



# THE FLORIDA HIGHWAYMEN

A Michael K Butler's Collection



## **Background**

Artistic creativity in the arts can emerge in the most unlikely places. What some consider the last great American Art Movement of the 20th century emerged from southeast Florida at the hands of itinerant, self-taught African American artists.

The southern racial hierarchy based on white supremacy and maintained by coercion and violence made the South increasingly hostile for Blacks. In the 1950s, the modern Civil Rights era was in its infancy, but the battle lines were drawn. This South was contested terrain. The 1954 Brown Vs. the Board Supreme Court decision outlawed segregation in schools. The Montgomery Bus Boycott ruling outlawed segregation in public transportation. Lunch counter sit-ins in Tennessee and North Carolina opposed segregation in restaurants. Throughout the South segregation was under siege. Blacks were hopeful, but their immediate prospects for advancement were dim.

Survival was the first priority. The 2nd "Great Migration" (1940-1970) continued Northeast, Midwest and West—anyplace, but here. Migrants were pushed by southern violence and strict Jim Crow codes and pulled by job opportunities and less restrictive living arrangements. "Down Home" Blacks were determined to change their prospects by moving. The urge to migrate was compelling; however, everyone did not have that option. How could they change their fortunes while remaining in the South? Many sought opportunities by moving from rural areas to urban areas. This "migrate in place" strategy provided some relief from day labor, tenant farming and sharecropping arrangements and marginally improved their economic status.

## **Blacks in The Groves**

Central Florida is the heart of the orange growing industry in the United States. Orange harvesting was and still is very labor intensive. Oranges have to be picked at a precise time. This particular task even now cannot be relegated to machines. Oranges that are not ripe when picked, never ripen once they are removed from the trees. Workers, in 90+ degree heat, climb 6 ft. ladders, pick the fruit, place the fruit in sacks that are then emptied into carts and then off-loaded to trucks. Workers were paid by the pound: .03-.05 cents/lb. The work was only available seasonally from May to September. The other common jobs open to Blacks, day laborers and domestic service workers, were paying slightly lower wages about \$20/week than they could earn in grove jobs. All available occupations were challenging. This was the fate for blacks in Central Florida during the era of segregation. Working conditions created a precarious hand-to-mouth existence that was nearly inescapable.

Nevertheless, Blacks in the South dreamed of a better lifestyle and desired work that was respected, stable, and that offered a chance to prosper. Stuck in the rural Jim Crow south and presented with limited social and economic choices, Blacks searched for options everywhere. Refusing to be defined by agricultural labor, low wages, and the constraints of racial segregation, they fought to expand their prospects. In Central Florida most Blacks were destined to lives of "planting, picking, and packing." From this milieu the group that was to become the "Highwaymen" formed. Desperate to prosper, these Black Floridians used their creativity to make a living and a life, doing something else. They would create art and sell it.



## A Collective Based on Entrepreneurship

Artist collectives have formed to advance aesthetic considerations, engage socially, or promote a specific political agenda; however, an artist association based on entrepreneurship was unique.

### Beginnings—Harold Newton and Alfred Hair

#### Harold Newton

Harold Newton was the first of the Highwaymen to meet Alfred E. "Bean" Backus—a white artist. This meeting was one year before Backus was introduced to Alfred Hair. Harold Newton met "Bean" in the early 1950s. He brought work to be critiqued and received limited instruction. Backus noted that Newton had an almost photographic memory and outsized talent. Newton could look at a Backus piece, leave for a couple of hours, and return having created an almost flawless copy.

Backus influenced Newton to change his preferred subject matter from Biblical images to Florida Landscapes. Before he returned to Florida, Newton lived in Georgia and sold Biblical images "door to door". However, outside the Bible Belt "Velvet Jesus" was a non-starter. Floridians had little interest. When Newton switched to Florida landscapes, his art sold. He maintained his sales technique of selling his art directly to the public in a door-to-door fashion and this direct sales method was at the core of the Highwaymen's entrepreneurial success.

