

The Wash by Clementine (pronounced Clementeen) Hunter (1886 - 1988) 91.88.2

The oil on board painting by Clementine Hunter was created in the 1950's. It was painted at Melrose Plantation when Dr. Hunter was over sixty years of age. She was an African American artist who lived in Louisiana all of her life.

Background of Artist

Clementine Hunter was born in December 1886 or January 1887 at Hidden Hill Plantation near Cloutierville, Louisiana. Her mother was Antoinette Adams and her father was Janvier Reuben, who was a Creole. Her parents were married on October 5, 1890.

The family moved to Melrose Plantation when she was 14 or 15 years old. She was the oldest of seven children. She had little formal education.

Clementine Hunter had two children with Charlie Dupree who died in 1914.

In 1924 she married Emanuel Hunter who was a wood chopper at Melrose Plantation. They had five children, though two died as newborns.

Melrose Plantation was known as an artist colony. Ms. Hunter was a creative woman and when introduced to painting in 1940 she began to paint and some say she never stopped painting. She began painting when she was a little over 50 years old and painted until her death at about 100 years of age. Clementine Hunter continued her artistic career and as an adult she always lived in or near the Melrose Complex.

She was encouraged by Carmie Garrett Henry, one of the owners of the plantation and Francois Mignon whom Carmie Henry invited to live at Melrose. He became a curator there in the 1940's and encouraged Clementine to paint. A number of other neighbors and friends supported her work and bought her paintings.

Clementine Hunter has been called the "Black Grandma Moses." She painted large and small canvases, murals, and had numerous other artistic creations. She sold everything she painted, except for some that were given to close friends and family. At the beginning her paintings sold for as little as 25 cents, but later they sold for 100's and then 1,000's of dollars.

Her work has been purchased and is part of the permanent collections of many institutions, including the High Museum in Atlanta, The Dallas Museum of Art, The New Orleans Museum of Art, and the New York Historical Association. And, of course, the Minneapolis Institute of Art owns two of her paintings. Works are also found at Radcliffe College, Vassar, Tulane and Fisk, as well as Louisiana State University and Illinois State University at Normal, Illinois.

She has been recognized and honored for her skills as an artist and for her life as one of the first black woman artists. She was awarded an honorary doctorate from LSU.

The subject matter of her paintings focused on work, play, religion, nature, school and others. The context was usually life at Melrose Plantation. Several of her paintings related to laundry and wash day. They include the Cane River Washday, 1949, the Melrose Complex laundry, 1955; and two paintings entitled Washday in 1965 and 1987. She did not title her paintings, so some are known by similar titles relating to the subject matter.

KEY QUESTIONS

What is happening in this painting?

What did you learn about wash day in rural Louisiana?

What do you like best about the painting?

Who are the subjects in the painting?

Why do you think this subject matter would have been important to Clementine Hunter to capture in a painting?

KEY POINTS

“The Wash” is one of many by Clementine Hunter. The MIA has two of her paintings. The other MIA painting is Picking Cotton.

Her painting might be described as folk art.

Clementine Hunter was a prolific artist. Many of her paintings focused on daily life on Melrose Plantation. Her most frequently painted subjects relate to work, play, religion, nature, and school. She sold (or gave away to family and friends) all of her paintings.

These paintings convey “real life” and do so in a colorful, interesting style.

Dr. Hunter’s skills were discovered by “friends” who knew that she had a talent for expressing life as she knew it. They supported her work

She has received many awards and honors, including an honorary doctorate..