

## OTHER VIEWS

## Discovering One Of Florida's 'Highwaymen'



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It all started with the painting. Two months ago, I bought a work of art I couldn't afford. Three weeks and a few sighs of admiration later, I started to wonder about the man behind the work. Who was he? Where did he live and paint? How could I find him, and what could he tell me about his small masterpiece?

The landscape painted by Horace Foster is one which some would call wild Florida. Others might call it real Florida. I like to call it intimate Florida. I wanted it because it reminded me of a place close to home: the Hillsborough River.

His scene suggests not the parts of the river that run through Tampa's downtown, but the places where the river bends and winds away from noise and traffic. It honors what remains untouched and undeveloped in a land where waterfront property makes for highly coveted real estate.

Foster's painting calls to mind any spot along the riverbanks where a proud cypress presides above a white heron taking a gentle step ... all far away from people, under a great golden sky.

So it might sound funny that a 59-year-old man who does nature such justice suggested we meet in a Wal-Mart parking lot for an interview. I was thrilled.

Foster lives back in his hometown of Tifton, Georgia, where he now paints for a living. I met him as he made his monthly drive down to Florida to deliver his latest works to a few regional galleries. He is accustomed to long drives. Some years ago, he lived in Miami and worked driving trucks to support his family. During this time he painted as a hobby rather than as a full-time career.

"But I never gave up the stroke of the brush," he said with satisfaction.

He sold his first painting—a piece he remembers feeling ashamed of—in the mid-1960s, when he was associated with the men who later became known as the "Florida Highwaymen." Many Floridians are aware by now of this inspired group of African-American Florida landscape artists who had begun selling their work in the segregated south of that time. Although not part of the core group of Highwaymen, Foster was on the scene. With his carpentry skills, he fashioned the crown molding frames that some of the artists needed. Over time, he tried his hand at painting and liked it. He's been trying it ever since.

As Foster opened the back of his blue minivan to reveal to me a small stack of his prized paintings, I found it hard to believe that this man ever produced a piece not worthy of pride. Each picture I looked at captures so well the Florida sky at all times of day, during each of the four seasons.

Foster talked about his paintings in a voice he calls his "high-pitched tenor"—a voice with strength and presence, too. He is a man at turns thoughtful and serious, then joyous and laughing loud. He remained unpretentious throughout. I liked him very much.

I asked him what he thinks he does best in his paintings.

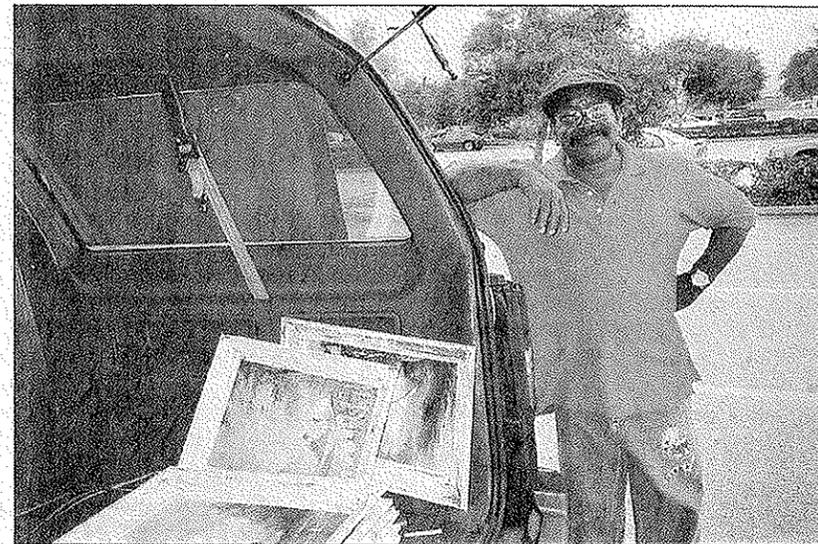


Photo by MARLENE FLYNN

Horace Foster reveals the beauty of ordinary scenes in Florida with a few gentle strokes of his paintbrush.

"I think it's my clouds," he replied, gesturing to the rosy glow that billows from one painting. "Sometimes I see something in my clouds after I've finished. I don't mean to do it. The paintings dictate to me. In this one, I see Moses in my clouds."

As he spoke, I watched the artist's hands. He had dark paint around his fingernails. I felt so fortunate to see up-close the hands that made the painting I own and love.

We talked as a colorless sky watched from above. It had far less magic than any in Foster's paintings. It looked dreary and sure to pour rain on us at any moment.

The wind picked up as Foster found beauty in a parking lot scene. He gestured to some trees nearby.

"There is beauty all around us; we just miss it. I help you see it by painting it. There's a difference between

just looking and truly seeing ... I could put those trees there in a painting. I might take out the pavement and put in a fence or some water, but there it is ... you know, a pelican might be an ugly bird, but he looks good in a painting!"

I told Foster someone called his works "bold, dynamic, and sensuous." He is so down-to-earth I expected to meet with a bit of reserve.

"Oh, I never get tired of hearing that! I love to hear it again and again!" His great laugh swelled and spilled forth. His grand face lit up.

He was pure joy then. He left me feeling proud to have met the man who reveals with his brush the intimate Florida that beckons all of us.

*Anna Marlene Flynn is a student from Temple Terrace majoring in history and French.*

## Africa Needs More Economic Freedom, Less Foreign Aid

British Prime Minister Tony Blair is pressuring the rich nations of the world to give more foreign aid to Afri-



Congo. It's not rocket science to conclude that economic liberty and the wealth of a nation and its peoples go