#### Alfred Hair

Before the "group", there was Alfred Hair. Hair, a resident of Fort Pierce, was a good student, artist and athlete. His art teacher, Ms. Zanobia (sic) Jefferson, recognized his artistic gifts and introduced him to future mentor Backus. Hair enrolled in college for two years, but left for financial reasons. Returning home, he continued to hone his artistic skills and over time gained recognition for his art. It is debatable how much "art" Alfred learned from Backus, but what is certain is that Backus planted the idea that you could make a living doing art. For Hair, Backus was a living example of a "not starving" artist. Friends of Hair emulated his example and with differing degrees of talent and commitment decided to give art a try. Most of the artists in this circle of friends displayed talent at early ages, but art making was no more than an interesting hobby. All that would change when they sold their work.

Alfred was as the unofficial leader of the group. There were no votes, but the artists gravitated toward him and consented implicitly to his leadership.

Unsatisfied with accolades, Alfred and his crew wanted money. Their art was always a means to an end. All wanted to live the "good life"—money in their pockets, fast cars, and active social lives. The friends were determined to reap tangible benefits from art. This was definitely not art for art's sake.



### **Regional Changes and the Art Market**

The market for Florida landscape paintings was a solid one. Floridians were proud of their locale and wished to see it reflected on their walls. Tourists visiting Florida wanted to have a tangible reminder of their vacation.

In this era, Florida was rapidly transforming. Disneyworld was established in central Florida in the 1960s, highways were crossing in every direction and NASA was a growing presence. Finding idyllic, unspoiled nature was becoming difficult and elusive. The tranquil settings people associated with Florida were being displaced by development. "Old Florida" resided only in memory and imagination. Both Backus and the Highwaymen tried to capture the "Florida look and feel" before it "totally disappeared."

### **Backus and The Highwaymen: A Study in Contrasts**

Though Backus was a successful artist, by adopting or imitating his processes and practices, the group would be doomed to failure. Innovation and modification were the secret ingredients to their success. Some of the significant ideas that were implemented had origins beyond Al Hair. Hair however combined them to maximum benefit.

Backus encouraged the artists to use economical materials such as Upson board, instead of canvasses, and crown molding, instead of traditional frames. Backus used these materials when he started.

Hair developed a painting technique where the landscape features were suggested in the images but required the viewers to engage ("connect the dots") and "furnish" the details. The net result was he could make art fast. To further increase speed, Hair occasionally used an assembly line approach. In his backyard "studio", he would nail several boards to trees and work simultaneously on them. Hair's "associates" would paint the background and horizon lines and he would fill-in what would become the completed image. Hair sometimes would paint a single color on all his paintings at once--all the blues, all the greens, etc. This was a technique that Jacob Lawrence used for most of his series work to assure color consistency.

To maximize his painting time and produce more work, Hair hired salesmen to sell the works. He kept painting while someone else was on the road selling. The "Newton" direct sales model in combination with Hair's technical innovations was quite different from the Backus approach. By joining several elements, Hair perfected his plan to make his living creating art.



### Backus and The Highwaymen: A Contrast in Strategies

	Backus	Highwaymen
Themes and Subjects	Florida Landscapes	Florida Landscapes
Styles	Naturalistic Direct Observation	Impressionistic Memory and Imagination
Venues	Gallery	Door to Door Store to Store
Clients	Known	Unknown
Prices	High	Economical
Working Environment	Solitary	Communal
Material Choices	Stretched Canvas Traditional Framing	Upson Board and Standard Sizes Crown Molding
Speed	Slow 1 painting per day	Fast 5-10 paintings per day
Process	Single—One at A Time	Multiples—Several at Once

#### Themes and Subjects

The Highwaymen were self-taught, but firmly familiar with the look of Florida landscape art. Works usually possessed a dominant horizontal orientation. Light was used very specifically to allow the viewer to accurately discern the time of day and the season of the year. Nature was either faithfully rendered in realistic colors or the artists would summon emotions and render nature expressionistically foreshadowing 1960s psychedelics. Landscapes reflected the very volatile, changing weather that Florida frequently experienced. Images highlighting the weather's constantly evolving, tenuous and transitory nature resulted in art that was vibrant and compelling.

