



Echoes of Our Past: The Narrative Artistry of

Palmer C. Hayden

The Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles

Hayden the Persona

Palmer C. Hayden was a person, a pseudonym, invented and developed by Payton Cole Hedgeman, who was born on January 15, 1890, to James and Nancy Hedgeman of Widewater, Virginia, the fifth of twelve children.

Payton Hedgeman attended the country schools and began drawing when he was four, inspired by an older brother who had an interest and some skill in drawing.

In 1912, after a number of years at odd jobs including working for the Ringling Brothers Circus (where he was able to use his art skills), Hayden enlisted in the army. "I always thought army men had a lazy time of it. In that case, I thought I would have plenty of time to draw."

In 1915, at the end of the first three-year enlistment, Hedgeman returned to New York. He had wanted to go to Europe to study art, but the outbreak of World War I had prevented that; Hedgeman re-enlisted. It was sometime during his tenure as a soldier that one of his commanding officers couldn't correctly pronounce his name. Because of this, it is generally assumed that Palmer Hayden is a corruption of Peyton Hedgeman.

Following his army career, he was known as Palmer C. Hayden, and was discharged from the service in 1920. He returned to New York City and worked as a letter carrier. During this time he took art classes at Columbia University.

In 1924 he left his job as a mail carrier and took up custodial work to give himself more time to paint. In 1927 Hayden entered the Harmon Foundation competition (at the behest of his then patron and benefactor, Alice Dike) and won first prize in the painting division. He then went to Paris with the financial assistance of Alice Dike and the Harmon Foundation.

The essential advantage gained by Hayden during the Paris years was that of being able to view himself as an American as it can only be done outside America. More importantly, it gave him a chance to reflect specifically on what it meant to be a black American.

While in Paris, he was in close contact with Hale Woodruff and some of the other black intellectuals and artists, like Henry O. Tanner; however, just as Tanner before him had ignored the most advanced ideas and theories of painting, Hayden also was little affected by the direction being taken by French artists between the wars. Nevertheless, his Paris years resulted in an expansion of the range of his subjects and themes with an emphasis on the narrative, anecdotal aspects. When he returned to America, he would become an American scene painter of the black experience.

Hayden the Artist

The themes and subjects that Hayden gradually evolved into painting were a declaration of the importance of the unheroic, ordinary aspects of the black experience. His choice of the mundane often flavored by nostalgic, archaic memories of his own, connects him directly to the common people admired by Langston Hughes—the folk "who have their nip of gin on Saturday nights and do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else."

In Hayden, the folk found their alter ego. He seemed at ease making pictures dealing with everyday activities, the human relationships and values most often found among unpretentious, working-class people, the small aspirations of the common man for a better lot in life. As a painter of the black American scene, he plowed the material he knew firsthand.

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Hayden's paintings, in this exhibition, can be classified under one of five thematic categories:

1. The rural South as idea and ideal:

Milking time, Hog Killing time in Virginia, Berry Pickers, Raccoon Up a Persimmon Tree. These paintings depict activities that were typical of rural living and, therefore, are emblems of an era of peace, contentment and simplicity.

2. Rites of friendship:

Blues Singer, No Easy Riders, Checkers Game, Beale Street Blues, Can't Sleep at Night, Central Park Summer. These are recurring scenes of diversion engaged in by those whose lives are closely linked; intimates and cronies who are commonly united by their beliefs, values and perceptions of the world.

3. The family:

The Boy from Home, Sunday Shoes, Faune au Crepuscule, Midsummer Night in Harlem. These paintings comment implicitly and explicitly on the value of the family as a coherent unit, the effect of the extended family, and the importance of the individual member who is shaped by and reflective of the family.

4. The church and old time religion:

Baptizing Day, The Blasphemer. This is an acknowledgment of the central role of the church and religion in black life.

5. The artist as soldier:

10th Cavalry Man, Garvey Parade, Cavalry Escort, West Point. The remembered past from his days in the 24th Infantry and the 10th Cavalry regiments.

There are works, of course, that cannot be thematically placed within any of these categories. One of them is his most well-known single work, *Fetiché et Fleurs*. It was first shown in public at the February 1933 Harmon Foundation exhibition held at the Art Center in New York City.

