

The Highwaymen

Black Artists of the Florida Coast

September 7, 2023 - April 28, 2024



Exhibited Artworks

Hezekiah Baker (American, 1940-2007)

Backwater Sunset Sky, c. 2000
oil on Upson board, 24 x 36 in.
Collection of Dr. Marilyn Chandler Ford, Promised gift to the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University

Backwater Under Pink Clouds, c. 2000
oil on Upson board, 24 x 34-3/4 in.
Collection of Dr. Marilyn Chandler Ford, Promised gift to the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University

Al "Blood" Black (b. 1947)

Untitled (Orange Sunset), n.d.
oil on Upson board with artist made frame, 24 x 35-1/2 in.
Collection of Ray and Selina McLendon

Johnny Daniels (1954-2009) and Ray McLendon (b. 1956)

Royal Poinciana Tree, n.d.
oil on canvas with artist made frame, 30 x 40 in.
Courtesy of the Florida Highwaymen Landscape Gallery, Vero Beach, FL

James Gibson (American, 1938-2017)

Untitled (Blue Night with Palm Tree), n.d.
oil on canvas board with artist made frame, 24-1/8 x 48 in.
Collection of Ray and Selina McLendon

Untitled (Low River between Forests), 2004
oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in.
Collection of Audrey Barrett Gleason

Indian River Isles, 1971

oil on Upson board, 24 x 48 in.
Collection of Ray and Selina McLendon

Untitled (Single Tree/Gray Sky), n.d.
oil on board with artist made frame, 24 x 18 in.
Estate of Ruth E. Myers, Boynton Beach, Florida

Alfred Hair (American, 1941-1970)

Untitled (Riverbend with Palm Tree), n.d.
oil on Upson board with artist made frame, 24 x 47-3/4 in.
Collection of Ray and Selina McLendon

Ray McLendon (b. 1956)

Backwoods Cabin (with Royal Poinciana Tree), 2001
oil on canvas, 38 x 48 in.
Courtesy of the Florida Highwaymen Landscape Gallery, Vero Beach, FL

Untitled (Three Birds), 2023
oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in.
Courtesy of the Florida Highwaymen Landscape Gallery, Vero Beach, FL

Soft Glow Reflecting, 2003
oil on canvas, 35 x 47 in.
Courtesy of the Florida Highwaymen Landscape Gallery, Vero Beach, FL

Two Boats in the River, 2023
oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in.
Courtesy of the Florida Highwaymen Landscape Gallery, Vero Beach, FL

Untitled (Birds in Riverscape), n.d.
oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in.
Collection of Judy Willard and Tom Currie

Roy McLendon (b. 1932)

Untitled (Figure in Landscape), n.d.
oil on canvas, 23-3/4 x 18 in.
Collection of Ray and Selina McLendon

Untitled (Royal Poinciana Tree), n.d.
oil on Upson board with artist made frame, 23-3/4 x 35-3/4 in.
Collection of Ray and Selina McLendon

Untitled (Royal Poinciana Tree), 1969
oil on canvas, 23-3/4 x 29-3/4 in.
Collection of Ray and Selina McLendon

Harold Newton (1934-1994)

Untitled (Palm Trees/Mist), n.d.
oil on Upson board, 23-3/4 x 18 in.
Collection of Ray and Selina McLendon

Willie Reagan (b. 1939)

Untitled (Fruit Still Life), n.d.
oil on canvas with artist made frame, 23-3/4 x 29-3/4 in.
Collection of Ray and Selina McLendon

Highwaymen (attributed)

Untitled (Single Palm Tree from Right), n.d.
oil on board with artist made frame, 24 x 36 in.
Estate of Ruth E. Myers, Boynton Beach, Florida

Untitled (Beach/Palm Tree/Sailboat), n.d.
oil on board with artist made frame, 24-1/8 x 47-3/8 in.
Estate of Ruth E. Myers, Boynton Beach, Florida

Acknowledgements

Our gratitude goes to Ray McLendon for his time and patience in sharing first-hand knowledge of the Highwaymen story and for lending a number of important works from his personal collection. McLendon is the owner of the Florida Highwaymen Landscape Gallery in Vero Beach, Florida. To contact the gallery, please call (772) 321-2802. Appreciation also goes to Laurene Buckley, Ph.D. (CAM Director 2002-2007) and Judy Willard, for their serendipitous trip to Ray McLendon's gallery in Vero Beach, Florida in 2022.

