

Hale Aspacio Woodruff was born in Cairo, Illinois, on August 26, 1900, the only child of Augusta Bell Woodruff and George Woodruff, who died soon after his birth. Hale and his mother moved to Nashville, Tennessee in the early 1900s. To occupy her son while she was at work, his mother had him copy artwork from the family Bible. He soon made drawings from newspapers and history textbooks. "I learned wherever I could," said Woodruff, who later was the cartoonist for his high school paper.

After graduating, he obtained a hotel job in Indianapolis, and began his formal art training at the only art school in Indianapolis, the Herron Art Institute, which had only some forty students. In exchange for his services as a desk clerk, the "colored" YMCA gave him a room. Through the lecture series at the "Y," he met several prominent African-American leaders (such as Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Woodruff became friends with Herman Lieber, who owned a local art supply store. In 1923, Lieber gave Woodruff the book, *Afrikanische Plastik* [African Sculpture], by Carl Einstein. Woodruff said,

You can't imagine the effect that book had on me....I had never heard of the significance of the impact of African art. Yet here it was....published with beautiful photographs and treated with great seriousness and respect! Plainly sculptures of black people, my people, they were considered very beautiful by these German art experts! The whole idea that this could be so was like an explosion. It was a real turning point for me. I was just astonished at this enormous discovery.

Woodruff was inspired to investigate modernism through the lens of traditional African art. He drew inspiration from many sources, ranging from African art to Renaissance frescoes. Of an exhibition he attended, Woodruff said, "I went back again and again and, between the Cézannes and the African work, I was off and winging."

In 1931, after four years of travel in Europe, Woodruff became a professor at Atlanta University. He was the first African-American with formal training to earn an art professorship in a southern Black university. Woodruff displayed works of major Black artists (such as Allan Freelon and Palmer Hayden), in the library at Atlanta University annually, and he made student exhibitions a feature of commencement week.

Woodruff strove to make art more accessible to his students and to the African-American community. A student of his remembered, "Woodruff took us to the High Museum [of Art]. He had to get special permission because Blacks didn't go in there at all unless they worked there....In other words, Mr. Woodruff was very much like Fred Douglas. . . We were all very proud of him."

After spending four years abroad, Woodruff returned to the United States in 1931, in the throes of the Great Depression. He took an instructorship at Atlanta University, where he taught art in two basement rooms at Spelman College (part of the newly formed Black university). Woodruff's ideas about art changed quickly after he observed the plight of the African-Americans who struggled to exist in the South's crippled, one-crop economy and

who had great difficulty obtaining relief allocations or jobs. This time of extreme hardship made Woodruff question the value of much that he learned during his stay in Europe. He concluded that cubism and modern art had little meaning for most Americans, and he began to encourage students to paint the social environment.

Woodruff created the "Painter's Guild" for his advanced students, with whom he explored rural Georgia. He explained, in the September 21, 1942 issue of *Time*, "We are interested in expressing the South as a field, as a territory; its peculiar rundown landscapes, its social and economic problems, and Negro people."¹ Although *Time* acknowledged Atlanta University's outstanding artistic reputation, the magazine dubbed the work the "outhouse school of art," given the ramshackle housing and privies that appeared in images such as Woodruff's. The appellation greatly discouraged his students and disheartened Woodruff.

Regardless, Woodruff continued to express his concern with poverty, particularly the shameful housing conditions typified by the ramshackle houses in this watercolor. During the early 1930s, the urban population increased dramatically. The white community's fear of job competition, decreased property values, and integrated schools exacerbated the limitations of segregation. Housing quickly became a problem for African-Americans, particularly in urban areas.

Woodruff's abstract and semi-abstract oils show strong affinities with the works of modern European masters. His free, broad brushstrokes convey colorful impressions of rhythmic movements in nature—the rushing sea or the rippling plain—presented in bright, clear, resonant colors: whites, deep blues, rusty browns, yellows, reds, and pinks. He is also an important mural painter, where his talent for design gives cohesion and interest to the historical subjects he chooses. He is especially noted for his murals in the Savery Library at Talladega College, Alabama. The murals tell two stories. The first recounts an uprising of slaves on the slave ship *Amistad*, the second recounts the history of Talladega College from its founding in 1867 in an abandoned Civil War prison to its present status as one of the important southern colleges. The second mural was reproduced and included in a booklet sent to India by the Office of War Information as a counterattack to Japanese propaganda. As a teacher, Woodruff set an inspiring example. In 1967, the New York University alumni Association named him "Teacher of the Year."



This painting is entitled “Poor Man’s Cotton,” and indeed, the cotton being worked in this painting is meager and not likely to provide bountifully for those doing the work, but there is nothing poor or meager about the depiction. The vivid colors, dramatic angles, and energetic bodily movements in the painting give it an astonishing richness that tells us something of the richness of the interior lives of the people depicted.

Men and women work at any different kinds of jobs. Some people work at taking care of a home and family. Some people have jobs that they go to everyday. Some work is done outdoors, some work is done inside. Different kinds of work sometimes call for different

kinds of clothing. The kinds of work people do have changed over the years because of machines. Long ago, before machines were invented, all work had to be done by hand. Artists have often painted people at work.

Thinking about the Art

When colors are intense or vivid, they are called saturated.

When they are washed out and so not intense they are called desaturated.

Are the colors in this painting saturated or desaturated?

What is the emotional effect of the use of such colors?

Consider the use of line in this painting.

How do the straight lines of the hoes differ from the lines used in the bodies of the figures?

How do the lines of the hoes help to create the illusion of motion in the figures? How are the figures arranged in relation to one another?

Again, how does this arrangement help to create the illusion of motion?

The influences of Impressionism that Woodruff picked up during his continental tenure emerge in "Picking Cotton" (1936), an oddly upbeat commissioned portrait of that difficult labor, done for a Chicago cotton company. The image depicts grinning workers bent over a sea of cotton represented in fat, tactile brushstrokes. Though the daylight shifts, the workers maintain the same poses, as if to show the ceaseless, repetitive nature of the work.

In his painting, Poor Man's Cotton, Woodruff depicts a scene of workers in the cotton field. His use of free, broad brush strokes helps show us the movement of the workers and how hard they are working. His use of bright reds, yellows and blues in combination with the white cotton falling against the dark background, help to make this a strong, dynamic painting. You can almost feel what it would have been like to work as a cotton picker as you gaze at this picture.

Do you see the red and blue and yellow colors? These are the primary colors. Our eyes move from one spot of each color to another. This lively painting is full of action! We see women and one man very busily working at chopping cotton. Have you ever hoed weeds in a garden? While machines do the work today, people used to chop weeds and pick the cotton out of the balls. It was hard work, and the weather was hot. See the white cotton bolls? Have you ever seen a field of cotton? Most of the cotton in America is grown in the southern states, but we have some cotton fields in California. The curves of the bodies and the slashing diagonals of the long, slim hoes make our eyes move rapidly around this lively, moving composition. What path do your eyes take as they move from figure to figure? There are a lot of strong dark and light contrasts in this colorful painting. Do you see a lot of round shapes? Notice the hats and the stump. (Have students assume postures of figures in the painting.)