



Spirit of the Delta: The Art of Carolyn Norris

Dorothy Sample Shawhan, Patti Carr Black

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Raised in West Virginia, self-taught artist Carolyn Norris (b. 1948) moved as a young woman of twenty-one to Cleveland, Mississippi, a quintessential Delta railroad town on the famous blues Highway 61. To create one of her first paintings, she tore the wooden back off a dresser to use as a canvas. She painted with available house paint and completed the painting with face makeup. Thus began the realization of a passionate need to paint.

Eventually, Norris came to serve as the visual griot of Cleveland. She has used a variety of media, painting on canvas, wood, paper, cardboard, glass, plates, tiles, sheets, floor covering, and mirrors. She also uses her garage door as a giant mural chronicling community events. In her extraordinary images, Norris shows daily black life in the modern Delta.

Spirit of the Delta contains 115 color images pulled from Norris's twenty-five years as a painter. Her existing artwork has been photographed by noted local photographer Kim Rushing and copies of the works that no longer exist have been found whenever possible. The book features a biographical essay on Carolyn Norris by Dorothy Sample Shawhan and an essay on her artwork by critic Patti Carr Black, who places Norris within self-taught traditions. In an interview with folklorist Tom Rankin, which took place in 1991, Norris explains the centrality of art in her life.

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