

The Resilient Florida Highwaymen Painters

by Randy Jaye

In the mid-1950s, a group of 26 Black (25 men and 1 woman) landscape painters, mostly from the Fort Pierce area, made a living selling their paintings door-to-door and from the trunks of their cars along the Atlantic coast roads (mainly A1A and US1) in Florida. The Jim Crow Era culture restricted their paintings from being exhibited or sold in art galleries in Florida and elsewhere in the Deep South, so they used this technique as an alternative method of advertising and selling their works of art.

They began an art movement known as the Florida Highwaymen, and it has been called “The Last Great American Art Movement of the 20th century.” These artists used construction materials rather than the more expensive and traditional art supplies for their paintings, and sold them at relatively low prices. From the 1950s through the 1980s, it is estimated that the Florida Highwaymen painted considerably more than 100,000 works of art (some estimates are more than 200,000).

In 2004, the original Florida Highwaymen were inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. In 2016, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American Art opened in Washington, D.C. and 18 Florida Highwaymen paintings were included in the museum’s original collection.

The Museum of Florida History, located in the R. A. Gray Building in Tallahassee, has Florida Highwaymen paintings in its collections by 23 of the original 26 artists.

Today, original Florida Highwaymen paintings, especially the early ones, command good prices and are testaments to the historic importance of this art movement that originated in Florida.

There are only a few original Florida Highwaymen still living, the most active is Al Black (b. 1947), who lives in Ft. Pierce. Al Black was originally the salesman for the Florida Highwaymen, however, he soon decided to learn to paint in order to cover scratches and smudges that occurred on paintings due to frequent moving, handling and traveling in car trunks while still wet.

There are also several 2nd generation painters who create Florida Highwaymen-style landscapes, including Ellis Buckner Jr., Kelvin and Reginald Hair, Stephanie Denmark (the daughter of Al Black), and Roy McLendon Jr.

Additionally, there are several painters, not connected to the original Florida Highwaymen, that currently paint in the style. One of these painters is West Evans from St. Petersburg. Evans took lessons from Al Black and is now creating his own versions of Florida Highwaymen-style landscape paintings. His landscapes are painted in the vintage style of the Florida Highwaymen and placed in vintage picture frames. Evans also sells his paintings across the state from the trunk of his car as Al Black did decades ago.

In March 2020, the Florida legislature passed a bill that created specialty license plates to honor the work of the Florida Highwaymen.

The original Florida Highwaymen painters defied Jim Crow Era restrictions to produce a unique art form. The style is as resilient as the original painters as it continues to attract collectors and a variety of people who admire and appreciate the bold Florida landscape designs.



Florida Highwaymen landscape painting with Poinciana tree by Chico Wheeler (1946-2019), original Florida Highwaymen painter. (Public Domain).



Florida Highwaymen landscape painting with lone fisherman and boat by Al Black (Clewiston Museum). Photograph by Randy Jaye.



Florida Highwaymen-style painting by West Evans. (Randy Jaye collection).



Florida specialty license plate that honors the work of the Florida Highwaymen. (Public Domain).