The Highwaymen artists interpreted the Florida landscape and developed their own unique depictions of it. The interfaces between land and water—especially rivers, streams swamps, mangroves, beaches, thickets, and lagoons were emphasized. The unique flora of Florida—Poinciana and Cypress trees, Live Oaks, Palms, Spanish Moss and Wild Orchids was highlighted. Fauna was not usually depicted with the exception of birds that are featured in a majority of works. Few scenes had people or manmade structures.



Atmospherics were essential to the paintings. Bright blue skies with the occasional puffy clouds and bright orange sunsets, "fire-skies", were a staple in Highwaymen images. Taken together, these elements, displayed a spiritual reverence and respect for the landscape.

Being white, Bean had an unrestricted access to the properties that he would later paint. Bean painted the landscape he saw. The Highwaymen in contrast had limited access to those properties and often had to paint from photographs. Backus kept a book of images to show clients for their commissions. Frequently the Highwaymen artists drew inspiration from those scenes. Other artists who painted Florida landscapes in the styles similar to Backus and the Highwaymen were collectively known as the Indian River School.

### **Venues**

Backus had gallery representation and could rely on commissioned sales. Waiting lists, months long, were his norm. People knew him as the Dean of Florida Landscape Artists and actively sought him for commissioned works. During segregation, Black artists were not allowed to exhibit in galleries.

Until their resurgence in the 1990s, the Highwaymen were only locally and regionally known. With time, their images were actively sought more broadly. A particular artist, with exceptions, was not important to the clients. In most cases, the authorship was minimally important to the artist as well. Images were what was sold. Some would sign their name to the others' works (for clients that wanted a signature) and that was generally accepted. What ultimately mattered to them was getting paid.

Backus' studio and gallery sales sharply contrasted with Hair and friends who did not know their clients by name (at first) in most instances. Frequently visiting law practices, doctors' offices, motels, and restaurants, they engaged the proprietors directly with their sales pitch. Businesses looked forward to the artists coming especially on return visits and over time developed familiar client/friend relationships.

### **Sales Strategy**

The sales force Hair hired to directly sell to customers was an integral part of their strategy. A quote attributed to Al Black was "A painting isn't finished until it's sold."

As with image making, some were gifted artists. Likewise, with sales, some were gifted salesmen. Al Black Jr., a former typewriter salesman was a master salesman. Al could sell ice to an Eskimo. As the lead salesperson, Al would load up his trunk with 10—20 paintings, venture into towns and stops along A1A and US1 visiting businesses and would always come back with his trunk empty. This was a very bold, brave undertaking in the time of Jim Crow. Black movement was severely scrutinized and constrained especially when Blacks appeared in what was perceived to be white spaces.

Besides being a master salesman, Al Black was a master in putting white people at ease. He knew just how to approach them



in an unctuous, non-threatening manner.

Later Al became an artist in his own right. During transport, the art would sometimes be damaged. Determined to not hold up a sale, Al frequently painted over the damage to sell the works. Ultimately by observation, imitation, and practice, Al developed into a skilled painter.

### **Prices**

Backus priced his art in the multi-hundred-dollar range and for the times those price points were high (\$200 to \$500 per piece). Because of his celebrity, Backus's work could command such high prices.

Less well known, the Highwaymen commanded much lower prices. By pricing all of their works under \$50, they filled a market niche with art that the public perceived as a good value. Good quality, high value, and competitive prices were a combination that led to impulse buying on the part of the customer and led to prosperity for the artists.

### **Speed**

Backus painted in a naturalistic style that limited the speed of his production. Committed to capturing nature in a realistic manner required him to focus on fine details. This was a slow process allowing him, on average, to complete one piece per day.

Because of his clients-in-waiting and the prices he could command, speed was not a problem. He lived by all accounts frugally and was financially secure if not rich.