Thank you to the Florida Highwaymen Landscape Gallery, Dr. Marilyn Chandler Ford, Audrey Barrett Gleason, Ray and Selina McLendon, the Estate of Ruth E. Myers, and Judy Willard and Tom Currie for lending CAM their cherished works for this important exhibition. We would like to extend a special acknowledgement to Marilyn Koren, former Major Gift Officer at Niagara University (NU), for her pivotal role in introducing Dr. Marilyn Chandler Ford to CAM in 2020. This connection marked the beginning of our Highwaymen exhibition. Dr. Ford is a former faculty member of the Department of Political Science & Criminal Justice at Niagara University (NU). We also acknowledge the generous financial support provided by Dr. Marilyn Chandler Ford that made this exhibition possible.

This exhibition was organized by Michael J. Beam, Curator of Exhibitions and Special Projects and produced by Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University, New York. For more information, please visit castellaniartmuseum.org.

The Highwaymen: Black Artists of the Florida Coast is made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.



7 VARSITY DRIVE | NIAGARA UNIVERSITY, NY 14109
716.286.8200 | castellaniartmuseum.org

Please visit our website for current hours of operation.
The Castellani Art Museum is a free admission art museum. Donations welcome.



**“Life is about balance and painting makes me happy.
I love bringing color and life to a canvas.”**

Ray McLendon

Ray McLendon Biography



Ray McLendon is the son of original Highwaymen artist Roy McLendon. He is, by blood, a Second Generation Highwaymen artist, as are other sons and daughters of original Highwaymen artists.

Born in 1956 in Bridgeton, New Jersey, he spent his adolescent years in Gifford, Florida. The artist's family were migrant workers "going north," as he says, to harvest fruits and vegetables in Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Separated from his father, McLendon's mother, Annie Bell McLendon, decided to stay in Pennsylvania in the early 1970s, settling in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, when he was a teenager.

McLendon, like his father, had a passion for painting. Inspired by the psychedelic art of the 1960s and 1970s, his early works were abstractions, full of vivid color and expressive patterns.

McLendon graduated from Harrisburg High School in 1972. After serving in the Army, he attended Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, graduating in 1982 with a Bachelor's Degree in social work. He moved to Philadelphia to pursue a career in public service as a licensed social worker. Close friends with Johnny Daniels (an original Highwaymen artist), McLendon would regularly travel back to Gifford, Florida, to spend time with friends and family, including his brother Roy (also a Second Generation Highwaymen artist) and his father Roy McLendon, Sr. McLendon eventually moved permanently to Florida in the early 1990s.

He is the proud parent of seven children, three of whom are Third Generation Highwaymen: Johnny, Michael, and Tyiesha. They continue the artistic tradition handed down by their grandfather.

McLendon is the owner of The Florida Highwaymen Landscape Gallery, located in Vero Beach, Florida where he also maintains an active studio, selling his work and works by the original Highwaymen. He speaks frequently on the legacy of the Highwaymen, setting the historical record straight and correcting hear-say history. McLendon is currently working on a book chronicling the Highwaymen legacy.

Image Credits: (above from left to right) Ray McLendon, Untitled (Birds in Riverscape), n.d., oil on canvas; Roy McLendon, Untitled (Royal Poinciana Tree), 1969, oil on canvas.

