



Theora Hamblett

Sorghum-Making Day
Oil on canvas

About the Artist

Theora Hamblett was born in Paris, Mississippi in 1893. She taught school from 1915 to 1936 before moving to Oxford in 1939. There, Hamblett ran a boardinghouse for university students and also worked as a seamstress. It was not until 1950 that she began painting. Basically a self-taught artist, she always had an interest in art and had taken a few art classes at the University of Mississippi. She developed her own pointillist technique, or using dots of vibrant color to create her compositions. Originally, Hamblett painted her childhood memories, then the Southern countryside, and later on, she painted religious and visionary works. Upon her death in 1977, she left her artwork to the University of Mississippi museums.

About the Artwork and Sorghum-Making

In this scene, Theora Hamblett shows the process of making molasses. Molasses syrup is made from sorghum, a type of cane originally from Africa. In the fall at harvest time, old fashioned sorghum-making festivals still exist throughout the South. To make sorghum, the stalks are squeezed through a mill run by a long arm pulled by mule. The artist shows how the mules walk in a circle around the mill, while the juice flows into a fire-heated vat a distance away from the mill. Large wooden paddles are used to stir the molasses. As many Southern self-taught artists including Clementine Hunter, Theora Hamblett depicts a scene of every-day life in the countryside, a special fall occasion – sorghum-making day.

Sorghum Information and Recipes available at

<http://southernfood.about.com/library/weekly/aa101798.htm>

Sample Classroom Activity

Yesterday/Today: Folk Traditions that Carry On
Grades 9-12 (Social Studies, Art Criticism)

Goal: To provide an opportunity for students to explore the history of early farming techniques and industry through primary documents (oral histories) and recording of every day events through art.

Compare Theora Hamblett's *Making Sorghum* with the excerpt. How does the artist depict the events described in the excerpt?

Have students interview a family member or friend who worked on a farm or some type of industry in the 1940s. How has the farming technique or industry changed? What technology or invention created the change?

Excerpt from "Old Time Sorghum Making"
Kentucky Explorer, November 2000.

"Everyone hoped the wind would blow the smoke from the fire pit away from the mill, for they didn't need smoke in their eyes all day long. The person feeding the stalks pushed the ends into the revolving metal canisters. The one taking the crushed stalks from the mill stood on the opposite side. When the crushed stalks fell from the mill, he quickly pulled them away with a pitchfork, throwing them outside the circle created by the walking mule. This long arm, a section of locust attached to the top of the mill, was also attached to the harness of the mule. The mule walked in a circle, pulling the pole with him. This turned the mill, which crushed the juice from the cane. The cane juice flowed down into juice buckets below the mill. All day that mule walked at the same pace, around and around, going no place, but getting the juice to flow." William W. Milburn