

Kids' KOrner

Former Servant Paints Century Of Memories From Her Past

NATCHITOCHEs, La. — When Frenchie came home to die, Clementine cared for him in sorrow. Then he did die, as he'd announced he would. After Clementine came home from the funeral, she couldn't sleep. She'd loved her son with consuming love. Now he had gone away and would not come back, and she had to paint. That was Clementine Hunter's way.

She painted an open grave, with Frenchie soaring out of it, already fitted with angel's wings, heading for a hole in the sky that would take him to the Promised Land.

The scene of Frenchie's leave-taking strikes with primal force. The painting may be the most emotional of Clementine Hunter's 5,000 to 7,000 paintings, but it is not alone in its communion with her deepest feelings.

Plantation Memories

And Clementine Hunter has had a lot of time to feel. In December 1986 her admirers celebrate her 100th birthday. The occasion means little to one whose richest images erupt from a plantation past.

On the wall of her trailer is a plastic relief of the Last Supper and a proclamation from Gov. Edwin Edwards of Louisiana, making her an honorary colonel and aide-de-camp. President Carter invited her to the White House; she wouldn't go because they said she'd have to fly. Lots of people fly, a friend told her. "They crazy, too," she said. She's seen an airplane, though, and painted it; the propeller is on the tail.

One of America's most-admired artists picked cotton well into young womanhood. Then she

became a house servant and did the laundry and ironing at Melrose Plantation until the owners recognized her ability as a cook.

She worked on the plantation until she was about 75, and for years would work all day, then walk the dirt road to her shack to cook for her family before earning the right, not to sleep, but to paint. Once she started to paint, it became her obsession. Yet she never had held a brush until she was about 53 years old.

Clementine Hunter has never been more than 100 miles from the rural parish where she was born. It is doubtful whether she has been addressed as "Mrs. Hunter" a dozen times in her life. She signs her paintings with her initials superimposed, but, even though she knows better and used to draw it the other way, she reverses the "C."

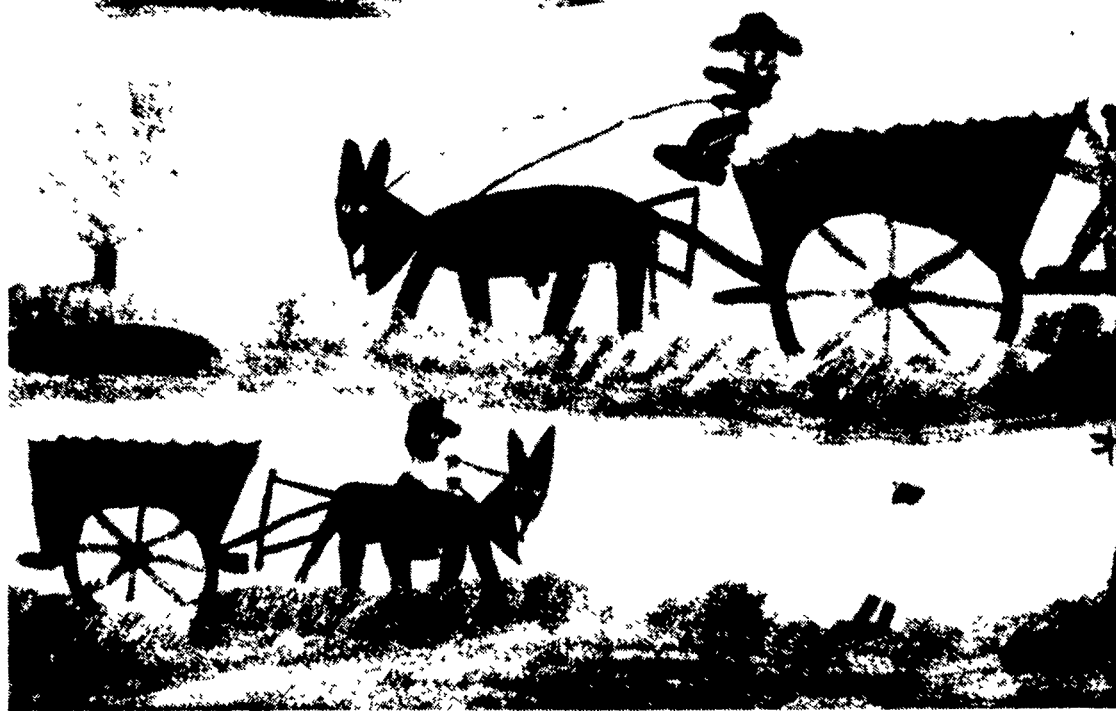
She cannot read or write. It doesn't seem to matter. She grasps anything within reach — window shades, shoe boxes, paper sacks, snuff bottles — with gnarled fingers and floods it with bright colors until an exuberant narrative unfolds.

