

A. E. BACKUS MUSEUM & GALLERY

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

“DRIVING FORCE: ALFRED HAIR AND THE FLORIDA HIGHWAYMEN” AT THE BACKUS MUSEUM EXPLORES THE LONG ROAD TO ARTISTIC SUCCESS FOR THE LEGENDARY AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS

Fort Pierce, FL – January 6, 2020 - The A.E. Backus Museum presents the latest exhibition in its annual series recognizing the artistic accomplishments of the original Highwaymen. ***Driving Force: Alfred Hair and the Florida Highwaymen*** explores the creative formula and entrepreneurial spirit of the acclaimed African American artists in a presentation of vintage works drawn from private collections, on view January 8 through February 16, 2020, with a closing reception scheduled for February 14 to kick off the annual Highwaymen Celebration Weekend. The Museum is located at 500 North Indian River Drive in Historic Downtown Fort Pierce.

The year 2020 marks the 50th anniversary of Alfred Hair’s passing at the age of 29. In his lifetime, Alfred Hair (1941-1970) was a man with a vision. Intelligent, talented, charismatic, and ambitious, as a high school student in the racially segregated Fort Pierce of the late 1950s, he was painfully aware of the obstacles to success, but was looking for his own path.

His art teacher at Lincoln Park Academy, Zanobia Bracy Jefferson (1926-2016), recognized something special in her student, and introduced Hair to her friend, white artist A.E. Backus (1906-1990) for special art instruction. Renowned for his acceptance of others regardless of race, “Bean” Backus defied the prevailing social norms and mentored Hair, teaching him about technique, materials, and the art world. And Hair was also aware of Harold Newton (1934-1994), the only African American artist he knew, whom Backus had also advised and who was known to make his sales door-to-door. The experiences kindled within the younger artist a way to design his own success, enlisting his friends to share and support this new path.

“In 21st century terms, he hacked the system,” says Backus Museum director J. Marshall Adams. “There were real, long-standing barriers for African Americans who wanted to pursue the arts as a career. Hair saw how Backus worked in that system, and he saw how Newton worked outside that system. Hair’s work-arounds amounted to a business plan for talented African American artists to survive and thrive as their own bosses. He was literally the driving force in what we think of today as the Highwaymen movement.”

These young artists developed their own popular style of energetic painting, streamlining the production to lower material costs and quickly build a daily inventory for sales, pricing their individual paintings modestly but selling them in volume, and instead of a brick-and-mortar storefront they found their

customers by taking the art to them, on the highways, in the trunks of their cars. Even selling one painting at \$25 was greater than the daily wage available to African Americans in the fields and groves of the area's agricultural economy – selling ten paintings in a single day was more than two weeks' work. Their formula of success sparked an artistic movement.

When the forerunner of today's Museum, the Fort Pierce Art Gallery, opened its doors in 1961 with its grand opening exhibition, director Backus included a painting by Alfred Hair – a quiet statement of encouragement and very likely the first integrated art exhibition the community had ever seen. While Hair's life was tragically cut short less than ten years later, his friends and associates embraced that characteristic drive in moving forward into legend: in 2004, Alfred Hair and 25 members of the original group were inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame.

Driving Force: Alfred Hair and the Florida Highwaymen features more than 50 works by original Highwaymen Alfred Hair, James Gibson, Willie Daniels, Mary Ann Carroll, Harold Newton, Sam Newton, and more. The exhibition explores through luminous images the dream and determination of these important African American artists. The exhibition is curated by Roger Lightle. Doretha Hair Truesdell, widow of Alfred Hair, will be the featured speaker at the exhibition's Closing Reception on February 14. ***Driving Force: Alfred Hair and the Florida Highwaymen*** is on view January 8 – February 16, 2020. For more information, please visit www.BackusMuseum.org.

Supporting Sponsor of the exhibition is Rennick Real Estate and Auctions.

HIGHWAYMEN WEEKEND CELEBRATION (Free Admission during regular hours!)

FRIDAY, SATURDAY, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 14-16, 2020

Friday, February 14

- Vintage Highwaymen paintings for sale by dealers, and independent art appraisals of Florida Art on the Outdoor Mural Plaza (10:00 am - 4:00 pm)
- ***Driving Force*** Closing Reception (Members Free, Not-Yet Members \$20); Lecture by Doretha Hair Truesdell, widow of Alfred Hair (6:00-7:00 pm), Reception (7:00-8:00 pm)

Saturday, February 15

- 5th Annual City of Fort Pierce Highwaymen Heritage Trail Festival and Art Fair, Moore's Creek Linear Park, 8th Street & Avenue D (10:00 am - 4:00 pm) – city shuttles available from Museum to Park
- Vintage Highwaymen paintings for sale by dealers, and independent art appraisals of Florida Art continue at the Museum (10:00 am - 4:00 pm); Gallery Talks (11:00 am, 1:00 pm & 3:00 pm)

Sunday, February 16

- Vintage Highwaymen paintings for sale by dealers, and independent art appraisals of Florida Art on the Outdoor Mural Plaza continue at Museum (12:00-4:00 pm); Gallery Talks (1:00 pm & 3:00 pm)
- Final day of ***Driving Force: Alfred Hair and the Florida Highwaymen*** exhibition

About the A.E. Backus Museum & Gallery

With a recently added, multi-million dollar expansion, the A.E. Backus Museum & Gallery houses the nation's largest public presentation of artwork by Florida's preeminent painter, A.E. "Bean" Backus (1906-1990), and is home to the state's only permanent multimedia exhibition on the Florida Highwaymen.

With a career spanning more than 70 years, A.E. "Bean" Backus (1906-1990) was the first Florida-born artist to build his professional renown by painting the landscape and scenes from daily life of his native state. He was fortunate to have known great success during his lifetime, with paintings hanging in the businesses and the private collections of many of Florida's most prominent citizens. A renowned humanitarian who abhorred the racist attitudes and segregation that engulfed the region, Backus taught and mentored the group of entrepreneurial African American artists who became known as the Florida Highwaymen. Their inspiring story is part of the A.E. Backus legacy.

In addition to preserving and perpetuating the artistic and humanitarian legacy of Backus, the Museum organizes and hosts changing exhibitions from artists of national and international acclaim.

Regular Hours are: Wednesday – Saturday, 10 AM to 4 PM; Sunday, 12 Noon to 4 PM (closed Monday-Tuesday). Admission is \$5 per person; AARP, AAA, and Veterans with appropriate ID receive a \$2 discount. Students with school ID, children under 18, active duty military, and current members are always free. During the regular season, the first Sunday of the month is Free Admission Day.

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Images Available

CREDIT: Alfred Hair (1941-1970). *River House Poinciana*, not dated. Oil on Upson board, 24" x 36". Collection of Roger Lightle.

CREDIT: James Gibson (1938-2017). *Indian River Evening*, not dated. Oil on Upson board, 24" x 48". Walker Collection.

CREDIT: Mary Ann Carroll (1940-2019). *Jamaica*, not dated. Oil on Upson board, 24" x 36". Walker Collection.