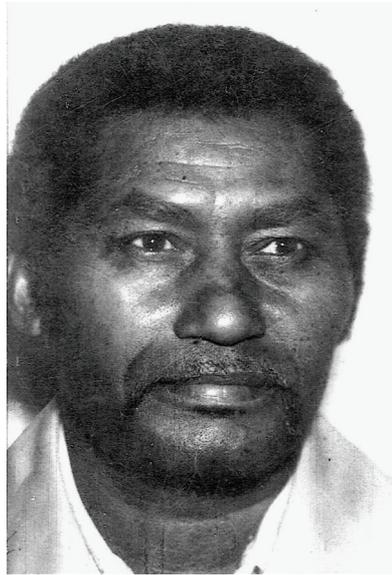


# The Landscape of Desire

*For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life.*

WILLIAM BLAKE



Harold Newton stood apart from the collective of African-American artists whose paintings, beginning in the late 1950s, seemed to appear out of nowhere in Florida homes and offices and spontaneously to be everywhere, as if they had always been there. These paintings symbolized how the American Dream was realized in the Sunshine State. The peninsula was still foreign and mysterious. Florida was seen as paradise. By necessity, the artists worked in near-anonymity.

The Jim Crow laws that cloaked segregation under the banner of progressive change and separate-but-equal faux integration were not deterrents to these young artists. They made their way with ease up and down the coast from their Fort Pierce area homes, determined to beat the odds by overcoming what appeared to be their social destiny—lives supported by manual labor. Rather than pick oranges and pull beans in the nearby fields, they painted prodigiously. This was a flight of fancy that would take them far and away from their apparent fate.

Without galleries or even studios, the artists stowed their paintings in their cars for day trips, selling them in towns from Daytona Beach down to Fort Lauderdale and inland, around Lake Okeechobee. Florida was booming along the Atlantic seaboard with postwar families starting afresh. The Eisenhower years were optimistic. America's vitality was echoed in Florida's landscape and was further intensified by the way these artists portrayed the verdant environs and dramatic skies.

Florida's weather was revelatory to northerners. Jet travel, interstate systems, mosquito control, and air conditioning were new, and they made the seemingly distant state increasingly accessible and desirable. Affordability, complemented by a strong economy, made Florida even more alluring. Tourism flourished along with outdoor recreation. Swaying palm trees along the coast appeared like exotic hula dancers. Although the first few feet of their trunks were often painted white as a means to repel

tree-infesting insects, colored floodlights illuminated them for pure whimsy. These dreamy hues beckoned vacationers. Florida became a magnet for people with new hopes and dreams.

People were hungry for artistic scenery that was devoid of human intervention. They could feel connected to artwork with imagery resonating a sense of divinity. These new paintings seemed to quell emotional longings created by an increasingly fast-paced world. The artists gladly fed this demand, while gaining respect and making money. Financial gain motivated them; they were pulling in more cash than they could have imagined. The challenge of acquiring wealth made painting a pleasure as they showered the state with their glowing, if not transcendent, images.

Harold Newton took to the streets in 1954 to sell his paintings. By the mid-1960s, he had at least two dozen followers. But no one could depict Florida's light with the same veracity as Newton did. The sensational fleeting colors of the sunsets were lost to them. They only acknowledged this transitory light metaphorically, whereas Newton mixed pigments that actually captured the piqued and nuanced hues.

Alfred Hair was the most notable artist to come along after Newton. While in high school, Hair began taking painting lessons from the established regionalist A. E. "Bean" Backus. Hair knew that he wasn't likely to gain the acceptance that Backus, a white man, enjoyed. Having a studio and gallery representation wasn't in his cards. For Hair, painting was a ticket to ride. Money was the way out of "Blacktown." Soon the very charismatic Hair attracted other aspiring painters.

