

## American Self-Taught Art from the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art



Clementine Hunter, *Melrose Plantation*, 1971, Oil on masonite, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, Gift of Robert Ryan, 73.205

The New Orleans Museum of Art has collected and displayed works by American self-taught artists since the 1980s. This collection includes paintings, sculptures and works on paper by artists including Thornton Dial, Clementine Hunter, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Jimmy Sudduth and the Reverend Howard Finster among others. This Educator Packet explores themes that pervade the work and practices of many of these. Lesson plans are also available to explore these themes in the classroom.

## LIST OF WORKS

Clementine Hunter (American, Louisiana, 1886/87 – 1988), *Melrose Plantation*, 1971, Oil on masonite, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Gift of Robert Ryan, 73.205

Thornton Dial (American, Alabama, 1928 - 2015), *Keeping the Pigs from Rooting*, 1988, Paint, carpet, epoxy, metal on wood, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. Kurt Gitter and Alice Rae Yelen, 2011.66

Jimmy Sudduth (American, Alabama, 1910 – 2007), *Man and Tractor*, n.d., Mud and paint on plywood, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, gift of Dr. Kurt Gitter and Alice Rae Yelen, 2011.63

Charlie Lucas (American, Alabama, b. 1951), *Man with Lantern*, 1987-88, Assembled metal objects, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Gift of Dr. Kurt Gitter and Alice Rae Yelen, 2010.224

James (J.P.) Scott (American, Louisiana, 1922 – 2003), *Shrimp Boat*, n.d. Paint, wood, plastic, linoleum, vinyl, metal, net, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, gift of Dr. Kurt Gitter and Alice Rae Yelen, 92.464

Howard Finster (American, Georgia, 1916 – 2001), *Angel*, 1986, Bicycle paint, permanent marker, wood, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Bequest of Carmen Donaldson, 99.109.24

Sister Gertrude Morgan (American, Louisiana, 1900 – 1980), *O Lord Have Mercy*, n.d., Gouache on paper, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert Ryan, 74.4

Purvis Young (American, Florida, 1943 – 2010), *Angels over the City*, 1989, Acrylic on fabric and wood, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, Gift of Friends of Contemporary Art, 92.509

Sam Doyle (American, South Carolina, 1906 – 1986), *No More We Fear*, 1982, Paint on roof tin, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. Kurt Gitter and Alice Rae Yelen, 2008.85

Thornton Dial (American, Alabama, 1928 - 2015), *Stung by the Wasp and the Cross We Have to Bear*, 1992. Paint, carpet, wood, epoxy, metal, paint can lids, fabric, Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, gift of William Arnett, 93.117

## What is Self-Taught Art?

The French artist Jean Dubuffet first used the term “Art Brut” in the 1940’s to describe works of art made by children, prisoners and the insane. In it, he saw a liberated freedom from the constraints of western aesthetics. He collected works in this vein and purposefully developed a personal style influenced by the inventiveness and child-like approach he saw in the works of untrained artists. Dubuffet recognized the spontaneity and direct approach of artists who work without the filter of expected practices. Today there are several terms used to describe work by artists who work independently of art world expectations. The terms “folk art,” “outsider art,” “visionary art” and “primitive art” have all been used to describe the work of these artists. The New Orleans Museum of Art collects and displays works by self-taught artists. The collection includes paintings, sculptures and works on paper by Thornton Dial, Clementine Hunter, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Jimmy Sudduth and the Reverend Howard Finster among others.

By definition, self-taught artists have never formally studied art-making techniques in art schools or universities. Historically, self-taught artists have been excluded from the art world of museum and gallery exhibitions by the circumstances of their biographies. In 1982, the Corcoran Gallery of Art mounted the exhibition, *Black Folk Art in America, 1930 – 1980* which featured the work of twenty artists whose work had previously not been shown on the walls of a museum. This exhibition led to subsequent explorations by curators and art historians to document the work of artists working outside the mainstream art world. The New Orleans Museum of Art contributed to this field of research with the 1993 exhibition *Passionate Visions of the American South: Self-Taught Artists from 1940 to the Present* curated by Alice Rae Yelen.

