

# *The Highwaymen and the Art of Appreciation*

BY GARY MONROE



*Untitled painting by Alfred Hair, from Highwaymen Newton and Hair: The American Dream in the Sunshine State*

I wrote *The Highwaymen: African-American Landscape Painters* to establish the history of these most unlikely artists with an underlying focus on understanding their artwork. The Highwaymen entered the scene in 1960 and for nearly 25 years quietly showered the state with their glowing interpretations of Florida as Paradise.

They are now recognized as being part of Florida's cultural heritage. This fact was strongly verified by their induction into the State Department's Florida Artists Hall of Fame in 2004 after I had the honor of nominating them. The Highwaymen now share this distinction with Jimmy Buffet, Robert Rauschenberg, Tennessee Williams, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and other notables.

Today there is not a lot to add to the Highwaymen's story. The media and word of mouth did a fine job at weaving their story into our cultural fabric. The artists rose above their apparent destinies as field workers to leave the visual legacy of modern Florida. It is

the quintessential Cinderella story. But with all due respect to the individual painters, I believe that this group is so much more than the sum of their biographies. We all are awed by a reflection on how young blacks were able to financially advance themselves during a time in our history when this was almost impossible. They broke down barriers that society had imposed upon them and their ancestors for generations. However, now is the time to begin to champion their art critically. Ultimately, this will take time and patience.

I have looked long and hard at the Highwaymen's paintings to understand their aesthetic and allure. I'm convinced that it is not only the social history of the times and the wonderful stories about the origins of their art that attracts people to the paintings and keeps a loyal following coming back for more. Rather, it is their art. I believe that the Highwaymen tapped into something primal that resonates with viewers by *the way they painted*.

Their pure, spirited and unadulterated painterly style placed suggestiveness over explication. Images as transitory and uncertain as life itself were the result. Veracity gave these paintings a place in people's homes and in the art world. That recognition is just now beginning. It takes an open mind and a generous heart to understand this movement.

When I hear detractors disparaging Highwaymen art, as they are apt to do with most anything new or different, two thoughts come to mind. Such skeptics in all likelihood have never witnessed a Florida sunset where those unearthly colors occur for a very few seconds. They know a Florida of concrete, with a CVS and Walgreens on nearly every busy intersection. Also it is likely that these naysayers have never lived with or spent much time under the glow and spell of one of these paintings. Their own negativity cripples any possible appreciation.

Using regionalism as a pejorative when evaluating landscapes is off base. These artworks, by their very

nature, are regional. However, calling the Highwaymen paintings “motel art” may not be as mean-spirited as it seems. After all, these motor hotels – along with swaying palm trees, oranges, alligators, pelicans and beach balls – were the very symbols of Florida for many years. The Highwaymen entered the cultural scene at that same time. Their art has endured even though most of the old single-story motels have long since disappeared, as have many of the old markers and tourist attractions.

It was a particular time and place, designed by and for people of another era. Tourists then drove right up to their temporary front doors of the motels, shook the sand out of their sandals and entered a room whose air conditioner buzzed chilled air inside. Jalousie windows did a fair job at keeping out the heat and humidity along with the sounds of the highway. At night, the neon from the, say, big diving-woman sign by the little courtyard pool buzzed, casting its flickering lightshow inside the darkened room as well as for all the travelers driving by to see. Many of us remember the sound of surf, ubiquitous Coppertone ads and how a grain of sand kept us awake all night long...

That was Florida then and that was when the Highwaymen began their journey. Art is time-coded, an often-prophetic response in retrospect to the time and place in which it was made. The Highwaymen codified our state without reserve back then. That the Highwaymen paintings were unabashedly Florida gave them their very strength. As America basked in the Eisenhower years, the time was ripe for new and different interpretations of our land. These paintings of our tropical light and color were, and are today, supreme metaphors that represented the Sunshine State. Florida as the last frontier represented the American dream at that time. The Highwaymen’s suggestive imagery shakes the foundation of conventional artist representation.

Highwaymen art flies in the face of

professional and academic aesthetics. These artists painted with abandon, with nothing to lose. Unencumbered by history and tradition, they freely wielded their palette knives and paintbrushes any way they wanted. They painted fast because time meant money. Unbeknownst to them, their “fast painting” corrupted the cherished concerns of the old school to yield instead renegade imagery that was perfectly suited to the people who were flocking to Florida during the post WWII boom. Their paintings were modern because the artists originated a fresh approach to landscape art.

Appreciating art requires not only a visceral response but also a learned understanding to enhance one’s sophistication. To this end, Museum of Art | Fort Lauderdale Director Irvin Lippman asked what so powerfully engages people with Highwaymen art. To view the art without prejudice and to see how it fares without emphasizing the great story behind the paintings’ production, the museum is now exhibiting *Highwaymen Newton and Hair: The American Dream in the Sunshine State* until December. The exhibition examines Highwaymen paintings through the looking glass of connoisseurship, with interpretation by chief curator Annegreth Nill. (Learn more at

[www.moafll.org/06/exhibitions/highwaymen/index.htm](http://www.moafll.org/06/exhibitions/highwaymen/index.htm).)

This exhibition takes the Highwaymen beyond the comfort of their east central Florida home turf. We will see how their paintings fare as they hang on the walls of a fine South Florida art museum: Walls that are like a tabular rasa, waiting for new meanings to be ascribed by viewers and critics without sentiment and prejudice. I hope that the Museum of Art exhibition is the beginning of the end of the incubation phase. These past 10 years have witnessed a cultural discovery and social phenomenon. Now, by adding layers of connoisseurship, the Highwaymen will find their rightful place in regional and national art circles, with critical discussions helping to locate, order and measure their contribution. ★

Gary Monroe, the Museum of Art | Fort Lauderdale’s guest curator for this exhibition, is the author of *The Highwaymen: Florida’s African-American Landscape Painters*. University Press of Florida will release his *Harold Newton: The Original Highwayman* early next year. More information about the *Highwaymen* can be found at [www.garymonroe.net](http://www.garymonroe.net) (click on Folk Art).



*Untitled painting by Harold Newton, from Highwaymen Newton and Hair: The American Dream in the Sunshine State (through November 30)*