

The Legacy of the Highwaymen



In the 1950s, a group of African American artists based around Ft. Pierce, Florida, began selling (still wet!) their landscapes of palm hammocks, colorful sunsets, and Evergladian fauna to tourists traveling south on Route 1. Mass-produced in the artists' backyards, these subtropic landscapes found their way into Florida's motels, hotels, banks, and office buildings as well as private homes all over the U.S. Until 1994, the paintings and the painters were nearly forgotten, having been overshadowed by new construction of highways and residences, a booming population statewide, and modern technology. In 1994, an art aficionado coined the name "Highwaymen" and pasted it onto this group of 26 African American artists and the paintings they created in rapid fashion using available building materials and borrowed paint.

Since 1994, a resurgence of interest in the Highwaymen and their indigenous art has brought new fame to the surviving members of the group, some of whom are painting again after a lapse of 20, 30 or more years. The older paintings—some 200,000 is a conservative estimate—are commanding high prices. New paintings are being viewed and purchased by young art lovers who see the landscapes as "old Florida," depictions of a sparsely-settled, romantic, exotic land.

Along with this modern interest in the Highwaymen comes another facet of the subject: Several Highwaymen have sons and daughters who paint. Do they paint like their parents? Are they riding on the coattails of their parents or have they developed their own original style? Is the legacy of the Highwaymen continued in their progeny?

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