Primitive painter takes a look back

By ANNE PRICE
Newsfeatures writer

Jessie Coates first showed her primitive paintings as a student at Louisiana Art Institute, where she studied commercial art until her instructor noticed her creative work.

Since then, she has continued her paintings, which chronicle a special period in rural Louisiana history. A collection of her work is now on exhibition at the LSU Credit Union Building on Nicholson Drive.

Coates was born in 1950 in Port Hudson, where she was reared by her grandparents on a farm in that area. Her paintings document her recollections of rural life in this area during the 1950s.

This is not the era generally associated with primitive, or naive painting, but Coates uses this natural technique to depict places and people in her own background, creating works with integrity and a genuine naive sensitivity.

There is perhaps more sophistication in Coates' painting style than, for instance, that of Clementine Hunter, but this reflects the period of her life and the changing pace of life. She uses the bright, primary colors, the stylized figures and forms of primitivism, although there is more perspective in her landscapes and a touch more technical skill in her execution.

This enhances rather than detracts from the value of her work, however. The paintings are a true historical reflection of a special time and place. She records recent history with the same no-nonsense, basic feeling that other artists have brought to scenes of long-ago times.

She has accompanied each of her paintings with a short description of the scene and its meaning for her. "Sitting on the Porch at Night" depicts her grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Louis Steward, seated on the porch of their Port Hudson farmhouse beneath a deep blue sky dotted with a half moon and lots of five-pointed stars, a scene capturing a way of life rapidly disappearing with the advent of TV and air conditioning.

A big red truck moves down the road toward the house in "The Iceman," and a tiny painting shows a woman "Going to the Mailbox," an important event in rural Louisiana.

Children play in bright blue flood water after a heavy rain in "Wade in the Water," and a weekend ritual is captured in "Dressing the Chickens," with a man holding a hatchet, ready to kill the chicken for Sunday dinner while the wife waits on the porch to complete the process. Coates' narrative explains that this was the weekly preparation for a big chicken dinner, to be served after church on Sunday.

"Vince's Store" shows the red building still in operation in Port Hudson, and a small still life assembles wash tubs, soap, and a bucket used for wash day. A quartet of paintings, "The Four Seasons," pictures a red house in the changing light and color of the seasons, revealing Coates as a painter of considerable skill. She manages more subtle lighting effects than are usually associated with naive painting, yet maintains the open, disarming feeling of true primitivism.

Coates obviously has deep dedication to her roots, and to preserving memories of a unique way of life in Louisiana. She has assimilated some improved techniques but resisted the temptation to sentimentalize her subject matter or give it contemporary gloss.

The value of her work is its sincerity and integrity. There are contemporary artists who assume a primitive style for commercial effect. Coates paints from her own memory, her own feelings and her own heart.

The exhibition will continue through Nov. 18.