Fetiché et Fleurs remains one of Hayden's outstanding works since it adroitly and iconoclastically pointed toward a direction for the development of a viable modality for the black artist that, unfortunately, was not to be realized until some thirty or forty years later. It could be argued that Hayden himself did not fully grasp its significance. The painting has become a cultural signifier with the capacity to excite and objectify a response as it allusively and episodically refers to Africa.

The Ballad of John Henry Series

*"When John Henry was a little baby,
Sittin' on his Mama's knee
He said, "The Big Bend Tunnel
On the C. & O. Line
Is gonna be the death of me!"*

Thus begins one of the many versions of the "Ballad of John Henry," the epic story of the steel driver who became a cultural hero because "his life and struggle are symbolic of the struggle of worker against machine, individual against society, the lowly against the powerful, black against white."

Hayden stated that the idea of John Henry appealed to him because it was the story of a powerful and popular working man who belonged to his section of the country and to his won race. Over the years, he began to view John Henry as a symbol of the physical strength of the black man in his struggle for economic survival, and a dramatization of "the beginning of the Negro from agricultural into industrial labor and the practical use of machinery in place of hand labor in the development of industrial America."

However, the key to Hayden's interpretation can be found in the statement he made when the paintings were exhibited in 1947 and again in 1969:

John Henry was not made up of the whole cloth nor was he the Negro counterpart of the mythical Paul Bunyan, but he did live and work in the Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia. For these facts which have been most helpful in my painting the story I am indebted to the book, *John Henry: A Folk Lore Study* by Professor Louis W. Chappell of West Virginia University.

Palmer Hayden died on February 18, 1973 at the age of eighty-three. His last painting was *Cavalry Escort, West Point*. It was to be part of a series depicting black soldiers from the early days of World War I up until World War II, when separate black regiments were abolished. These last paintings were commissioned by the Creative Artists Public Service Program Foundation of New York.

The number of works in this exhibition, although far from being a retrospective, allows one to grasp some of the significance of Hayden as an artist who climbed the "racial mountain" in order to discover himself and his people.

*The preceding text was excerpted from the 1988 exhibition catalog, **Echoes of Our Past: The Narrative Artistry of Palmer C. Hayden**, written by Allan M. Gordon, Ph.D.*

Chronology

- 1890 Palmer C. Hayden is born on January 15 in Widewater, Virginia, to James and Nancy Hedgeman, the fifth child in a family of twelve. Father was a professional hunter and tour guide for fishermen and hunters.
- 1894 Begins drawing inspired by the efforts of an older brother.
- 1906 Goes to Washington, D.C. Works in a drugstore. Joins Ringling Brothers Circus as a roustabout, draws circus performers at night, makes posters.
- 1912 Goes to New York City. Joins army, 24th Infantry Regiment, and is sent to the Philippines.
- 1915 Returns to New York at end of first enlistment.
- 1916 Reenlists. Sent to West Point with 10th Cavalry. Enrolls in correspondence art course.
- 1920 Is discharged from the army. Enrolls in summer art class at Columbia University, July 6 to August 13.
- 1920 Becomes letter-carrier in New York. Quits position in order to have more time to paint. Begins cleaning windows, polishing brass, and tending furnaces.
- 1924 Meets Victor Perard, art instructor at the Cooper Institute (Cooper-Union) in New York, who gives Hayden job as custodian and encourages him to pursue painting.
- 1925 Works two summers at Boothbay Harbor, Maine, for Asa Randall of the 26 Commonwealth Art Colony. Also works in summer cottage of New York woman, who is probably Alice M. Dike and who encourages him to enter painting in the Harmon Foundation exhibition.
- 1926 Receives first solo exhibition at Civic Club in New York. Fifteen works shown: landscapes and marine studies.
- 1927 Wins first prize and four hundred dollars in the painting category at Harmon Foundation exhibition.
- Takes first trip to Paris, France. Possibly studies with M. Clivett Lefevre.
- Exhibits at Bernheim-Jeune, Editeurs d'Art. Receives favorable review.
- 1930 Exhibits at Salon des Tuileries.
- 1931 Exhibits two paintings in American Legion Show in Paris. Both paintings are of black subjects: *Man with a Guitar* and *Camp Meeting*.
- 1932 Returns to New York City.
- 1933 Paints *Fétiche et Fleurs*. Wins the Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Prize at Harmon exhibition.
- 1934 Works as a painter for the W.P.A. easel division.
- 1936 Paints first version of *The Janitor Who Paints*. Takes second trip to Paris.
- 1940 Marries Miriam Hoffman of Des Moines, Iowa.
- 1944 Takes first trip to Big Bend Tunnel in the Berkshires of West Virginia to gather 45 material for *The Ballad of John Henry* series.
- 1947 Exhibits John Henry series at Argent Galleries, New York.
- Meets in Greenwich Village studio of Ellis Wilson along with Joseph Delaney, Buford Delaney, Selma Burke, and Robert Blackburn to "discuss problems of the Negro artist and means of solving them through concerted action on the part of the artist and the public."
- 1969 *The Ballad of John Henry* series is shown at Frick Fine Art Gallery, University of Pittsburgh.
- 1970 Temporarily assigns *The Ballad of John Henry* series to the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution.
- 1973 Receives the Creative Artists Public Service Program Foundation commission to paint black soldier series.
- Dies February 18.