Instead of utilizing Backus's classical approach, which required exactitude and time, Hair painted fast. By creating many paintings in the same time that it took Backus to make one conventional painting and by charging a fraction of the price for each, Hair and his fellow painters earned the same amount of

money, especially if they sold the paintings rapidly. And so they did: they sold them before the oils had time to dry.

Hair and those who followed him capitalized on Newton's door-to-door merchandising to sate an endless clientele. These patrons weren't likely to spend a week's salary or more for a Backus painting when they could have a reasonable facsimile—a hybrid—for relatively little. The artists' marketing strategy worked. The painters were well remunerated as they brightened countless lives and decorated numerous walls of homes and offices for more than twenty-five years. A decade later, this seemingly clandestine, loosely associated group of unlikely artists was called the "Highwaymen."

The art that emerged from the Hudson River School, in the 1830s, gave rise to American landscape painting. This imagery glorified the wonders of nature and was soon enhanced by the Luminists' poetic treatment. Man was seen as small in relation to God's Creation, but not insignificant. Rather, the individual was symbolized within a cosmology that transformed one in accord with nineteenth-century romanticism. Man ultimately was the point. Although the genre assumed a less humble attitude with the advent of Impressionism, the tradition maintained its spiritual underpinnings.

Backus had the knack, with dynamic compositions and puffy clouds, to make those who are so susceptible absolutely weak in the knees. He made the viewer feel as if he were part of the picture, completely awestruck by God's divine hand. However, if the viewer did feel like an outsider looking in, he knew that deliverance was a real possibility. Backus's paintings were objects to be adored; he was, after all, considered to be a fine artist.

As outsiders looking in, the young black artists wouldn't be as likely to objectify the land in which they lived and worked in quite the same mannered way as would trained artists who

made the place seem less important than the art. Their bare-bones renditions encouraged people to look at tangled vegetation as an attainable paradise. With the veneer of civilization stripped away, viewers could experience life in all its primal glory, at least vicariously, from the comfort of their living room.

Backus provided the high-water mark, and Newton made it accessible to the then-fledgling area painters. Fast painting defined them, giving credence to Sam Newton's position of disavowing any association with the Highwaymen, for himself and his brothers Lemuel and Harold. Indeed, compared with Harold, whose paintings weren't rushed and were considerably more refined, the others' paintings may have looked inferior, and by traditional standards they were. Harold created paintings more formally astute than those by any of the other Highwaymen. Their common strength was their unconventional approach.

Some of the painters took their time with their art, but it was speed that led to Alfred Hair's distinctive imagery. His broad and exuberant brushstrokes came from the shoulder, without a care in the world, and his painterly style reflected the turbulent 1960s, whereas Harold Newton's style masked it beautifully with his fine handiwork. He achieved universal appeal with images in heavenly concert. Newton's paintings provided the measure of excellence that the other artists could only dream of achieving. They were awed by his work. Even Backus had, on occasion, acknowledged Newton's great talent. Clearly, the Highwaymen didn't know the virtues of their own paintings.

Newton's pictures lulled the masses into their dream worlds, overshadowing the fleeting informality of the quintessential Highwaymen paintings. The magic of their art was in that style, and that style was like the land itself—evocative, furtive, and unpredictable, a place for those with a pioneering spirit. Newton provided a sense of permanence and even security in contrast to Hair's temporal world.

Newton embodied the enigmatic quality that marks the romantic notion of artists. His exemplary skill provides the missing link, bridging the high and popular arts. He is central to understanding the phenomenon of landscape painting that emerged from the Indian River area and to assessing broader aesthetic issues especially as they relate to Florida as a mythic place. Newton captured not only the meaning of the semitropics but also the aura of the artiste.

During the past decade, the Highwaymen have burst onto the scene and into public awareness with a zeal that would make the best Madison Avenue ad executives envious. But as the dust settles, it becomes increasingly clear that this phenomenal accomplishment would not have happened had it not been for Harold Newton. The story would have unfolded differently and probably would have been remembered as a wonderful folk tale about how Alfred Hair empowered other young African-Americans before his death at age twenty-nine. It could have concluded with his enabling his friends and family to escape the bleak lives they faced at home and with the paintings seen more as artifacts than as art.

