HUNTER, CLEMENTINE (1886-1988) drew upon her experiences of living and working as a field hand at the Hidden Hill plantation near Cloutiersville, Louisiana, and working as a cook at the Melrose Plantation in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, to produce thousands of paintings that recorded daily plantation life. A mecca for artists, Melrose was an ideal place to stoke Hunter’s desire to “mark a picture.”

Born Clementine Reuben in 1886 at the Hidden Hill plantation, this African American artist witnessed the gradual dissolution of the plantation system in her lifetime. The eldest of seven children, she gave birth to seven children like her mother, Antoinette Adams. After her husband, Charles Dupre, died in 1914, she married Emmanuel Hunter, a woodchopper at Melrose in 1924. Hunter picked cotton and pecans to help provide for her family and took in washing and ironing from Melrose when Emmanuel was diagnosed with cancer in the 1940s. A creative person, she sewed clothing, made dolls, wove baskets, and created functional, pieced cotton quilts for her family in the spare time she could find.

Hunter began making art using the discarded paint tubes of the artist, Alberta Kinsey, a guest of Cammie Henry, the owner of Melrose. Encouraged by the landscape artist and historian, M. François Mignon, another visitor to Melrose, Hunter began to paint people working on the plantation planting cotton; harvesting gourds, pecans, and sugar cane; making syrup; and washing clothes. She portrayed women doing kitchen chores, paring apples, and caring for children. She painted people in lighter moments dancing, playing cards, and socializing on Saturday night at the local honky-tonk. Religion was an important part of Hunter’s life and that of the community, so she painted people going to church and participating in baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Crucifixions and nativity scenes were also among the subjects she painted. She loved flowers, particularly zinnias, and often painted them displayed in large pots. To encourage her to experiment, her friend, the teacher and writer James Register, commissioned Hunter to create a number of abstract works. Register realized, however, that Hunter preferred to follow her own muse to make representational works.

Using oil paint and gouache, Hunter painted in a flat style, close to the picture plane, the imaginary window that separates the viewer from the image, using pure, bright colors. Linear layering, the placing of shapes above or on top of other shapes, was substituted for shading and naturalistic perspective. Hunter painted mostly on cardboard, occasionally on canvas, and on other materials as diverse as window shades, lampshades, spittoons, and bottles.

This prolific painter produced several thousand paintings and most were about twenty by thirty inches in size, but among her masterpieces were room-sized murals. Melrose’s Africa House Mural, painted by Hunter, documents the diverse activities of plantation life. Among the mural’s vignettes is a self-portrait of the artist, seated in a chair and painting in front of an easel. Hunter also created several hand-sewn, appliquéd, pictorial quilts with scenes of life at Melrose. The different signature initials she used during her life are an aid in dating many of her works.

Hunter was motivated to make art until the last few months of her life, when she became too ill to continue working. She said, “God gave me the power. Sometimes I try to quit paintin’. I can’t. I can’t.” She also acknowledged that “Paintin’ is a lot harder than picking cotton. Cotton’s right there for you to pull off the stalk, but to paint you got to sweat yo’ mind.” She thought of her art as “a gift from the Lord”. Hunter’s achievement went beyond providing pleasure for viewers. Her pictures of southern plantation life recorded over more than half a century are important documents—as important as letters or diaries—of a significant era in American history.

Hunter received a measure of artistic recognition during her lifetime. She was awarded an honorary doctorate from Northwestern University in 1986, and her work is represented in the permanent collections of many American museums and has been seen in exhibitions throughout the United States.

See also Folk Painting.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

LEE KOGAN

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM, known earlier in its history as the Museum of Early American Folk Arts (1961-66) and the Museum of American Folk Art (1966-2001), was established in New York City in 1961. One of very few urban museums devoted to folk art in the United States, the American Folk Art Museum has supported a broad-based program of exhibitions since it was founded. Even during its first decade, the institution staked out a national and even international purview for its programming. Since then it has presented more than 220 exhibitions, many of which also have been seen in other museums through an active traveling exhibition program.

At the time of its founding, the American Folk Art Museum was without a collection of its own—unlike the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center or the Shelburne Museum, which were established around distinguished collections. The first object entering the museum’s collection was the now famous Flag Gate (c. 1876), the gift in 1962 of Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr., one of the institution’s founding trustees and an influential pioneer in the field. Since then the museum’s holdings have grown to encompass over 4,000 objects in various media, including the highly important collection formed by Ralph Esmerian, president of the museum’s board from 1977 to 1999, and chairman since then. Among the major works of art in the museum’s collection is Ammi Phillips’s great portrait, Girl in Red Dress with Her Cat and Dog (c. 1830).