Checklist

Sunday Shoes, 1963

oil on canvas
33¾ x 25 in.

Big Bend Tunnel, 1944-45

Oil on canvas
30 x 40 in.

It's Wrote on the Rock, n.d.

oil on canvas
25 x 31¾ in.

Fétiche et Fleurs, 1932-33

oil on canvas
23½ x 29 in.

Berry Pickers, 1946-47

oil on canvas
30 x 40 in.

Midsummer Night in Harlem, 1936

oil on canvas
25 x 30 in.

No Easy Riders, 1948-50

oil on canvas
27¼ x 35¼ in.

Working on the Railroad, 1939-43

oil on canvas
27 x 33 in.

Cavalry Escort, West Point, 1972-73

oil on canvas
24 x 36 in.

Baptizing Day, 1945

oil on canvas
28 x 35 in.

Milking Time, n.d.

oil on canvas
20 x 30 in.

Faune au Crépuscule, n.d.

oil on canvas
26 x 34 in.

Isle de Bonaventure, n.d.

oil on canvas
27 x 34 in.

Raccoon up a Persimmon Tree, n.d.

oil on canvas
33 x 24 in.

Trinity Church, n.d.

oil on canvas
26 x 20 in.

Beale Street Blues, 1943

oil on canvas
30 x 40 in.

Hog Killing Time in Virginia, n.d.

oil on canvas
28 x 36 in.

Blues Singer, n.d.

oil on canvas
31 x 40 in.

Checkers Game, 1939

oil on canvas
17¾ x 23¾ in.

When John Henry Was a Baby, 1944-47

oil on canvas
30 x 40 in.

His Hammer in His Hand, 1944-47

oil on canvas
27 x 33 in.

His Hammer in the Wind, 1944-47

oil on canvas
30 x 40 in.

John Henry Was the Best in the Land, 1944-47

oil on canvas
30 x 40 in.

The Dress She Wore Was Blue, 1944-47

oil on canvas
36 x 29 in.

**John Henry on the Right,
Steam Drill on the Left, 1944-47**

oil on canvas
30 x 40 in.

Died Wid His Hammer in His Hand, 1944-47

oil on canvas
29 x 38 in.

A Man Ain't Nothin' But a Man, 1944-47

oil on canvas
36 x 28 in.

Where'd You Git Them Hightop Shoes, 1944-47

oil on canvas
30 x 40 in.

Boy From Home, 1948-50

watercolor on paper
15¼ x 18¼ in.

Banjo Song, 1961

watercolor on paper
14 x 16¼ in.

African Dancers, 1932

watercolor on paper
14½ x 18 in.

There Lies That Steel Drivin' Man, 1944-47

oil on canvas
30 x 40 in.

He Laid Down His Hammer and Cried, 1944-47

oil on canvas
30 x 40 in.

Goin' Where Her Man Fell Dead, 1944-47

oil on canvas
40 x 30 in.

The Blasphemer, n.d.

watercolor on paper
19 x 25½ in.

Garvey Parade, n.d.

watercolor on paper
7¼ x 10¼ in.

Central Park Summer, 1942

watercolor on paper
19½ x 26½ in.

10th Cavalry Man, n.d.

watercolor on paper
12 x 18 in.

African Dancer, 1932

watercolor on paper
13 x 10½ in.

Can't Sleep at Night, 1932

watercolor on paper
18½ x 22 in.