For the Highwaymen this was not acceptable. They wanted big, fast money. Constrained by price, they elected to do volume. Volume could not be generated without speed. Working fast, they frequently made 5-10+ pieces per day. This was possible by modifying their techniques, work specialization, and creating multiple works simultaneously.

### **Choice of Materials**

To minimize costs, they used economical materials—Upson boards and crown molding. The boards came in sizes where they could be cut with minimal wastage. This generated one of the most popular sizes for their paintings—24 X 36 inches.

The crown molding provided some protection for the art, because it allowed the paintings to stack easily in the car trunks giving space to art that was frequently shipped out before the paint was dry and at increased risk for gouging or smudging.

In addition, the customers like the framing because the art would be ready to hang.

### **Working Environment**

The loosely affiliated group was more like its Black Cultural counterpart—a quilting bee. Bees were occasions where seamstresses would



get together and make “squares” that they would collectively assemble to make a quilt. That atmosphere was like a social event rather than a work assignment. The artists first and foremost were a circle of friends with social gatherings that resulted sometimes in working together, going to Jai Alai or the dog tracks, or “holding court” in their local bar.

Unfortunately, their social life led to tragedy. Getting into a bar fight, Al Hair was shot and killed at the age of 29. This almost killed the group before they would become the Highwaymen. Activity slowed down and sales dropped. The artists continued to paint, but it was not the same without Alfred.

### **The Name—Highwaymen**

In the 1960s, Jim Fitch, a marketer, art investor and gallery owner, coined the term Highwaymen for the collective based on the fact that they sold paintings on the east coast of Florida along US 1 and A1A from Fort Pierce to Daytona Beach and south to Miami ostensibly “out of the trunks of their cars.” This was not entirely true, but it was effective marketing. The artists were not initially sold on the name, because of its prior association with highway robbers and bandits. Some artists wanted to be considered as individuals rather than a member of any group. However, this name sparked a resurgence, renaissance, and renewed the public’s interest in their art. Though uncomfortable, the artists realized the name’s value had given them a second life. They swallowed hard.

### **The Highwaymen Market Today**

The interest in acquiring works by the Highwaymen remains high. Ultimately the group grew to 25 men and one woman. Determining the value of individual works can be a fraught exercise. The basis of valuation depends on the individual artist. Alfred Hair, Harold Newton, Al Black Jr., Willie Daniels, James Gibson, Roy McLendon, Sam Newton, Livingston Roberts and Mary Ann Carroll (the sole female member) command higher prices, because they are considered the “Core 9” and instrumental to the movement.

Some Highwaymen possessed superior technical skills that are displayed in many of their works and as a result some buyers see these works as more valuable.

Image size is a factor and in this case bigger is better. Signatures are important when authenticity is in question.

Condition may be a significant factor because these paintings were not made for the long haul—paint loss, flaking, foxing, water spots, dirt, etc. should be considered. Many of the original frames are damaged, but collectors try and keep them. We also should keep in mind that some of the earlier paintings are decades old.

As always market forces, both the local and general economy play roles. Overall the value of the artistic output of this group of artists has held up well. Paintings that were sold below \$100 are commanding prices in the four and five figure range with especially fine exemplars going for six figures.

Estimates suggest that the Highwaymen completed over 100,000 paintings. How many of those numbers that exist today is speculative. By pricing and construction, the paintings were essentially disposable.



Relatives of the original Highwaymen paint in the tradition and style of the original group. The Original members mentored most of these associates. Some writers include these later artists in the lineage of the Highwaymen based on their kinship and association. This second generation are adhering closely to their legacy are stimulating interest.

### **Interracial Collaboration Across the Tracks**

Avenue D was the center of commercial activity and the heart of the Black community in "Colored Town" in Fort Pierce. Avenue C, a few blocks away separated by railroad tracks, was a white neighborhood. When it came to Black and white interaction, that short distance would be unbridgeable. The exception was the home of "Bean" Backus. His Avenue C home was a combination salon, school, and studio. Bean welcomed any and all no matter their race. His home was the nexus of good conversation, good music and discussions about the topics of the day. He taught, guided, and encouraged any would be art students. Frequently he provided space for artists to paint under his observant and watchful eye where those artists were rewarded with gentle supportive critiques. His support for the artists extended to materials and supplies, loans, etc. Bean's place on occasion would turn into a supper club with food and drink freely available.

