

The Florida Highwaymen: Art on the Road

by Caroline Fox



Sunset Over the Wetlands by Willie Daniels, a Florida Highwayman
Lawrence G. Miller via Flickr

Alfred Hair and Harold Newton were two talented Black artists who became icons of Florida's cultural history. Both men lived in small towns on the Florida coast in the 1950s. Like most southern states in America at the time, Florida was segregated by law. "Jim Crow" laws enforced segregation between Black people and white people by legally requiring the separation of these groups in most parts of public life. This included schools, businesses, transportation, and workplaces. At the time, most opportunities for Black workers involved labor in fields or factories. Segregation made it very difficult for Black professionals to find opportunities. Faced with this lack of opportunity, Alfred Hair and Harold Newton created a new path to make a living: crafting beautiful landscape paintings and selling them on the road.

Hair and Newton began painting as teenagers. In Fort Pierce, an art teacher introduced them to each other. Like many artists, the young men benefited from support in their community. Hair and Newton were inspired by a local painter named "Bean" Backus. Backus was much older and had already achieved success with his own art. Hair received some professional training from Backus at his studio in Fort Pierce. Backus had a special interest in Florida scenery, and was known for using vivid colors in his work. With Backus in mind, both Hair and Newton began to focus on painting their own landscapes.

Since art galleries were usually reserved for white artists and customers, Black artists like Hair and

Newton were forced to find new ways to show their work. For example, Hair sold his art out of the trunk of his car. But it wasn't easy to make a living this way. Hair and Newton began traveling up and down the coast of Florida to look for more opportunities. While selling their paintings along the highway, more and more artists joined their efforts. Eventually, they had a lively group of 26 artists- 25 men and one woman. Later on, they would be known as the Florida Highwaymen.

Some artists spend many years studying their craft. But most of the artists who joined Hair and Newton were not professionally trained, so they relied on each other to learn new techniques. One of those techniques was called "fast painting." A single artist would place many canvases beside each other. Then, the artist would alternate between the canvases and paint similar strokes on each of them to create many paintings at once. By using this method, some artists were able to churn out more than a dozen pieces every day. When Hair, Newton, and the original Highwaymen began selling paintings, they sold them for around \$25. Today, many of the group's works sell for thousands!

The Florida Highwaymen painted with a distinct style. It was similar to a style of art called impressionism, which often involved outdoor scenes. Impressionist painters used small, light brush strokes to portray sunlight and natural patterns. The Highwaymen often used much thicker brush strokes and bolder shades, which made their landscapes seem to leap off the canvas. They painted flaming sunsets with remarkable shades of orange, pink, and yellow. Bright, solid colors were used for common views of Florida, like palm groves, white sand beaches, and red royal Poinciana trees. Many paintings by the Highwaymen also contain the Indian River, which runs down the Florida coastline.

The Florida Highwaymen painted and sold their work from the 1950s through the 1980s. In the 1990s, a Florida art expert Jim Fitch wrote about these artists and dubbed them the Florida Highwaymen. His writings helped bring even more recognition to their work. In 2004, they were honored by the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. Florida residents and visitors can see a collection of their paintings at the Museum of Florida History in Tallahassee, the state's capital. Not only did the Highwaymen paint over 200,000 works of art, but they also forged a path for many Black artists of their time. Their landscapes continue to inspire and captivate people. They provide a lasting reminder of artists who refused to be defined by the limitations of their time.

Vocabulary

alternate

verb

definition: to move back and forth between two or more places, actions, or conditions (usually followed by "between").

Our Christmas lights alternate between red and bright blue.

Spanish: alternar

forms: alternated, alternates, alternating

distinct

adjective

definition: different or set apart; separate.

Her laugh is distinct from everyone else's in the audience.

The children divided the rocks that they had collected into three distinct groups.

Spanish: distinto, diferente

landscape

noun

definition: a picture that shows a view of an area.

He gave me a beautiful landscape to hang on the wall.