Harold Newton's implacably beautiful scenes became insignias of rank for the other painters as well as for Floridians. He was the perfect ambassador for the multitudes who were making Florida home. His paintings brought nature indoors. They became extensions of the outdoors, suggesting to people that by hanging one of these landscapes on a wall, they could overcome modernity's alienation from nature. While Florida as a place of rejuvenation was settled and later bulldozed out of existence, development of the land fueled the interest in and renaissance of Highwaymen art.

Defining aesthetics as the evolution of art suggests that our shared notion of beauty and meaning is fluid and ever-changing. Museum culture, since the Highwaymen emerged,

has been based largely on this view of a rapidly evolving visual language, as art became primarily about art. It became increasingly idea-driven to the point of not looking like art, at least not to the layperson, for whom such art was not made or readily available. In recent times, postmodern aesthetics has recast art to be even more esoteric, less about imagery and in favor of theory, something akin to art eating itself. Critique and parody have ruled, along with intellectual posits ranging from issues of authenticity to questions of representation.

Although uninitiated in the ways of the fine arts, the people who gravitated to the Highwaymen had little doubt about or much interest in issues of aesthetics, especially as they related to authenticity and representation. They wanted pictures that looked like their surroundings, and it was even more desirable if these images were idealized enough to lift their spirits. They wanted pictures that commemorated their time and place in history. It was even better yet if they were affordable. At about twenty-five dollars each, including a frame, they were.

Newton and the other artists largely appropriated Backus's memorable and marketable images during their nascent trials. This included flowers and short-lived scenes of Jamaica, where the artist had a studio-retreat. As a consumer-driven art, public taste provided a natural selection of marketable imagery. But it was the artists' interpretation and expression of those scenes that sold them. The entrepreneurial painters would capitalize on some half-dozen archetypical scenes of Florida that they arrived at through a process of distillation which began at Backus's studio. These views served as templates and were explored under many qualities of light and weather to become the artists' own. As rudimentary forms they encouraged the very act of painting.

A few of his pieces depicted people at work and play at home, bordering on genre painting, but they didn't satisfy buyers at that time, although today some collectors covet them because

of their scarcity. If these pieces had sold well, many more would have been produced. These rustic, often stereotypical, pictures of blacks distanced the viewer from nature, so these representations were the antithesis of the emotional need that landscape art filled. As Harold Newton found his way, his paintings became his calling cards.

Newton's early landscapes often depicted a prehistoric land. His birds appeared like winged reptiles from the Mesozoic era. Sometimes he used a palette of "technicolors," bright pigments applied in short strokes to achieve an Impressionistic effect of light and space and an immediacy of being there. His images entered a viewer's subconsciousness to question whether one had actually ever seen that particular landscape or, perhaps, the image of it somewhere else, as if it resided ancestrally trapped deep within. Daring and experimental qualities mark these works. He then painted with a vigor that was more emotive than representative while being veracious, but without any claim for photographic fidelity.

Such paintings explored the nature of sight, as the experience of light perceived allowed for an awareness of place. But as his palette became more sedate, cool, and detached, the images were without subjective and expressive overtones. Thickly applied paint gave way to smoothly graduated surfaces. These delicate and beautiful images were seemingly accurate and transparent, like looking through a window. These looked like the places people knew, without doubt. Viewers, in fact, enjoyed personalizing the paintings. Some were apt to testify to a painting as representing a specific place, although the paintings were, almost exclusively, archetypal images.

For viewers to identify with the land depicted required that the imagery be palpably real. None were more "real" than Newton's. His relatively exalted views drew into the process the spectator, who in turn was elevated to arbiter. The land became