in the community became aware of her work and often stopped by her little house to watch her paint. She charged them five cents to watch. Over time the price to watch grew until toward the end of her days at Melrose, she was charging fifty cents for observers. Many of her paintings sold to people in the community for one dollar each. Later the price went to five dollars, then ten. Literally hundreds of Clementine Hunter paintings went for under twenty dollars at the time they were painted. As she became better known through sales and exhibits, the price of the paintings went to a few hundred dollars and then to the thousands. One of her paintings was chosen in 1976 for the United Nations UNICEF calendar, and thus her art went all over the world.

Several area collectors who particularly admired her work began to secure paintings reflecting her various subject matters: work and play of rural Southern folk, religious experiences, and other miscellaneous subjects such as flowers, animals, etc. Many of these collectors were personal friends of Clementine Hunter. Her primary advocates were Thomas Whitehead, Dr. Mildred Hart Bailey (who has willed her collection to the community), and Ann Williams Brittain. It is interesting that Clementine Hunter never saved a single painting for herself. She said that when she was finished painting a work, she was through with it. She seemed to have
no sentimental attachment to her work. Her children were not collectors either. Some of her works were sold in the drugstore in Natchitoches, others through James Register in New York and New Orleans. Today a Clementine Hunter major work would bring thousands of dollars. There are some advertised on the internet now for $5000 and up. Clementine Hunter never got this kind of money for her work. She lived within extremely modest means all her life.

In addition to the single works that Clementine Hunter painted and sold or gave away over her thirty-five years as a painter, the artist took on another very important endeavor: the murals for the African House at Melrose. Behind the main house at Melrose plantation, there is a building called the African House, said to be the only example of pure African architecture in the United States. The African House had been built on the plantation by its original owner, a freed slave woman, Therese Coincoin, who apparently remembered the structure of huts in the Congo. The African House had been used for many purposes over the years. It had been a jail, a storage house, a stable. Francois Mignon hit upon the idea of clearing the clutter out of the historic building and asking Clementine Hunter to paint murals for the upper level. She took on the project, and today the priceless murals of Clementine Hunter are permanently affixed to the upper level of the African House. She painted the murals in a makeshift studio on the grounds, and then they were attached to the walls of the African House. There are nine large panels, each four feet by eight feet. The work, done in 1955, took three months of full time effort by Clementine Hunter. These large murals, like her other paintings, reflect the joy and sorrow of plantation life of working folk. There is a baptism scene, a wedding scene, a cotton picking scene, a funeral scene. All of the characteristics that appear in Hunter’s other paintings-large subjects, bright colors, exuberant spirits-appear also in the murals.

Clementine Hunter’s lifespan coincides with the post-Civil War era of separation of people by color. When she spoke of the
separation of schoolchildren by a fence, division by race, she was reflecting the culture that she knew. When a major local exhibit of her work was planned for the community of Natchitoches in 1955 at the college library, Clementine Hunter was not invited. The college did not accept blacks at that time. Because of the courtesy of Ora Williams, a professor of Greek at the college, who was willing to break the rules, Clementine Hunter was sneaked into the exhibit of her own works on a Sunday afternoon when the college was closed so that she could see her paintings on display. Later, in 1986, that same college—Northwestern State University of Louisiana—gave Clementine Hunter, who had never learned her ABCs, an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree. She walked into her graduation at the school, by then integrated, at age ninety-nine in full academic regalia. Her simple response to the honor was “Thank you.” It must have been a great day for her. It was an even greater day for the community and the college, for the time had come for the simple recognition of talent unfettered by racial considerations.

Clementine Hunter continued painting until the final months of her life. She died of old age on January 1, 1988, surrounded by family and friends. She died in the mobile home to which she had moved after Melrose was sold to the Southdown Land Company. She was buried in a mausoleum adjacent to the country Catholic church, St. John the Baptist, between Natchitoches and Cloutierville. Buried next to her was her lifelong friend and patron Francois Mignon, the historian of Melrose.

Since her passing, the paintings of Clementine Hunter have continued to rise in value. Major art galleries seek her work. The major museums of the country exhibit the paintings. When the Dallas African American Art Museum opened, the inaugural event was an exhibit of Clementine Hunter’s work. Mrs. Hunter has been the subject of more than one hundred published articles. She has been a focus of the women’s history project at Radcliffe. Institutions of higher learning have paid homage to the illiterate but phenomenally talented folk artist Clementine Hunter. Clementine must have been right when she said she “had made out all right.”
**Endnotes**

2. Wilson, 20.
3. Wilson, 74.
4. Wilson, 110.
5. Wilson, 110.
7. Lyons, 27.
8. From dust jacket of Wilson.

**Works Consulted**


Cotton-pickin’ Time