

# Highwaymen in exhibition

## Artists will have show, auction for paintings today at Ponce de Leon Mall

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Special to The Record

Published Saturday, April 18, 2009

If the Florida Highwaymen had a prize for their most organized member, Willie Reagan would probably win it.

One of the black artists who sold paintings door-to-door depicting Florida half a century ago when their art wasn't welcome in most galleries, Reagan carefully matched his oil paintings to their numbered spots on easels yesterday at the Great Expectations Auction Company.

Reagan is in town for today's art show featuring his work and that of other Highwaymen at the auction house in the Ponce de Leon Mall. The show is from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. A live auction follows.

Paintings of Florida beaches, Royal Poinciana trees and orange suns peeking between Christmas Palms were placed on boards made from PVC and stretched carpet Friday by Reagan and his wife of 44 years, Don Delora.

She said she is the only one he will allow to help with the setup.

"He's a perfectionist," she said. "Everything has to be just right."

Wearing a flat cap and Hawaiian shirt, Reagan eyed his wife, making sure she matched the numbers on the paintings and the easels as he surveyed his work in the auction houses' front room.

He's seen it before. It's all laid out in his Vero Beach home studio the night before the couple leaves for one of the art shows, whose numbers have dramatically increased since Gary Monroe's 2001 book on the Highwaymen prompted a surge in their popularity.

Monroe's book popularized the term Highwaymen.

"I taught for 30 years," said Reagan, a retired art education teacher. "To be a good teacher you have to be organized. Otherwise, it's a job."

This is the second time Great Expectations will host the Highwaymen. Last year, an exhibit drew about 700 people, according to Jena Baker, who owns the gallery with her father.

Baker said she hopes the Highwaymen will make the trip to Great Expectations an annual one.

"Even though we're in a depressed market, Highwaymen art has held up very well," Baker said. "We sell the paintings throughout the year and are always getting calls inquiring about pieces."

Another Highwayman who taught school for more than three decades, Robert L. Lewis, will sell his work at Great Expectations today.

Lewis calls what the men (and one woman, Mary Ann Carroll) did decades ago "grassroots art."

Carroll is also at today's show.

Lewis said one of the most important influences of his youth was a teacher, a white woman at his black high school in his hometown of Cocoa. He mimicked her artistic style. And when she showed him a 1958 Miami Herald article detailing how Highwayman pioneer Harold Newton paid doctor bills by selling his art, his eyes opened.

"I got to see an artist who looked like me," Lewis said. "For some, it was art for the sake of survival. All I knew how to do was art."

He did more, graduating from Syracuse University after learning his education could be subsidized by the college hospital where he worked.

He moved back to Florida in the 1960s and began what he and fellow Highwayman Sylvester Wells called an "honest hustle" selling their work to lawyers, motel proprietors -- whomever they could find to buy it.

Lewis now owns a gallery in Cocoa.

"My painting, I think, reflects light and vibrancy," Lewis said. "I always want to be remembered for portraying light, even in a storm."

Reagan graduated from Florida A&M University, where he played football with NFL Hall of Famer and Jacksonville native "Bullet" Bob Hayes.

He met Don Delora during his one year teaching in Savannah, Ga.

In 1980, Reagan stopped painting, concentrating on teaching and purchasing old houses he would refurbish and sell. He's also a professional carpenter.

When he returned to his art in 2002, he took 10 paintings to a show. They sold in two hours.

"I was so impressed after that first show I decided to continue," he said.

After the layoff, Reagan said there was a learning curve.

"I had to start all over," he said. "I could still keep a composition together. But I'd forgotten so much."

Still lining up paintings to numbers, Don Delora disagreed.

"He started back, and it looked just like it does now," she said.

St. Augustine resident Grey Webb, who came to check on consigned pieces he has at the auction house, is a longtime fan of the Highwaymen.

"We've followed the Highwaymen since before we knew they were the Highwaymen,"said Webb, who grew up in Pompano. "I always knew that I loved those Florida scenes.

"You'd go in to a doctor's office or a bank in the '50s and early '60s and you'd see their work. You didn't know what it was. You just knew it was pleasing to the eye."

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