The support, guidance, and friendship of Alfred E. Backus cannot be overstated. Backus a true altruist and mentor to many especially in the arts community who has to be given credit for the flowering of the Highwaymen. Fostering and teaching along the way and providing a safe space for Black artists to interact with whites, take lessons, etc. cannot be overemphasized.

Black artists painting Florida landscapes and selling them directly to the white public in the age of segregation was an inherently transgressive act. Black artists interacting with whites was also a transgressive act. "Artistic Space" was one that was decidedly white. We sometimes speak of identity politics as a bad thing. However, when Black people did anything, they could not forget that they were Black. The fact that the Highwaymen could compete successfully, both artistically and economically, was a testament to their ingenuity, creativity, and organizational and entrepreneurial skills.

### **Resurgence/Renaissance**

In the 1990s and beyond in large measure the group became known as the highwaymen. The public took a second look at their artistic production and discerned that they were true artists that had a unique vision of the vanishing ideal of Florida landscape. In 1993, the original highwaymen and highwaywoman were inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. The works commanded exponentially higher prices and were included in many celebrity collections including Michelle and Barack Obama.

### **Epilogue**

Many of the artists are still painting and own galleries. Some achieved college degrees and became educators. Some trained a second generation of Highwaymen. Several became pastors.



Some went to jail, but still painted and persevered. Al Black deserves special mention. During his prison stint he painted the only known murals by a highwayman.

Calming, pleasant and recreating a pristine, unspoiled view of nature, these images are treasures that fit into a wide variety of settings and are welcomed into the homes and businesses of Florida and throughout the world.

The Florida Highwaymen's story of artistic and entrepreneurial innovation is a quintessential American story of achieving success by making a way out of no way.

#### A Note About Titles and Dates

The Highwaymen did not title nor date many of their works. They did not live with their paintings long enough to title them in most instances. They did not date them either. Catherine M. Enns in her book, ***The Journey of the Florida Highwaymen***, developed a classification scheme to address the lack of titles by classifying their works by subject matter. She has 13 categories:

#### Themes and Subjects in Highwaymen Art

- |                                |                            |                                |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Royal Poinciana             | 7. Back Country            | 13. Orange Groves and Rarities |
| 2. Ocean Shore                 | 8. Back Country Pines      |                                |
| 3. Breaking Waves              | 9. Rivers of Grass         |                                |
| 4. Fireskies                   | 10. People                 |                                |
| 5. Indian River                | 11. Stormy Weather         |                                |
| 6. St. Lucie and Inland Rivers | 12. Moonlight on the Water |                                |

The plates in her book are grouped into these categories and she provides numerous examples.

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Angell, L. L., ***Painter Is Adding to Highwaymen Legacy***, Vero Beach Newsweekly, August 19, 2015

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#### Confirmed Highwaymen

Harold Newton

Lemuel Newton

Sam Newton

Livingston Roberts

Willie Reagan

Cornell Smith

Charles Walker

Sylvester Wells

Charles Wheeler

Rodney Demps

James Gibson

Alfred Hair

Isaac Knight

Robert L. Lewis

John Maynor

Roy McLendon

Alfonso Moran

Rodney Demps

James Gibson

Alfred Hair

Isaac Knight

Robert L. Lewis

John Maynor

Roy McLendon

Alfonso Moran



### **Interview Comments from Ms. Doretha Hair Truesdell**

Ms. Truesdell vividly recalls the early days of the group who would later be known as the "Highwaymen".

She and her late husband, Alfred Hair, were children of the South. They and other blacks similarly situated had limited opportunities, but unlimited aspirations. "If we are to prosper, we have to find a way to make it work."

Alfred, through his artistic talent and entrepreneurial acumen, charted a path out of poverty. The path led to prosperity. Unusual even now, the Hairs purchased a home when they were in their 20s. The property allowed Alfred and his friends to establish an outdoor studio with the space that they could create 20 paintings per day. "We Paved the Way."

