

Ancestry and Innovation: African American Art from the American Folk Art Museum
Artist Biographies

Lucinda Toomer (1888/1890–1983)

Macon, Georgia

Lucinda Toomer grew up on her family's farm in Georgia. In her elder years she remembered childhood on the farm as a better time, when "Everything people had, they made." She also recalled being awakened each night, when her mother would come into her room to teach her to sew and quilt. She was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship in 1983, shortly before her death.

Kevin Sampson (b. 1954)

Newark, New Jersey

Artmaking became an act of healing for **Kevin Sampson** when he sought relief in his life after the tragic deaths of his wife, a newborn son, and a favorite cousin. Now a retired police officer living in Newark, New Jersey, Sampson collects ephemera and discarded objects from the streets and creates sculptural portraits, or tributes to people.

Leola Pettway (b. 1929)

Boykin, Alabama

Leola Pettway was born into a family of quiltmakers from the African American community of Gee's Bend, an isolated U-shaped peninsula encircled by the Alabama River. Gee's Bend has witnessed four generations of quiltmakers. Their traditions first came to widespread attention during the 1960s, when the Martin Luther King Freedom Quilting Bee was established; Leola Pettway belonged to this quiltmaking collective for many years.

Sam Doyle (1906–1985)

St. Helena Island, South Carolina

Sam Doyle was more than anything else a portrait painter. Whether he was working on roofing tin, plywood, or discarded signage, with house paint and an occasional collaged element, Doyle relished painting visages of local characters, national figures, sports heroes, and religious leaders. While Doyle drew as a boy in school and later as a young man, it was in the 1960s when he retired that he was finally able to devote himself full-time to artmaking.

Lureca Outland (b. 1904)

Boligee, Alabama

As a teenager, **Lureca Outland** learned to quilt by finishing the tops pieced by her mother. She did not make what she terms "fancy" quilts, however, until joining a senior citizens' quilting group.

Nellie Mae Rowe (1900–1982)

Vinings, Georgia

Although she had an early interest in drawing and fashioning cloth dolls, it was not until the death of her second husband, in 1948, that **Nellie Mae Rowe** turned her full attention to artmaking. She worked with readily available materials, such as colored pencil, pencil, felt-tip pen, on paper for her drawings, and Styrofoam trays, wallpaper sample books, wood, and chewing gum for her sculptures.

Pecolia Warner (1901–1983)

Yazoo City, Mississippi

Pecolia Warner learned to make quilts under her mother's watchful eye. Warner was born in the Mississippi Delta, but she lived in New Orleans and Chicago before returning to the South in 1968. Wherever she moved, she made quilts: "Making quilts, that's my calling ... just giving them for the 'remember me.'"

Idabell Bester (?–c. 1992)

Alabama

J.B. Murry (1908–1988)

Sandersville, Georgia

J.B. Murry was a preacher. Murry came to artmaking late in life. First, he executed his images on found objects and cash register tape. Later, he was given fine art paper and pigments, and even though the material was new to him, the motivation was the same. Murry made art strictly for spiritual and protective purposes; his abstract script formed thoughts that were like prayers, providing guidance and offering support.

Dennis Jones (1898–1988)

Vienna, Alabama

Little is known about **Dennis Jones**, who has left a legacy of more than a dozen quilts that he started making after the death of his wife. He was inspired by patterns he remembered from his mother's quilts. Jones's quilts are strongly reminiscent of African textiles pieced from narrow-loom woven strips. In West Africa this type of weaving was primarily the work of men.

Clementine Hunter (1886/1887–1988)

Melrose Plantation, Natchitoches, Louisiana

"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 identify the artist's canvases. Highly prolific and returning to preferred subject matter more than once, Clementine Hunter produced several thousand works over a forty-year career

David Butler (1898–1997)

Patterson, Louisiana

For more than thirty years, **David Butler** delighted neighbors and visitors when he rode his bicycle—decorated with tin cut-out sculptures and painted pinwheels—around his

neighborhood in Patterson, Louisiana. Butler also enjoyed giving tours of his home environment, which was similarly covered with painted metal cut-outs constructed into animals, people, icons, and emblems from the artist's imagination and life experience.

Pearlie Posey (1894–1984)

Yazoo City, Mississippi

Pearlie Posey's mother died when she was five. She left a trove of quilt tops to be pieced after her death and given to her young daughter as a tangible expression of her love. Posey learned to make quilts from her grandmother.

Mozell Benson (b. 1934)

Waverly, Alabama

Mozell Benson began quilting to fulfill her family's need for bedcovers. Over time, making quilts became a constant in her life, a creative act she could always return to: "If I got so I couldn't use part of my body as long as I had eyes to see and hands, I could still find something to do." In 2001 Benson was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship.

Willie LeRoy Elliot (b. 1943)

Detroit, Michigan

Bessie Harvey (1929–1994)

Alcoa, Tennessee

Bessie Harvey began her artistic endeavors in the 1970s, when she was middle-aged, raising eleven kids from two marriages, and struggling with single parenthood and a difficult home economy. It was also around the time that her cherished mother died. Sculpting proved very therapeutic. Because she shared her art with patients in the nursing home where she worked, her sculptures started to receive attention, eventually reaching an audience in the national artworld.

Thornton Dial, Sr. (b. 1928)

Bessemer, Alabama

Thornton Dial, Sr. is always "making things" and "making ideas." For more than two decades he has created a collection of paintings, assemblages, sculptures, and works on paper greatly admired by the artworld.

Thornton Dial, Jr. (b. 1953)

Bessemer, Alabama

Mary Maxtion (b. 1914)

Boligee, Alabama

Mary Maxtion's love of making quilts was learned from her mother, who died when she was a young girl. Her earliest quilts were constructed from small strips of fabric called strings. This was sometimes a strategy of thrift and recycling, as the strings represented the smallest reclaimable piece of fabric.

Nora McKeon Ezell (b. 1917)
Eutaw, Greene County, Alabama