

## RUTH MAE MCCRANE

Ruth Mae McCrane was born in Corpus Christi, Texas in 1929. She was educated at the Little Red School House in Taylor, Blackshear Elementary, and Jack Yates High School in Houston. She received a B.A. in Spanish and Art Education (1952) and an M.A. in Art Education and Secondary Education (1955), both from T.S.U.

During the 33 years McCrane taught literature, language and art, she received wide recognition for her educational skills. Her thoroughly researched and elegant iconographically stylized religious murals are permanently installed in seven Baptist churches in the Houston area.

Upon her retirement in 1985, and upon the prompting of some friends, McCrane began to paint, on canvas board and plywood, scenes from her childhood in East Texas: school rooms, family scenes, neighborhoods and neighborhood characters, juke joints, and greasy spoons.

Perhaps because she was unburdened by all her academic responsibilities, or perhaps because she had begun to depict the richly textured humanity of her childhood instead of prophets and angels, a naive style emerged which has a fresh unpremeditated compositional quality combined with a rich clash and vibration of passionate, full strength blues, yellows, greens, and reds.

She has added to her repertoire of childhood scenes, glimpses of the activities inside Houston's Black Spiritualist churches, and it is these particular paintings which affirm the shared element in all her new work: music and dance. In one group of paintings, the pleasures of the senses are in total abandon; in the other, the sensuous emotions are sublimated into mystic ecstasy, and all is captured in a festal radiance of color.

Her instinctive disregard for scale and depth provides a two dimensional ascending perspective which makes each figure and each group, in turn, the center of attention until the eye merges them into a field that undulates with rhythm. Even in scenes of quietude—children reading, a mother and daughter quilting, a waitress waiting for an order—McCrane's wiry line simultaneously suggests both mass and movement.

Her paintings are often deepened and enhanced by the tension and interaction she creates between pictorial innocence and visual-verbal syntax. The signs and notes tacked on walls and doors, attached to windows, perched on tables, or on the spines of books, exert a good-humored, appollonian countervailing pull against total absorption in dionysian dance and music—whether in church or the juke joint.

The unique style McCrane has evolved is at once naive and sophisticated, lyrical and narrative, spirit and flesh; a fusion of youthful emotion with the reflectiveness of a mature mind.

*A.P. Antippos*

## BERNICE SIMS

Bernice Sims, the eldest of ten children, was born in 1926 in the tiny rural south Alabama community of Hickory Hill. She was mostly raised by her grandmother in impoverished circumstances.

Sims recalls she was "first exposed to art painting at the age of eight, by Mrs. Hattie Warren, a white lady who owned a general store next door to where I lived with my grandmother. But I left school after the tenth grade and got married at the age of sixteen and had six children. I never had a chance to paint again."

After her children were grown, she went back to school and passed the GED at the age of 52. She then enrolled in a Monday afternoon ceramics class at Jefferson Davis Junior College in Brewton. Under the sympathetic tutelage of her instructor and class excursions to museums in Mobile, Montgomery, and Birmingham, "all of my concealed talent bust out," and Sims began painting with oils on canvas.

Sims' talent has made her the embodiment of the "memory painter," directly in the tradition of Clementine Hunter and Grandma Moses. Like her predecessors, Sims is occupied with evoking the spirit of early 20th century country scenes—how life went on and how things were done in her childhood. Her humble subjects, circumscribed by her experience, include turpentine collecting, farming, school life, church activities, cotton picking, and making cane sugar.

In these simple and compelling scenes, however, there is no information for the historian or the sociologist. The unique art of the "memory painter" is neither imaginative nor mimetic: it is, at once, a representation *from* memory and a representation *of* memory. The memory of a mature mind is reflective and frail: it is a repository of sensations, not facts. The memory is a selective and synthesizing power: the dross of detail is lost and only essential, human emotions remain.

Sims' obscure and vaguely delineated figures are joyous, symbolic forms—toiling, singing, playing—in an ever fertile, symbolic landscape. Form and content are perfectly unified in her paintings; her untrained "folk" style reincarnates the harmonious and innocent vision of a childhood filled with passion and excitement: a radiant vision that takes an unalloyed pleasure in everyday activities and makes luminous the common things of life.

The utter pureness of Sims' depictions of these intense, mysteriously remembered moments imbue her paintings with universal human feeling and provide affirmation of the commonality of human experience. For a moment, if we allow ourselves to become part of the unassuming, meditative flow of Sims' visionary paintings, we can stand alongside her, outside the flux of time, and gaze, if plaintively, upon the effortless joys of our own childhoods.

*A.P. Antippos*