Fort Pierce took notice of their prosperity. Alfred's success drew others who were anxious to learn his secrets and if possible, emulate his success. More than willing to share his process and techniques, Alfred engaged his budding artists to help his production efforts. Speed and volume were keys to their success. They learned to create and market the art the HAIR way.

We firmly believed that we could "Make a way out of no way and produce anything with nothing."

Though talented enough to paint other subjects and in other styles, the artists confined their efforts to Florida landscapes, because "They sold." They never took their eyes off commerce.

Much has been made of the "resurgent" interest in the 80s when this group of Fort Pierce artists was given the name of the Highwaymen by Jim Fitch as a marketing ploy. Ms. Truesdell would like to point out that "We had already achieved years of success prior to that naming."

In 2004, 26 Highwaymen were inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. Ms. Truesdell stated, "There were not 26, but 7-8 core Highwaymen members." She declined to give the names of the members she considered core to avoid controversy or bruised feelings.

The Highwaymen have had an extended run that spans over forty years. Ever friends, they still frequently socialize and appear jointly at exhibitions, galleries and community events. The artists and their families keep the legacy alive through educational and promotional tours. Some of the descendants learned from the forefathers and continue the tradition by painting the same subjects in the same style. The legacy continues.



THE FLORIDA  
**HIGHWAYMEN**

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THE FLORIDA HIGHWAYMEN

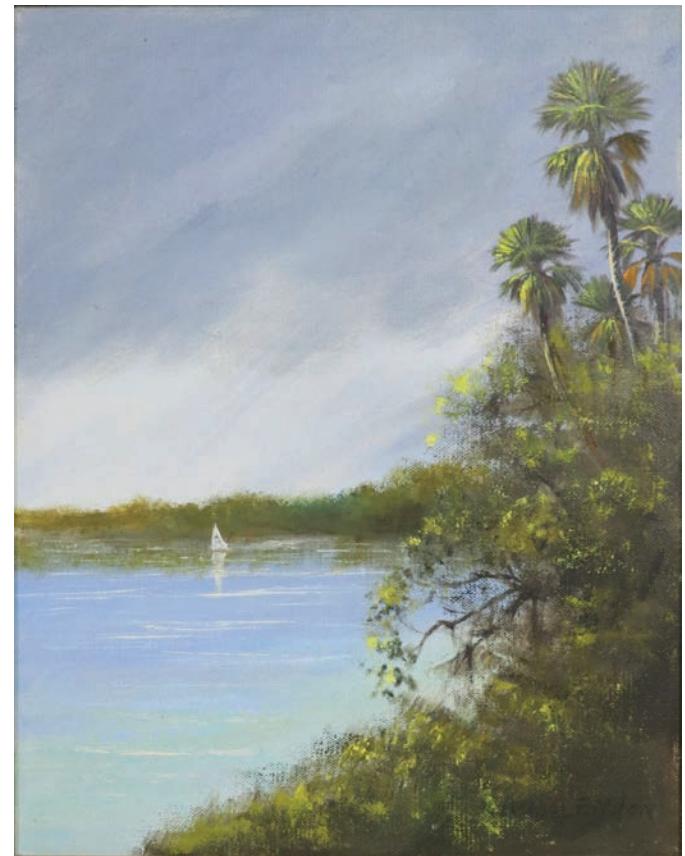


Alfred Hair - 24 x 48 in.



Willie Daniels - 16 x 20 in.

Roy McLendon - 14 x 11 in.





THE FLORIDA HIGHWAYMEN



Isaac Knight - 24 x 30 in.



Sam Newton - 25 x 36 in.



THE FLORIDA HIGHWAYMEN



Sam Newton - 24 x 48 in.



Alfred Hair - 18 x 24 in.