Florida in the 1950s

The Highwaymen are a group of 26 affiliated African American artists who created stylized, impressionistic scenes of Florida's magnificent forests, swamps, beaches, and sunsets. They painted landscapes throughout the 1950s through the 1970s in the segregated South.

In parts of the United States at this time, White and Black people were not allowed to use the same facilities, such as diners, restrooms, and schools. Facing overt racism, the Highwaymen were barred from exhibiting in established Florida art museums and galleries. The mainstream art scene was dominated by White people and therefore, these artists were excluded from participation.

The painters instead found a creative solution to share their work: Florida roadsides. With automotive travel booming, these entrepreneurs attracted travelers who pulled over to purchase their colorful works at roadside stops along the A1-A, Florida's first "Main Street." They also sold works by going door-to-door in Central Florida neighborhoods, new hotels, restaurants, and businesses during the region's development boom in the 1950s-1960s.

Today, the Highwaymen have received national and international recognition for their unique style and business acumen. They were originally referred to as the "Indian River Artists" after the 121-mile long brackish lagoon in the region. The name "Highwaymen" was actually coined in a 1995 article by Jim Fitch, former curator of the Museum of Florida Art. He wrote, "Thus was born a movement, a school, a Black, self-taught tradition that I recognize as the beginning of Florida's residential, regional art tradition." The article brought the artists and their movement into the art world and garnered attention from major art collectors.

Naturally Skilled Painters

The Highwaymen movement grew from the friendships between Harold Newton, who had relocated from Georgia, along with Alfred Hair, James Gibson, Livingston Roberts, and Roy McLendon. McLendon and Newton, through marriage, became family and friends. The group expanded to include Willie Daniels and Mary Ann Carroll, known as the original Highwaymen Seven. "All of them were naturally skilled painters," said Ray McLendon, son of Roy McLendon and a Second-Generation Highwayman painter.

Coalescing around the original seven, their group continued to blossom, adding the rest of the first generation of Highwaymen: Curtis Arnett, Hezekiah Baker, Al Black, Ellis Buckner, George Buckner, Robert Butler, Johnny Daniels, Rodney Demps, Isaac Knight, R.L. Lewis, John Maynor, Alphonso Moran, Lemuel Newton, Sam Newton, Willie Reagan, Carnell Smith, Charles Walker, Sylvester Wells, and Charles Wheeler. Most of the artists, now 26 in number, lived in the small Florida towns of Fort Pierce or Gifford, and their extended families knew and appreciated each other's work.



"We didn't paint for perfection, we painted for color."

Hezekiah Baker



first painted on Upson Board, a lightweight fiberboard used for building ceilings and walls. This material was not only inexpensive but also very plentiful during the early days of Central Florida's building boom.

The Highwaymen primarily used a "wet-on-wet" technique. The background landscape was quickly painted and more detailed scenery would be added while the paint was still wet. This method of working enabled the artists to work on multiple paintings simultaneously. As they began to make a profit, some of the artists upgraded to pre-made canvas boards and stretchers available in standard sizes. They also learned to make their own frames, purchasing bulk or by-the-foot crown molding. The more decorative frames were made from ornate bed headboards acquired from local lumber yards and hardware stores. In some cases, they traded their artwork for wood.

Legacy and Myth

The story of the Highwaymen is still being written, as the Second Generation has now come to prominence. Most of the original members strongly believe that the "bloodlines" are key to the legacy. In addition to Ray McLendon, children of original Highwaymen that continue the legacy include Kelvin Hair, Roderick Hair, Robert Lewis III, and Tracy Newton.

As is the case with many art and historical movements, popular stories and half-truths have blurred the factual narrative of the Highwaymen. The privilege to work directly with Second Generation Highwayman Ray McLendon, offered first-hand, factual information, sometimes dispelling popular authors' books and curatorial ruminations on the artists and their movement. In addition to continuing the Highwaymen tradition, McLendon said, "The fictional histories that are out there circulating, need to be straightened out."

