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'Highwaymen Kids' exhibition continues Florida legacy in art

Students depict state's natural beauty, inspired by legendary Black artists

ORLANDO, Fla. – April 15, 2025 – The spirit of the Florida Highwaymen remains strong at the Orange County Regional History Center, where the annual *Highwaymen Kids* exhibition showcases young artists who take their inspiration from the legendary painters. It's on display from April 19 through May 20 on the first floor of the downtown Orlando museum.

Highwaymen Kids marks the culmination of a community-outreach program that this year drew 350 participants from three Orange County Public Schools: OCPS Academic Center for Excellence, Howard Middle School Academy of Arts, and Westridge Middle School. The student participants are in the sixth through eighth grades and typically between the ages of 11 and 14.

During the program, the History Center provided students and teachers with art materials and lesson plans focusing on the history and style of the original Highwaymen – a group of 26 Black artists who took to Florida's roads in the 1950s and '60s to sell their landscapes. Once almost forgotten, their colorful depictions of the state's wild beauty are now widely coveted by collectors and museums.

After learning about the Highwaymen, the young participants dove into making their own paintings, says Courtney Burns, the History Center's assistant curator of education. "Their teachers asked them to think about a Florida landscape they've seen and be inspired by that. They might choose a beach scene, sunrises, sunsets, birds, the view from a pier – lots of options."

This year, after two rounds of anonymous review in which judges assessed the resulting paintings with no indication of the young artists' identities or school affiliations, 55 paintings were chosen for exhibition, along with prize winners for each school. The judges, who included art professionals from Central Florida museums, "look at the artwork based on criteria such as who is truest to the Highwaymen – the use of color, layering, Florida landscape, and so on," says Burns.

Burns says the students' work is always stunning, but this year's paintings proved "exceptionally gorgeous" – rich in the oranges and pinks of a Florida sunrise or the cool greens and blues of a shady cypress grove. One student, Angelina A, has captured the top prize for her school for three years, reports Burns. "It's a testament to how talented she is that she was able to do that three times in a row."

During the project, students learn more about their state, Burns notes. "A lot of the kids told us they didn't know about this history. They may know something about world or American history but sometimes

forget that history happened here in Florida, too. It's rewarding when they want to know more," she says, "because spreading that message is our job."

In addition to the *Highwaymen Kids* exhibition, student participants also attend a reception and award ceremony at the History Center that includes a tour of the museum's collection of Highwaymen paintings. For museum staff, it's always a special treat to meet the winners in person, Burns notes. "They are the sweetest, most polite kids. I love this program."

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