

## Painting Florida, Preserving History

In the beginning, there was yellow. The lightest of yellows.

And from the yellow there grew a sky. And the sky became a sea.

From the sea sprouted land, green land, with palm trees and the turquoise wings of a heron. And, in less than two hours, it was finished.

The artist surveyed his work. "That's pretty," he said.

R.L. Lewis, an original Highwayman artist, demonstrated his wet-on-wet technique at the St. Petersburg Museum of History on March 6. About 20 people watched as Lewis created a Florida landscape from a blank canvas. While Lewis painted, his son Robert told the history of the Highwaymen.

Lewis, 69, is one of 26 Highwaymen artists who painted between the 1950s and 1970s. His son called them black folk artists with a "Florida twist" to their work. Although their paintings were barred from museums, the Highwaymen sold to businessmen and bankers.

Today, Lewis is one of 15 Highwaymen artists still painting. He hopes to capture natural Florida "on canvas before it disappears," his son said. Lewis' paintings, once unaccepted by galleries, now sell for thousands of dollars. His work has been displayed in the Smithsonian Institution, and he plans to do a 13-episode PBS show called "Painting the R. L. Lewis Way."

Despite his success, Lewis is humble.

"A man's gift makes room for him and it brings him before great people," Lewis said. "Who am I standing here before?"

An audience member said, "Great people?"

"Great people," he echoed. "The miracle is no two people think alike."

As a former art teacher, Lewis encouraged budding artists in his audience.

"Your only limitation is your imagination," he said.

Lewis didn't allow limitations in his life to keep him from painting. For 32 years, he taught art in Brevard County schools. He would paint before class started. At the end of the day, he'd finish his painting and sell it to a banker or attorney on

the way home. Summers he worked an “honest hustle” up and down the coast of Florida, selling his work.

Unlike the popular misconception, Lewis didn’t sell his art by the side of the road. His son said most Highwaymen “had some reservations about standing anywhere on the side of the road,” especially in less friendly towns. Instead, they built relationships with people.

“Never go where you’re not celebrated,” Lewis said. “Don’t go where you’re just tolerated.”

Lewis’ own love for art began in high school. He grew up in Cocoa, Florida, beside the waters of the Indian River Lagoon. He was a football player at historically black Monroe High School. When he injured himself playing football, he went to art class to make up the elective credit.

His art teacher soon noticed his talent.

She brought him a newspaper clipping about Harold Newton, one of the early Highwaymen. Reading about Newton’s life encouraged young Lewis to pursue his art.

Today, Lewis shares that inspiration with future generations of artists.

In 1971, he gave a painting to one of his students to inspire her. She later told him that everything she owned burned in a house fire.

But Lewis’ painting survived unscorched.

As he gives painting workshops across Florida, Lewis remembers every place he visits by placing buttons on his cap. Sometimes people ask him to wear buttons for a cause. Wear the yellow ribbon for my son in the service. Wear the pink for breast cancer. Wear the cross and flag for God and country. Today, Lewis’ hat is covered with buttons.

Throughout his demonstration, Lewis joked with his audience. Sometimes he wandered from his canvas and offered his brush to an onlooker, asking, “You want to paint?” At other times he would tease that an exam would be given on the painting process.

Lewis’ paintings reflect his colorful personality. His skies are vibrant with violets and pinks. Trees bloom with red or yellow blossoms. Like his fellow Highwaymen, Lewis captures the spirit of Florida.

His audience seemed to enjoy the demonstration. One viewer, Kathy Bernheim, said she liked his work because it reminded her of “things we’ve seen around the state.”

With every painting, R.L. Lewis is preserving the history of natural Florida.