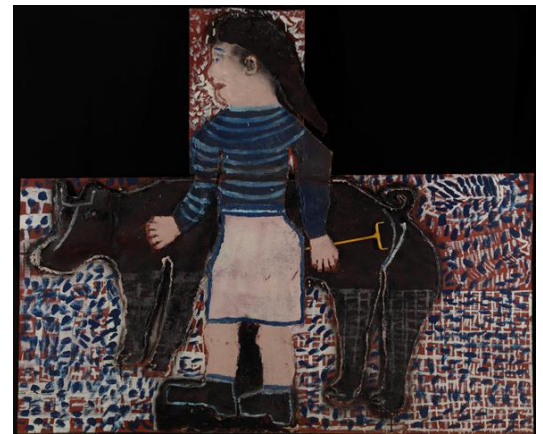
The aesthetic impact of the work of each of the self-taught artists in NOMA’s collection is undeniable and the stories told by the individual voices of the artists are compelling and often universal. These artists felt compelled to tell their stories and they inventively devised methods for visually representing ideas. Although each artist developed his or her own distinctive style, there are certain themes that can be seen as representative of twentieth century American self-taught artists. Autobiography, material innovation, daily life, social commentary, religion, and patriotism are themes that run throughout the creations of self-taught artists. Each of these themes is explained and illustrated below.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

All art is to some degree autobiographical, stemming from a personal encounter or belief. Many self-taught artists delve into their own pasts to tell personal stories with universal appeal. The artists represented in NOMA's collection are predominately from the rural south and their works express the realities of the agricultural existence.

*Melrose Plantation* of 1971 (page 1) by **Clementine Hunter** documents the artist's life on Melrose Plantation in Natchitoches, Louisiana where the artist worked with her family. This painting depicts the plantation house and scenes of the labor that took place on the farm. Figures can be seen plowing, raking and picking pecans. Hunter felt so compelled to paint that she painted her first painting on a torn window shade, claiming that she "was going to go crazy if I don't get this pictures out of my head." While the images Hunter painted document life on the plantation, they also speak of the human condition and are therefore universally appealing.

*Keeping the Pigs from Rooting* from 1988 is an early large scale work by **Thornton Dial**. Born in rural Alabama in 1928, Dial toiled in many blue collar jobs as he raised his family. He created what he called "things" all of his life and began to be recognized as an artist in the 1980s. Dial's use of alternative materials includes the reverse side of carpet and a metal forked object in the hands of the standing woman. Like Hunter, Dial grew up in a rural environment and drew from his experiences to produce art with layers of meaning. Here, Dial presents a woman and a pig in a garden setting. The woman holds a metal device in her hand which Dial invented to be worn on the snout of a pig to keep it from rooting in the garden or straying from the trough. The artist also painted a version of the device in white on the pigs head. The device keeps a pig wearing it from eating off of the ground as the simple metal object falls forward when its wearer bends toward the earth. On one level, Dial portrays a typical farm scene but symbolically, the work may refer to the concerns of a woman keeping her man close to the hearth or the political implications of the binding poor black families to the farm.



Thornton Dial, *Keeping the Pigs from Rooting*, 1988, Paint, carpet, epoxy, metal on wood



## MATERIAL INNOVATION

As illustrated by Clementine Hunter's willingness to paint on a discarded window shade and Thornton Dial's use of the underside of carpet as a painting surface, self-taught artists are not confined to the use of traditional art-making materials. These artists who had minimal formal education were freed from the constraints of the expected and their innate drive toward creativity propelled them to employ methods and materials in unconventional ways.

**Jimmy Sudduth** grew up in rural Alabama and often paints agrarian scenes. He rarely used canvas, paint or brushes, instead painting predominately with his fingers using a mixture of sugar, mud and pigment on found wood. Sudduth began making mud paintings as a child but they would wash away with the rain. He later discovered that molasses would bind and set the mud. The artist claimed that he could find 36 colors of mud in the rich Alabama soil. He also sourced natural white kaolin and tempered his colors using coffee and charcoal. This farm scene depicts a field laborer on a tractor and the varying colors obtained from the land are evident in his palette.