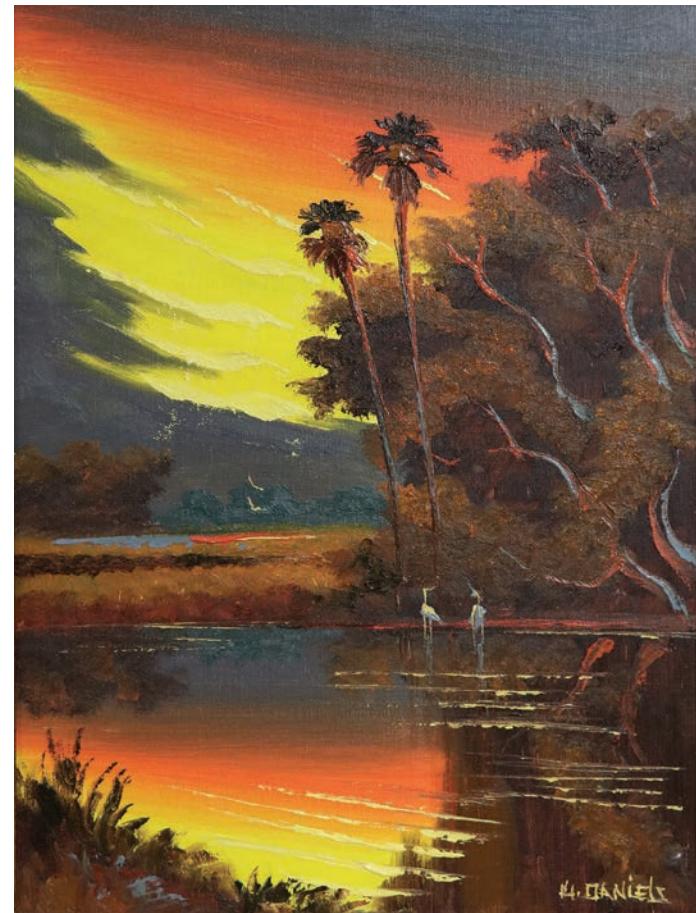
THE FLORIDA HIGHWAYMEN



Alfred Hair - 24 x 36 in.



Isaac Knight - 8 x10 in.



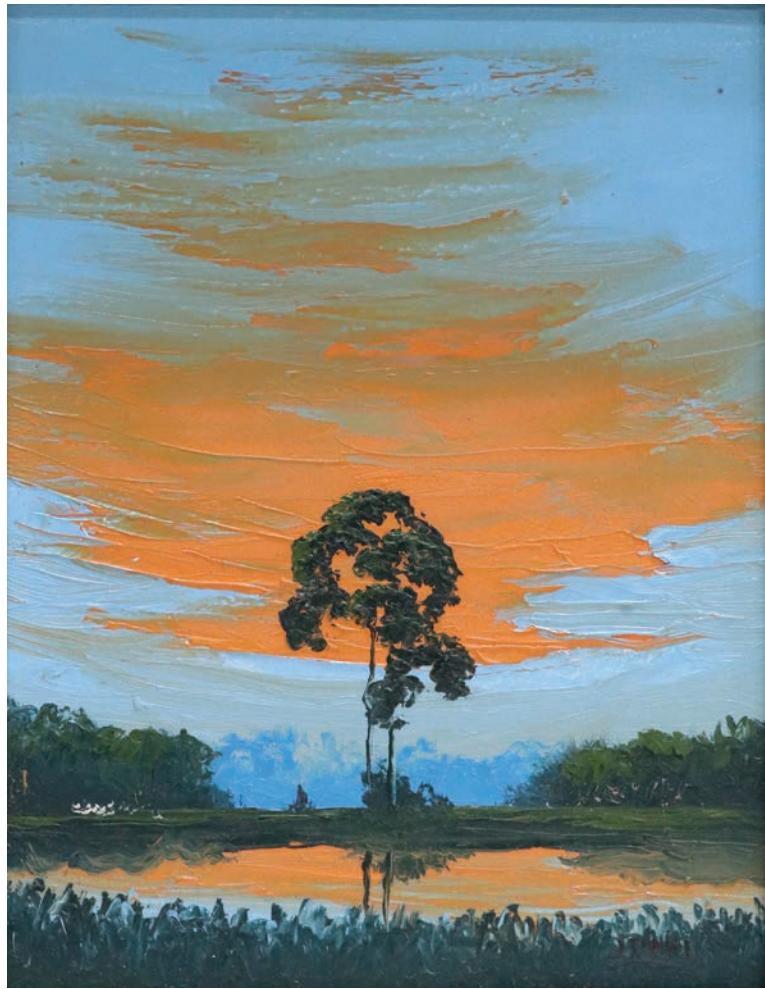
Willie Daniels - 18 x12 in.