Spanish: paisaje

recognition

noun

definition: notice or approval.

She received recognition from the school for her high grades.

Spanish: reconocimiento

segregated

adjective

definition: If a city or other place is segregated, people of different races or groups are separated from each other, and they are required to use separate things like bathrooms, hotels, and swimming pools. In a segregated place, children of different groups have to go to different schools, and people have to live in different neighborhoods from where the other people live.

In segregated South Africa, native African people had to live in separate communities from the Europeans who settled in the country.

When the southern states were segregated, Black people could not stay in the same hotels as white people.

1. Before you start reading...

Here are the vocabulary words that will be in this reading. Let's see how well you already know them.

Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
landscape				
recognition				

2. Word Changer

Words have different forms when we use them in different ways. Write the correct vocabulary word, in its correct form, in each blank.

He gave me a beautiful _____ to hang on the wall.

She received _____ from the school for her high grades.

3. After reading and exploring the words through some activities...

Do you know these words better? Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
landscape				
recognition				

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What made it difficult for Black professionals to find opportunities in Florida during the 1950s?
 - A. not enough space in Florida's art galleries
 - B. lack of transportation on the Florida coast
 - C. Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation
 - D. too many artists in small coastal towns

2. What caused Alfred Hair and Harold Newton to start selling their paintings along the Florida highway?
 - A. They wanted to create a new trend of selling art on highways so they could get their art into museums.
 - B. They wanted to get more inspiration for their paintings that focused on Florida scenery.
 - C. They were inspired by a local painter, Bean Backus, who also sold his paintings on the highway.
 - D. Art galleries were reserved for white artists and customers, so they had to find a new way to show and sell their work.

3. The Florida Highwaymen used painting techniques that made their process very quick and efficient. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?
 - A. "Backus had a special interest in Florida scenery, and was known for using vivid colors in his work."
 - B. "By using [the fast painting method], some artists were able to churn out more than a dozen pieces every day."
 - C. "While selling their paintings along the highway, more and more artists joined their efforts."
 - D. "Bright, solid colors were used for common views of Florida, like palm groves, white sand beaches, and red royal Poinciana trees."

4. Why might Hair and Newton's landscape paintings have appealed to viewers along the Florida highway?
- A. Their paintings displayed the beauty of Florida and used bright, bold colors that seemed to leap off the canvas.
 - B. Their paintings were very large and easy to see from car windows on the Florida highway.
 - C. Their paintings were made by artists who were professionally trained for many years.
 - D. Their paintings were beloved in many art galleries on the Florida Coast in the 1950s.
5. What is the main idea of this text?
- A. The Florida Highwaymen were artists who used a technique called "fast-painting," which allowed them to produce more than a dozen paintings every day.
 - B. In response to the challenges of segregation, Hair, Newton, and the other Florida Highwaymen created unique techniques for painting and selling their distinct landscapes, eventually earning lasting recognition.
 - C. The coast of Florida has beautiful natural scenery that includes bright green palm trees, red royal Poinciana trees, white sandy beaches, and colorful sunsets that attract many people.
 - D. Florida art expert Jim Fitch wrote about Alfred Hair and Harold Newton and actually gave them their name, the Florida Highwaymen, even though one of the artists was a woman.

6. Read the following sentences from the text.

"Backus had a special interest in Florida **scenery**, and was known for using vivid colors in his work. With Backus in mind, both Hair and Newton began to focus on painting their own landscapes."

As used in this excerpt, what does the word "**scenery**" most closely mean?

- A. natural surroundings
- B. city skylines
- C. bright paintings
- D. artistic techniques

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

_____ most of the Florida Highwaymen were not professionally trained, they still created beautiful paintings that many people loved.

- A. Even though
- B. In conclusion
- C. Before
- D. Because

8. How did the segregation of art galleries affect Hair and Newton?

9. Why might it have been important for the Florida Highwaymen to use the "fast-painting" technique?

10. Based on the text, how did the challenges Hair and Newton faced inspire their creative decisions?