The museum publishes Folk Art (formerly The
Clarion), a quarterly magazine; issues exhibition catalogs; and offers graduate courses in folk art studies in association with New York University and as part of the Folk Art Institute, an accredited educational division of the museum. In 1998, the museum established The Contemporary Center, a division devoted to collection, exhibition, and study of the paintings, sculpture, and installations of twentieth- and twenty-first-century, self-taught artists. In 2001, The Contemporary Center announced the acquisition, by purchase and gift, of twenty-four works of art by the Chicago artist, Henry Darger, as well as an archive of Darger’s manuscript books, tracings, drawings, and source materials.

After many years in inadequate space, the museum inaugurated its own building in late 2001. Designed by architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, the 30,000 square foot structure at 45 West Fifty-third Street in New York City includes a library, auditorium, classrooms, and exhibition galleries, among other facilities.

See also Robert Bishop; Mary C. Black; Adele Earnest; Ralph Esmerian; Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr.; Jean Lipman.

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GERARD C. WERTKIN

TATTOO, the marking of the skin with indelible inks in patterns and designs, had largely been a pastime of superstitious, ship bound sailors and a scattering of port town practitioners around the globe, who had hand-poked their designs until this activity was transformed into an occupation employing specialists with artistic flair and mechanical aptitude. A maritime-related folk art in America, tattooing was revolutionized in 1892 when Samuel O’Reilly invented the electric tattoo machine in his Chatham Square, Bowery tattoo shop in New York City. He modified Thomas Edison’s Electric Engraving Pen, changing the tube tip assembly to hold ink. His machine worked on a rotary-cam assembly principal that pushed the tattoo needle into the skin. New York tattooists Charlie Wagner, who was active about 1900-52, and Bill Jones, active about 1930-59, designed other tattoo machines after O’Reilly’s invention, which were a little different because magnetic coils created the pushing action of the needles, and these became standards of the trade. Other American tattoo innovators, such as Chicago’s Owen Jensen also designed successful tattoo machines.

A codified lexicon of tattoo designs coalesced from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries from traditional life-affirming or magical marks tattooed by sailors on their skin to prevent mishaps associated with their dangerous profession. Because sailors lived on salt pork, the pig became a powerful symbol and sailors had small images of pigs tattooed on the left instep as a charm to prevent drowning. Sailors often had the image of a rooster tattooed on their right instep, a reference to the cock’s crow that the angel Gabriel was supposed to have heard as the word of God. If lost at sea, these sailors believed this symbol would help connect them with their maker. In short order, other images associated with maritime, masculine, and martial culture were developed, adopted, and codified. Images of American eagles holding cannons, sailing ships framed with naked mermaids, American flags with banners reading “Liberty” became part of the vocabulary of tattoo in the United States. Tattooist and “Sailor” Jerry Collins (1911-73) who lived in Honolulu, Hawaii, created some of the most elegant examples of classic American tattoo art using his natural flair for line and his drafting ability. His graceful, but provocative rendering of female pin-ups became legendary among the sailors of the Pacific Fleet.

Before O’Reilly’s innovation, the practice of tattooing by hand was typified by personalities such as Gus Wagner (1871-1941) who was born in Marietta, Ohio. He had become a merchant seaman in 1897, traveled the world for four years, and claimed to have learned the hand-tattooing technique from tribesmen in Java and Borneo. During his forty-year career as a tattooist, he promoted himself as “The Most Artistically Marked Up Man In America.” Men and women like Wagner and his heavily tattooed wife Maud, brought the practice of tattooing inland away from the port town settings, traveling around America as tattooists, tattooed attractions, and circus performers. They worked in vaudeville houses, penny arcades, county fairs, and wild west shows, exhibiting themselves to curious onlookers. Wagner’s sales pitch was, “I’ve got a history of my
life on my breast, a history of America on my back, a romance with the sea on each arm, the history of Japan on one leg, and the history of China on the other."

Modern tattooing, dating from the late nineteenth century, coalesced around the specialized culture of the electric tattoo machine and a standardized assortment of tattoo designs referred to as “flash” emerged. The term flash was borrowed by tattooists from the jargon of carnival and circus sign painters and described graphic, eye-catching signage. In the quickly modernizing culture of early twentieth-century America, the specialized knowledge needed to control and understand the electric tattoo machine elevated tattooing to a modern profession. Artistic values developed around this specialized, mechanical knowledge that focused on protecting the profession from “outsiders.” Tattoo techniques were not openly discussed; the locations of sources of color pigments, needles, tattoo machines, and designs were kept secret.