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Al Black - 24 x 36 in.



Johnny L. Daniels - 10 x 8 in.



Willie Daniels - 24 x 18 in



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Tracy Newton - 12 x 24 in.



Al Black - 23 x 35 in.



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John Maynor - 23 x 46<sup>1/2</sup> in.



Al Black - 30 x 40 in.



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James Gibson - 25 x 15 in.



Willie Daniels - 24 x 18 in.



Al Black - 23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 35  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.

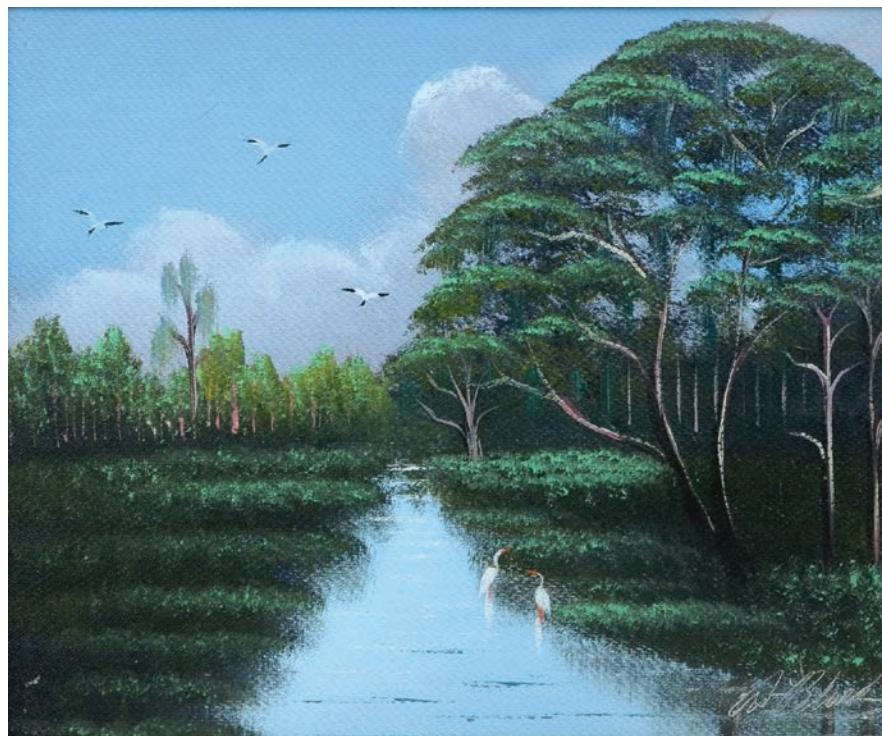


THE FLORIDA HIGHWAYMEN

Al Black - 25<sup>1/4</sup> x 37<sup>1/4</sup> in.



Charles "Chico" Wheeler - 14 x 11



Al Black - 20 x 24 in.



Johnny L. Daniels - 18 x 24 in.



THE FLORIDA HIGHWAYMEN



James Gibson - 22  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 46  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.



Hezekiah Baker - 23 x 35 in.



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Charles "Chico" Wheeler - 20 x 28 in.

Al Black - 16 x 20 in.





Al Black - 18 x 24 in.



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Charles "Chico" Wheeler - 18 x 24 in.



Hezekiah Baker - 18 x 24 in.



### **Acknowledgments**

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#### **Rosa Carrasquillo**

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#### **Bruce Kodner**

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