

# PLATE WORKS OF ART

PAINTINGS BY LOUISIANA ARTIST CLEMENTINE HUNTER ARE TRANSLATED INTO A NEW CERAMICS COLLECTION.

BY KATHLEEN ALLAIN



ARTIST CLEMENTINE HUNTER



There's been renewed interest recently in the works of Clementine Hunter, a self-taught black artist born in 1886 and known for her depictions of Louisiana plantation life.

In September 2012, Tom Whitehead and Art Shiver published *Clementine Hunter: Her Life and Art*. In January, Robert Wilson premiered his opera, *Zinnias: The Life of Clementine Hunter*, and in June, Jennifer Moses wrote an article in *The New York Times*, "Looking for Clementine Hunter's Louisiana."

This month, Doug Gitter ([www.gittergallery.com](http://www.gittergallery.com)) releases a collection of ceramic dishes hand-painted with reproductions of Hunter's artworks.

"I've been working on the ceramic line for a few years," Gitter says. "It was quite challenging because you're taking a piece of artwork that's flat and putting it onto a three-dimensional surface. To get it right on ceramic — to make the dresses the right color, the feet different colors,

the hair the right look — was very difficult."

Hunter's art is characterized by textured brushstrokes, bright colors and figures with detailed outfits. Gitter conveyed these traits by adding relief (a raised plane) to the pottery and hiring artists to paint the pieces and match them to the original paintings. The result is rich texture and vivid details: You can almost feel the sun's warmth and see the zinnias on the womens' hats in "Baptism on Cane River."

After Gitter perfected the ceramics line, he got an exclusive worldwide licensing agreement from Hunter's estate to reproduce her works, under the condition that a percentage of proceeds returns to the estate to promote Hunter. The images she created reflect her memories of life on a Southern plantation and a world that existed prior to mechanization.

"She was one of the first, if not the first, to truly capture a piece of American history which

SEPTEMBER 2013 <<< CUE 35

PERSPECTIVES CUE FEATURE



WORKS BY CLEMENTINE HUNTER DEPICT EVERYDAY TASKS LIKE LAUNDRY, SHOWN HERE IN "WASH DAY."

has since vanished," Gitter says.

"World War II changed it all," says Tom Whitehead, co-author of *Clementine Hunter: Her Life and Art*. "When mechanization came to agriculture, there were no more jobs. What took several hundred people to do, now 10 people could do. We have to completely think about life before modern attributes like air conditioning and washing machines. To me, it seems like a hard life, but Clementine enjoyed the camaraderie and that's what she painted."

Hunter was born in 1886 in Natchitoches Parish at Hidden Hill Plantation in Cloutierville. At age 15, she moved with her family to Melrose Plantation, where she

worked in the cotton fields. In her 50s, she moved into the "big house" at Melrose Plantation, where she switched from picking cotton and pecans to chores like cooking and cleaning. There, she stumbled upon leftover tubes of paint from Alberta Kinsey (a New Orleans artist who visited Melrose Plantation) and began painting on shoebox tops and anything else she could find.

While many people in the South lived on plantations, Hunter was unique because she was able to document her memories through painting.

"Not many people [who worked on a plantation before mechanization] had a way to tell their stories," Whitehead says. "They didn't have access to cameras, and they had very little schooling so they couldn't read and write. Clementine told stories that other people weren't able to document and share."

With titles like "Fish Fry" and "Wash Day," each platter or bowl reveals the daily grind, as well as the social and religious aspects of life on Melrose Plantation. Although it shows hard labor, Hunter's artwork is upbeat. Hunter enjoyed the social life surrounding these strenuous endeavors, and it shows in paintings like "Pecan Picking," where kids hang upside-down in trees, arms flailing.

"Even her funeral paintings and wakes are bright and cheerful. I guess you had to have that attitude to survive," Whitehead says. "She always found happiness in hard work, and she always said, 'Picking cotton is easier than painting pictures.'"

When Hunter moved out of Melrose Plantation and into a house across the street, she sold her paintings for 25 cents and popples for 15 cents on her screened porch. Some say she charged 50 cents to look at the paintings in her house. Gitter plans to keep this notion of affordable art for the collection.

"I want to take something that was once affordable and make it affordable again," Gitter says of the Clementine Hunter ceramic pieces, which range from \$118 to \$168 at [HazelNut](http://HazelNut.com) (5515 Magazine St., 504-891-2424; 2735 Hwy. 190, Mandeville, 985-626-

“When the role of African-Americans in American society was being more appreciated and more published, Clementine was there, and she was there as an artist.”

8900; [www.hazelnutneworleans.com](http://www.hazelnutneworleans.com)).

Hunter has become one of the most coveted folk artists from the South. Her work is featured in museums including the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans and the American Folk Art Museum in New York. She was the first black artist to have a solo exhibition at Delgado Community College.

"Clementine's career paralleled the civil rights movement," Whitehead says. "When the role of African-Americans in American society was being more appreciated and more published, Clementine was there, and she was there as an artist." □