Jimmy Sudduth (American, Alabama, 1910 – 2007), *Man and Tractor*, n.d., Mud and paint on plywood

Known as the “Tin Man,” **Charlie Lucas** (b. 1951), utilizes repurposed car parts and other items salvaged from the trash heap to create large scale figures and animals. Lucas came from a family of skilled craftsmen of blacksmiths and he worked as a construction worker and truck driver. After a back injury in 1984, Lucas turned to crafting small wire sculptures during his convalescence, eventually moving toward larger pieces of found metal. The repurposing of materials has philosophical as well as practical intentions. Materials can be easily obtained and represent the notion of creating something from nothing. Lucas said, “You can take the scrap from the bottom of the heap and breathe new life into it.”

In *Man with a Lantern* (right), Lucas is conscientious about what parts of the car translate to the tin man's body parts. The arms are fashioned from pipes and the trunk was once a muffler. Facial features have been delineated with a blowtorch and the figure holds a rusting lantern in his hand and stands on a tire rim. The rust and decay of the metal only adds to aesthetic appeal. Lucas likened the rust to the bumps and bruises of his own life.



Charlie Lucas, *Man with a Lantern*, 1987-88, Assembled metal objects

## DAILY LIFE

The experiences and traditions of daily life are a common subject matter for artists from both rural and urban environments. Clementine Hunter documented life on Melrose Plantation and the religious and social rituals of her time including ceremonies such as weddings and baptisms. Sudduth also created images of the daily rituals of life in the rural south. Although many of these artists worked for many years away from the public eye, they were deeply rooted in their communities and their work documents the daily experiences of countless Americans.

**J.P. Scott** (whose *Shrimp Boat* is shown below, lived and worked in the small waterways of Louisiana's bayou country. He made careful observations of ships along the Mississippi and of smaller boats on the bayous and the made detailed constructions of the boats from salvaged materials. He also created versions of French Quarter houses, airplanes and oil rigs. Scott reproduced vestiges of his immediate environment from found materials and simple tools.



James (J.P.) Scott (American, Louisiana, 1922 – 2003), *Shrimp Boat*, n.d. Paint, wood, plastic, linoleum, vinyl, metal, net.

## RELIGION

Self-taught artists are compelled to create art as if driven by an innate force. These artists often began making art as a result of a dramatic life change such as retirement, a health event or a calling from God. Religion is a predominant theme in the work of several artists including the Reverend Howard Finster and Sister Gertrude Morgan.

**Howard Finster** had a powerful vision at the age of 57 in which he was commanded by God to paint sacred art. Most of his works are covered in writing and instruct the viewer on religious themes. Finster, a self-proclaimed preacher since his teens, believed he could reach more people through painting than through preaching. In this work Finster used bicycle paint on wood to represent the angel Gabriel. The angel's wings are covered in faces created by smudging the paint with fingertips and drawing in facial features with permanent marker. Finster is also known for Paradise Gardens, an art environment he created encompassing his house and land in Summerville, GA.



Howard Finster (American, Georgia, 1916– 2001), *Angel*, 1986, Bicycle paint, permanent marker, wood.

**Sister Gertrude Morgan** was born in Lafayette, Alabama and moved to New Orleans in 1939 after she was commanded by a voice to begin to preach. In New Orleans she preached in the streets of the French Quarter and helped found an orphanage and chapel. In the late 1960s she established the Everlasting Gospel Mission. Morgan considered herself to be the bride of Christ and she dressed in all white. At her mission, the furniture was covered in white and the walls were decorated with the apocalyptic paintings she began creating as part of her calling from God. Many of Morgan's paintings were inspired by the Book of Revelation and the biblical text often accompanies her drawings. Morgan was very resourceful and painted on paper, cardboard, plastic and other found materials. She worked with ballpoint pens, pencil, acrylic, watercolor and tempera paints. She sold her creations to finance her mission. The painting at left is a self-portrait of Sister Gertrude at prayer.

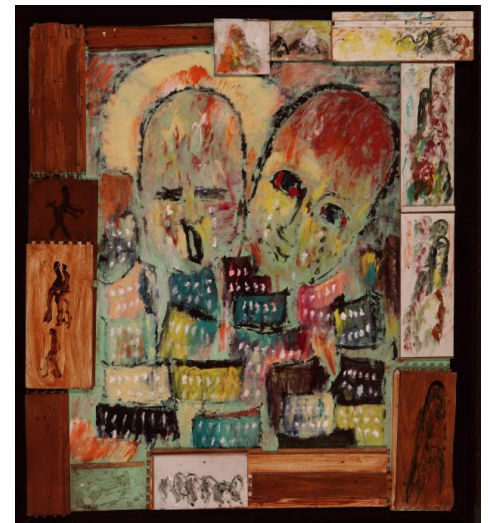


Sister Gertrude Morgan (American, Louisiana, 1900 – 1980), *O Lord Have Mercy*, n.d. gouache on paper

## SOCIAL COMMENTARY

The work of self-taught artists frequently refers to historical events and national and global issues, often reflecting the personal views of the artist. Popular culture, American history and cultural and societal issues have been reflected in the works of self-taught artists including Thornton Dial, Sam Doyle, Purvis Young and others.

