

The best painter ever

by Joan Altabe



From time to time, I'm asked to name the best artist in the state where I write art criticism – Florida – and I'm usually without a ready reply.

But a show I saw the other day supplied an immediate answer. The luminary of Florida's picture making is the star of the day – the sun, especially when it's about to retire for the evening.

Here's this art-maker, burned out and ready to drop, and it runs from one cloud to another, washing each with aurora reds – the footprints of its journey across the sky like some strobic play of light pushing at the night.

Behold, Vincent van Sun!

No artist can hold a candle to this daystar when it comes to painting the sky at dusk. Nothing in the long history of art can compare to the spiritual content of Old Sol's elaborate, incandescent candlepower at twilight. Picture making by this fireball eludes all known processes of painting.

Holman Hunt, a 19th-century English painter, sought to capture the setting sun's color and light by working in a small room with screens and curtains to create dark. Painting by natural light in another part of the room, Hunt peeked

into his make-believe edge of night through a hole to render the painting *The Light of the World*.

Early photographers also used elaborate methods to capture natural light, purposely wobbling their cameras during exposure so that their images trembled.

But the mighty daystar in Florida's sky doesn't have to resort to tricks. It has no need to shake anything to get a vibrating effect. It just rouges everything with a throbbing redness that takes away all sense of place. And in its half-light, clouds above look so dark that you expect thunder.

And when the sun stops painting the sky, America's sub-tropics look like one big charcoal drawing.

Even when the sun is up for the day, the sky is still the best show in town. Maybe it's because I grew up in Manhattan, where mountains of concrete crowd out such things, but Florida's upper atmosphere engrosses like few pictures on exhibition.

One minute, the blue yonder is just that – a cerulean lake, smooth and silent – a backdrop for a landscape busy with flowering. The next thing you know, the sky, upstaging even the

showiest plants,
gathers up its
clouds – the dark
and woolly ones,
the silken and the
delicate grays, as if
emptying a closet
– and puts on a
show.



Once, on the horizon against a blackening sky, I saw a statue. It was white, like alabaster. I could almost feel its polish. It looked like the frenzied animal in George Stubb’s famed painting, *Lion Attacking a Horse*. But I could see it was a low-lying cloud that the sky had carved into a horse.

Some whittler, the sky.

Once in a while, the shifting mass looks like sand dunes soft against the gray sky in Eugene Boudin’s *Normandy Women Spreading Wash on the Beach*.

The paintings of romantic painters show up a lot in Florida’s sky.

My favorite novelists also have seen the light and compared clouds to other things. In *The Witches of Eastwick*, John Updike saw plant life: “At the base of this cliff of atmosphere,

cumulous clouds, moments ago as innocuous as flowers, afloat in a pond, had begun to boil.”

In *Karain: A Memory*, Joseph Conrad saw animals: “Ragged edges of black clouds peeped over the hills, and invisible thunderstorms circled outside, growing like wild beasts.”

It makes you wonder what Conrad and Updike would have written had they visited Florida. Everything you can think of shows up in the sky here if you watch it long enough.

Not just here, of course. Skies everywhere are wide-screen motion pictures. Any painters out there noticing? 📷