New York City tattooist, Lew Alberts, a wallpaper designer who was active as a tattooist about 1904, worked on Sands Street in Brooklyn, New York, at the main gate of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. He is credited with redesigning, standardizing, and improving the look of early tattoo art. Norfolk, Virginia, tattooist August “Cap” Coleman is also credited with changing the look of early tattoo designs into the first successful and workable designs that were hung on tattoo shop walls as prototypes from which customers were encouraged to choose a design for their tattoos. Coleman’s artistic ability established the measure of the standard American style of tattoo art. He transformed the idiosyncratic look of early machine-designed tattoos into more easily readable, open designs that stressed a heavy black outline and dynamic black shading techniques. The color palette of early tattooists was limited to carbon-, oxide-, and metallic-based black, and red and green pigments which were unreliable and faded quickly. When the colors of the painted flash display sheets or on the bodies of customers faded, the depth of Coleman’s black shading preserved the integrity of the tattoo’s design. Coleman’s shading technique was important because it gave early tattoo designs a firm foundation and his style of tattoo design became popular and successful because it sold well. Tattooists contemporary with Coleman praised his designs: "You can see what the design is from twenty-five feet away!" Sailors around the globe who traveled to the port of Norfolk prized their Coleman tattoos.

In the twenty-first century, tattooing has emerged from its historical legacy and entered the cultural mainstream as a youth-based, popular art form. Surprisingly, the technology of tattoo machines has changed little over the last one hundred years, but tattoo artwork has changed dramatically and become specialized into style categories. Pigment technology has improved so that tattooists now have a limitless assortment of shades and colors from which to choose.

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MICHAEL MCCABE

MEADERS, LANIER (1917-98) was one of the most gifted of Southern potters from the Mossy Creek community in Cleveland, Georgia. Established in 1893 by his grandfather, John Milton Meader and carried on by his father Cheever, Lanier Meader’s pottery produced both practical pottery for household use and artistic forms, particularly the grotesque “face jugs” so popular with contemporary collectors.

Everything in Meader’s shop smacked of the nineteenth century: the small wooden shop building usually occupied by a single worker, the old fashioned potter’s wheel, and the tube-like tunnel or “hogback” kiln in which the ware was fired. The three generations of Meaders took their stoneware clay from the same local river bank for over a century, and their traditional alkaline glaze (composed of clay, wood ash, feldspar, and whit- ing) was dripped over the vessels to produce a rich, brown finish with shades of black, yellow, and green.

Though he loved the old country forms of pots, jars, and churns that had a real connection to rural farm life and, particularly, jugs used for the illicit moonshine trade during the time of prohibition that kept many a country potter in business, Meaders recognized that survival of his craft depended upon production of ceramics for a broader audience. He became one of the foremost makers of the extremely popular face jugs that are
now a mainstay of the Southern pottery craft. Shaped as a face or complete head with eyes and teeth of the white firing kaolin clay, these humorous or foreboding vessels are individual works of art, and took several hours each to complete. Though many Southern folk potters created face jugs, those which bear the imprint of Lanier Meaders are among the most highly prized, both for their artistic merit and for the continuing tradition that they represent.

See also Face Jugs; Stoneware.

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WILLIAM C. KETCHUM

HEMPHILL, HERBERT W., JR. (1929-98) altered the course of the folk art field when he began championing the work of twentieth-century folk artists in 1968. Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Hemphill acquired an early appreciation of America's popular culture in this resort town where his father was a prominent businessman. His love of Southern culture owed much to his mother's prestigious ancestry in Georgia, while her love of shopping and collecting was an equally important formative influence as Hemphill began collecting Americana even as a child.

After briefly studying theater, poetry, and painting in Paris and at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, Hemphill moved to New York City in 1949 in hopes of developing a career as an artist. His forte, however, quickly proved to be collecting—first African sculpture, then modern European and American art, and, ultimately, folk art. Inspired by pioneering collectors such as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Jean Lipman, Hemphill focused on early American weathervanes, portraits, watercolors, and furniture during the early 1950s. In 1956, he purchased a pair of non-traditional cigar-store Indians from Sotheby's auction of Rudolph Haffenreffer's collection of American trade signs. This acquisition was the first public indication of the unusual and underappreciated works that he became known for championing—so much so that his detractors and admirers alike often identified works as "Hemphill things."

Hemphill was one of six private collectors and dealers who founded the Museum of Early American Folk Art (now the American Museum of Folk Art) in New York in 1961. A year later he co-organized the museum's inaugural exhibition at the Time and Life Exhibit Center under the auspices of Life magazine, and also donated the first object to enter the museum's collection—Flag Gate by an unidentified artist, c. 1876.

In 1964 Hemphill became the museum's first full time curator. Over the next decade he developed an exhibition program of innovative topics and memorable installations, among which Twentieth-Century Folk Art (1970), Macramé (1971), Tattoo (1971), and Occult (1973) are widely considered the epitome of his curatorial career.

Hemphill's perception of folk art's possibilities changed dramatically in 1968, when artists and folk art collectors Michael and Julie Hall introduced him to the Kentucky wood carver Edgar Tolson. Spurred by what he frequently described as an epiphany, Hemphill began canvassing the country in search of living folk artists. Although he remained interested in nineteenth-century folk art, his collection became decidedly contemporary, national, and ethnically.

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