Ray McLendon clarified a number of well-established myths that often made the group seem less art-savvy. For example, the artists always used artist-grade oil paints, whereas a popular Highwaymen story claimed that they used house paints to create their early works.

McLendon also dismissed the legend that A. E. Backus taught Highwaymen artists how to paint and sell their work. Albert Ernest "Bean" Backus (1906-1990) was a prominent landscape painter in Central Florida.

Tools of the Trade

With an almost spiritual reverence for their beautiful and lush surroundings, the Highwaymen captured the splendor and magnificence of pre-suburbanized Central Florida with easily accessible materials.

The artists used commercial oil paint for its pliability and slow-drying characteristics.

In the early years, they

He was based in Fort Pierce and maintained a plein-air art studio. He led an active Bohemian lifestyle, with many New York artists and Harlem musicians visiting regularly. "The early Highwaymen were well aware of Backus and his commercial success," to quote McLendon, "but this was the era of segregation and Jim Crow, Blacks lived in Vero Beach or Gifford and would not have been welcomed in certain Fort Pierce neighborhoods."

National Recognition

It has taken 70 years for these 26 African Americans to receive the recognition they deserve. On March 24, 2004, all 26 Highwaymen artists were inducted into the Florida Artist Hall of Fame in Tallahassee, alongside fellow inductees Ray Charles, Ernest Hemmingway, and Robert Rauschenberg.

In 2014, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., acquired a collection of eighteen Highwaymen paintings. These works were on view when the museum opened to the public in 2016. It is estimated that the Highwaymen created more than 200,000 works of art collectively. Today, Highwaymen works are greatly sought after by contemporary art collectors and are included in major public collections. The Castellani Art Museum is honored to include two Hezekiah Baker paintings in this exhibition, promised gifts to the museum from Dr. Marilyn Chandler Ford.

"It is not really a technique. It is something you got to feel."

Roy McLendon



There is much more to be known about the Highwaymen. By interviewing Second Generation and legacy participants and encouraging deeper scholarship on this topic, it is our hope that the Highwaymen artists' true brilliance is more clearly articulated and becomes honored as a critical part of our nation's art history.

Michael J. Beam
Curator of Exhibitions
and Special Projects

The Highwaymen

Hezekiah Baker

1940 - 2007

Ellis Buckner

943 - 1991

Robert Butler

1943 - 2014

Johnny Daniels

1954 - 2009

Rodney Demps

1953 - 2020

Alfred Hair

1941 - 1970

R.L. Lewis

b. 1941

Roy McLendon

b. 1932

Harold Newton

1934 - 1994

Sam Newton

b. 1948

Livingston Roberts

1942-2004

Charles Walker

b. 1945

Charles Wheeler

1946 - 2018



Curtis Arnett
b. 1950



Al Black
b. 1947



George Buckner
1942 - 2002



Mary Ann Carroll
1940 - 2019



Willie Daniels
1950 - 2021



James Gibson
1938 - 2017



Isaac Knight
b. 1941



John Maynor
1948 - 2016



Alphonso Moran
1930-2003



Lemuel Newton
1950 - 2014



Willie Reagan
b. 1939



Carnell Smith
1950 - 2015



Sylvester Wells
b. 1938



Image Credits: (cover)(detail) Al Black, Untitled (Orange Sunset), n.d., oil on Upson board with artist made frame; (above) Hezekiah Baker, Backwater Sunset Sky, c. 2000, oil on Upson board.

Image Credits: (above) Highwaymen (attributed), Untitled (Beach/Palm Tree/Sailboat), n.d., oil on board with artist made frame.

Image Credits: (above from top right) Harold Newton, Untitled (Palm Trees/Mist), n.d., oil on Upson board; James Gibson, Untitled (Blue Night with Palm Tree), n.d., oil on canvas board with artist made frame.