Compelled To Paint

Today is her last day on earth, one thinks, seeing her brush jab the yard-square plywood palette and stroke a dead white surface until it comes to brilliant life.

Clementine Hunter paints:

Rough-and-tumble schoolyards, decorous but perilous courtrooms, even more dangerous lots outside honky-tonks, throbbing cotton gins, lively funerals, river baptizings, pecan-tree thrashings, joyously successful fishing ex-



Mules stare impudently at the onlooker as they haul cotton from a field in this 1970 painting by Clementine Hunter, 100-year-old primitive artist. Granddaughter of a slave, the artist picked cotton in Louisiana well into young womanhood, then became a house servant at Melrose Plantation. Her paintings, long considered valuable because they chronicle days gone by, are increasingly hailed for their color, form and vitality.

peditions, and, in characteristic whimsy, chickens pulling enormous loads of cotton.

In her banana-frond-shaded Nativity scenes, the wise men present a black Mary with three gifts: a cake wrapped in cellophane, a box of candy, and a big squash known as a cushaw.

She paints entirely from memory. "Anything that come into my mind, I paints it," she says. "Anything."

She painted evocative abstracts for a while, but quit, protesting, "They make my head sweat."

"Clementine has documented a way of life on southern plantations," says Thomas N. Whitehead, a journalism professor at Northwestern State University

of Louisiana. "Her role as a participant who can tell us about those days is unique. She lived it and she can paint it."

Whitehead is one of a small group of Natchitoches academics who believe the well-being of Clementine Hunter is their noblest purpose. Several times a week for 20 years, Whitehead has driven seven miles through the Cane River cottonfields to her small trailer to supply her with brushes, oil paints, and other needs, such as fried chicken. She treats such devotion as her due, upbraiding him for any lapse.

Mildred Bailey, dean of the same university, is another of Clementine Hunter's benefactors. On a recent visit to the trailer to

help her sort out a financial problem, Dr. Bailey first had to contend with the tiny, wizened artist's pique at a perceived transgression by Whitehead.

Waiting For Salt Meat

"I got a pretty cabbage over there," Mrs. Hunter said, "and it's waitin' for that salt meat Tommy supposed to bring me to go with it."

At the end of an hour's visit, her expressed concern as Dr. Bailey departed was, "Tell Tommy to get out here with that salt meat he promised, or my cabbage is gone rot."

In the sweltering parlor of her trailer, Mrs. Hunter sits in an overstuffed chair with her

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COLOR THIS!

1. BLACK	6. ORANGE
2. RED	7. PINK
3. YELLOW	8. LT BROWN
4. BLUE	9. LT. BLUE
5. BROWN	10. LT. GREEN

GREBES ARE KNOWN AS "THE DIVING BIRD." THEY DIVE UNDERWATER TO GET FISH TO EAT. THERE ARE ABOUT SIX DIFFERENT KINDS OF GREBES LIVING IN NORTH AMERICA. THESE BIRDS DO NOT LIKE TO FLY. THEY HAVE GREAT DIFFICULTY GETTING OFF THE GROUND. ONCE THEY ARE AIR-BORNE THEY CAN FLY FOR LONG DISTANCES.

