



THE APPLE PARING

Clementine Hunter (1886/87–1988)

Natchitoches, Louisiana; c. 1945

Oil on paper; 12 ½ × 16"

Gift of Mildred Hart Bailey and the Clementine Hunter Art Trust, 1996.1.1

Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

“Clementine Hunter, Artist, 50 cents a look” announced a sign on the artist’s studio door. Inspired by her experiences, Clementine Hunter began her artmaking career late in life with memory paintings, documenting her community at work, at play, and at church. Simple forms and shapes crafted with dynamic, punchy color combinations characterize the artist’s canvases.

Hunter was born on Hidden Hill Plantation near Cloutierville, Louisiana, in late 1886 or early 1887. Her family moved to Melrose Plantation in Natchitoches when she was a teenager, and she began work as a field hand soon after.

Melrose Plantation, where Hunter lived for most of her life, was a haven for artists. Encouraged by the plantation librarian, Hunter began to paint using oils discarded by an artist-in-residence. Hunter’s several thousand paintings chronicle work and recreational activities on the plantation as well as the spiritual beliefs and religious practices of her community.

This work scene is presented on a flattened plane close to the picture surface. A comfortably seated woman is paring apples; she is almost as tall as the tree that protects her from the sun as she performs the common kitchen task. A child, seated on a stool and shaded by an umbrella on a post, hands apples to the parer from a basket. The single chimney and veranda-like porch of the plantation building on the left are common to African American vernacular architecture. The signature, “Clemence,” was typical for the artist between 1945 and 1950; another set of personal initials was added to the painting around 1970.

RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:
www.folkartmuseum.org

Arnett, Paul, and William Arnett, eds. *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 1999.

Gilley, Shelby R. *Painting By Heart: The Life and Art of Clementine Hunter, Louisiana Folk Artist*. Baton Rouge, La.: St. Emma Press, 2000.

Harding, Deborah, and Laura Fisher. *Home Sweet Home: The House in American Folk Art*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2001.

Hollander, Stacy C., and Brooke Davis Anderson. *American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

The Library of Congress’s American Memory website, “Voices from the Days of Slavery” online archive:
www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/vfssp.html

Wilson, James L. *Clementine Hunter: American Folk Artist*. Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing, 1988.

A CHRONICLE OF PLANTATION LIFE

QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What is the story depicted in this image?
- What can we say about these figures? What is their relationship?
- What clues do you see that give you that idea?
- What can we say about the time and place where this is happening?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Clementine Hunter worked as a farm laborer at Melrose Plantation in Louisiana for many years before becoming a domestic worker in the house. It was not until she was in her 50s that she started painting, encouraged by the plantation librarian. Having lived at Melrose Plantation since she was a teenager, the majority of her paintings are set there. By looking carefully at *The Apple Paring*, consider how she portrays the plantation; does she project any particular sentiment about it?
- *The Apple Paring* is typical of Hunter's style, with a flattened plane and unconventional use of perspective. How do these stylistic elements affect your interpretation of the image?
- Hunter, who was the granddaughter of slaves, painted several thousand works chronicling daily life on the plantation where she lived and worked. Though she could not read or write, the sheer multitude of her paintings tells the story of the artist's day-to-day activities almost like a storybook. Considering *The Apple Paring* is a moment in a longer narrative, what do you imagine might have happened before this scene, and what will happen next?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- After the Emancipation Proclamation, how did life change for formerly enslaved people in the South? What exactly changed, and what remained the same?
- How did the Freedmen's Bureau affect Reconstruction in the South?
- Clementine Hunter's life extended from the late 1800s through the late 1900s. Think about what you already know about the Jim Crow laws and life for African Americans in the 1960s. What similarities exist between the Black Codes and Jim Crow laws?
- Why are paintings of plantation life particularly important for us to preserve?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Have students choose a scene from their own lives to represent in a painting, drawing, collage, or photograph. When these images are displayed together, ask students what they think future viewers will be able to glean about life in the twenty-first century based on them.
- Have students research written and oral accounts of plantation residents from 1860 through 1900. Ask each student, playing the role of a plantation resident, to write a letter

from that resident's perspective to a relative in the North, addressing daily customs, work, discrimination, independence, or recreation.

- Ask students to research the life and work of Clementine Hunter. By looking carefully at her paintings, write an account of the life she depicts.