**Purvis Young** lived his entire life in Miami's Overtown ghetto and created works inspired by his urban environment. While incarcerated for armed robbery from age 18 – 21, Young was encouraged to draw by a prison attendant. *Angels over the City* suggests the tenement buildings of his neighborhood with the heads of two angels weeping above them. "Sometimes I cry when I see what happens to people," Young proclaimed, offering the emotional impetus for his work. Yet, Young's work is hopeful, looking toward a brighter future as angels look out for his city from above. Young combines painting with a variety of discarded materials including old books, scraps of wood and bits of glass and mirrors. An unconventional frame is created by the attachment of found wood to the border of the painting. Young also found inspiration for his art in books. At the public library he examined works by old masters and other cultures. In the 1970s he was commissioned by his neighborhood library to create an exterior mural. The large painting could be seen for the interstate highway that crossed over Overtown and caused Young to be recognized as an artist outside of his own neighborhood.



Purvis Young, (American, Florida, 1943 – 2010), *Angels over the City*, 1989, Acrylic on fabric and wood.



**Sam Doyle** was raised in the Gullah community of St. Helena Island off the coast of South Carolina which maintained vestiges of the culture and language brought to the island from West Africa by slaves. Doyle's images often document the rich folklore and traditions of St. Helena's African American culture. *No More We Fear* is one of several versions created by Doyle to illustrate the words of an anti-slavery poem penned for a St. Helena church in 1863. St. Helena's became a Union stronghold near the beginning of the American Civil War and slaves were freed. Soon after the Penn School, a private vocational school was founded for the island's children and Doyle attended the school fifty years later. The poem that Doyle illustrates was sung as a hymn at Christmas at the school, and hopes for a life of freedom for mainland slaves. "We hear no more the driver's horn, no more the whip we fear," are the words of the poem which is visually interpreted by Doyle in house paint on found roofing tin. After retiring from working at the laundry at a Marine Corps base, Doyle considered painting his principal profession and set up a gallery at his home. In addition to portraying cultural events from St. Helena's Island life, Doyle also completed a series of local and national heroes including sports figures and politicians.



Sam Doyle (American, South Carolina, 1906 – 1986), *No More We Fear*, 1982, Paint on roof tin

**Thornton Dial**'s large scale assemblages and sculptures comment on contemporary social issues pertaining especially to race relations and the dispossessed including women, the urban underclass, immigrants and the homeless. *Stung by the Wasp and the Cross We Have to Bear* (below) was created four years after *Keeping the Pigs from Rooting* and illustrates his continued exploration of incorporating salvaged materials to create layer upon layer of materials and meaning. Although this work may at first appear abstract, upon closer inspection figures are revealed which are unified by an overlying knotted rope that crisscrosses the compositions creating quadrants. A large figure created from carpet, a pair of men's pants, burlap and paint stretches his arms and legs into each quadrant and two women appear in the upper portion of the painting seemingly running away from the male figure. A feeling of chaos is introduced by the staccato brush strokes and circular paint can lids inserted into the scene.

Dial developed a personal iconography that can be seen in many of his works and which offer interpretive clues to his visual commentary. Carpet is often a symbol for the downtrodden, as it is usually stepped upon. Ropes represent bondage and often imply that humanity is bound to its own fate. However, Dial usually offers a glimmer of hope in his works, holding out the promise that we can overcome our fears and prejudices and that new beginnings are always possible.





Thornton Dial, *Stung by the Wasp and the Cross We Have to Bear*, 1992. Paint, carpet, wood, epoxy, metal, paint can lids, fabric.

## Educator Resources

[www.noma.org/learn](http://www.noma.org/learn)

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