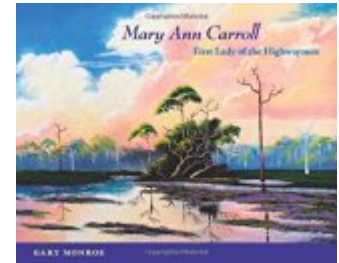


Gary Monroe. *Mary Ann Carroll: First Lady of the Highwaymen.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014. Illustrations. 192 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-4969-4.



Reviewed by Kathryn Lee Seidel

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Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

The colorful sunset on the cover of this attractive book displays a painting by Mary Ann Carroll, the only female painter among Florida's twenty-six Highwaymen painters. This group painted Florida landscapes from the 1950s to the present. Although they originally sold their work along Florida's highways for twenty-five dollars per painting, their work is much prized by today's art collectors.

Gary Monroe's latest book on the Highwaymen focuses on the life and work of Carroll. He places her work within the context of the segregationist South of the fifties and sixties and the civil rights movement. Monroe asserts that Carroll defied the limitations not only of racism but also of sexism with her steadfast commitment to her art and her deft maneuvering within the man's world of the Highwaymen.

The book is based on interviews that Monroe conducted with Carroll over several years. These he blends with his wide and comprehensive knowledge of the Highwaymen in general. His previous books on the Highwaymen include *The Highwaymen: Florida's African-American Land-*

scape Painters (2001), *The Highwaymen Murals: Al Black's Concrete Dreams* (2007), and *Harold Newton: The Original Highwayman* (2009). Together with this book on Carroll, these books have established him as a premier historian of their work. He is particularly grateful to Carroll who was the first of the group he ever spoke with and who introduced him to several of the painters.

Monroe summarizes Carroll's life, influences, and contexts in a thirty-nine-page essay and then reproduces seventy paintings in full, lush colors. The essay describes the history of the group and also debunks myths that have developed about their work. He explains Carroll's uniqueness as an artist and recounts biographical details about her life.

Born in Georgia on November 30, 1940, Carroll was the daughter of migrant workers who moved to Ft. Pierce in the 1940s. Like many Highwaymen, she lived in the Lincoln Park neighborhood. She attended Lincoln Park Academy, a respected all-black school, but left before graduation to work in gladiola fields. While there, she began to draw and paint. She had children as a

teenager, but continued to work in a variety of jobs, all the time painting in her free time. The first Highwayman she met was Harold Newton who taught her painting techniques and the use of colors to express feelings. She began to focus on the beauty of landscapes, which became the leit-motif of her work.

When her paintings began to sell in the mid-1960s, she could not constantly be on the road with the Highwaymen because by then she had seven children. She was the first of the painters to hire a broker to whom she paid a commission. Painting in the segregationist South, she painted in the context of Ku Klux Klan activity and the strife of the desegregation of the Lincoln Park Academy. Monroe points out that the nostalgic optimism of her paintings, and those of the Highwaymen in general, were popular among white Floridians precisely because they did not depict political circumstances. For example, most of these paintings have no people in them; hence, the issues of skin color need not remind anyone of the problems of the times. Moreover, Monroe asserts that the group was careful to be polite and nonthreatening when interacting with potential buyers.

Carroll regarded the Highwaymen as friends and colleagues, but she did not join in with rowdy beer drinking at night. She was at home painting while her children slept. She was a good business-woman as well and was able to supply paintings to a gallery in West Palm Beach. Money was always tight, however, and she sometimes had to use a painting as payment for a set of tires.

Monroe is careful to present Carroll as an artist who took her time with her work. He refutes the notion that the Highwaymen were like a factory with an assembly-line approach to painting. Carroll's work with color is particularly deft. Her paintings of ocean scenes and glades predominate, but they are not always realistic. Rather they evoke the tranquility of a Florida before the railroad, the car, and the condo. Monroe points

out that some in the art world regard the work of the Highwaymen as insufficiently political and too sentimental, but one recalls that these same critiques were hurled at a novelist of the Florida pastoral, Zora Neale Hurston. These criticisms do not account for the fact that for Carroll, as for Hurston, the act of painting is in itself a powerful disrupter of the status quo.

Monroe also comments about the irony that as popular as these paintings are today, and as high as their resale value has become, Carroll and the other Highwaymen have not benefited. Most artists were only paid for the initial sale, which means that Carroll's life has been a struggle. Today her circumstances are comfortable but humble. More happily, Carroll's reputation as a painter has continued to grow. She has been honored with invitations to festivals, a piece on National Public Radio, and an invitation to a luncheon at the White House in 2011, where one of her paintings now hangs.

Monroe's book is a compelling summary of Carroll's life and contributions. He locates her as a creative and strong person who was able to coexist with the rambunctious male Highwaymen. Readers of Florida history, the women's movement, and art history will find this book invaluable. While it does not cite sources, it is dense with detail. Its chronological organization blends the details from her life and those of many other sources. It also is a colorful and attractive coffee-table book. The foreword by Virginia Lynn Moylan, who has written about Hurston's later years, reinforces the idea that Carroll can be viewed as another female creative genius from central Florida.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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