

THE WOODEN BOAT ON THE RIVER

By John F. Hall

In 1842, Thomas Cole created four paintings representing the four stages of human life: childhood, youth, manhood, and old age. Cole's paintings depict a voyager who travels in a wooden boat on a river through the mid-19th-century American wilderness. I am a writer of nonfiction stories. I only write about things that I have experienced and



Thomas Cole's "Childhood" National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

observed. In 1986, I was a Captain in the Army Reserves. I just obtained Russian video film footage for a Command Post Exercise (CPX) that I was developing for the 100th Training Division. I was in Charlottesville, Virginia to obtain that footage. I had the weekend off and my flight back to Louisville, Kentucky was not scheduled until Monday morning. I drove my rental car back into Washington DC and decided to visit Arlington National Cemetery. Back in 1962, when I first

enlisted in the Army, I was just 17 and President John F. Kennedy was my first Commander in Chief. I never forgot where I was when he was assassinated. I wanted to pay my respects at his grave.

Standing at his gave, my mind drifted back to the time that I was a paratrooper in B Company, 327 Infantry, 101St Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, Kentucky. It was like the memory was seared in my mind. I remembered like it was yesterday. I was sitting on a wooden Army footlocker. The rest of my platoon pulled their footlockers in a semi-circle around the console television in our open bay barracks. Not a single word was spoken. We were 101St Airborne paratroopers and not afraid to jump into the fire of combat. Yet I looked around and observed tears running down the cheeks of my fellow "Band of Brothers." One tear rolled down my cheek, onto my upper lip and into my mouth. It had a salty taste.

My Band of Brother and I were intently focused on the television screen as we watched President Kennedy's widow, Jacqueline Kennedy standing next to a high ranking soldier. He was holding a small candle. You could barely see its flame. I remembered the words that a preacher once said, "If everyone would light just one little candle, what a bright world this would be." We continued to watch as Jacqueline Kennedy lit a gas soaked small rag on a stick from the candle held by that soldier. She then lit the eternal flame and brought it to life at the end of the burial service. This was First Lady Jackie's idea. She had previously admired the eternal flame at the tomb of the French Unknown Soldier in Paris, France. She felt that a similar tribute would be appropriate for her husband. In World War II, He was a Lieutenant (junior grade) and the commander of PT—109. This was a PT boat (patrol torpedo boat) and on a profoundly dark, starless, moonless, night of August 1, 1943, in the Blakett Strait, south of Kolombangara in the Solomon Islands, at 2:30 in the morning a shape loomed out of the darkness three hundred yards off PT 109's

starboard bow. The young Lieutenant and his crew first believed it to be another PT boat . When it became apparent that it was one of the Japanese destroyers (the Amagiri), Kennedy attempted to turn starboard to bring his torpedoes to bear. But there was not enough time. the PT 109 was hit forward of the forward starboard torpedo tube, ripping away the starboard aft side of the boat. The impact tossed Kennedy around in the cockpit. Most of the crew were knocked in the water. The one man below decks, engineer Patrick McMahon, miraculously escaped, although he was badly burned by the exploding fuel. Kennedy's boat was made of double-planked mahogany wood and had a top speed of 40 to 50 knots an hour.

The hot sun was bearing down on me and no wind was stirring as I walked away from President Kennedy's Eternal Flame. After walking about a mile towards the White House, I stepped into the National Gallery of Art, just to cool off. The nearest that I ever came to being an artist is when I drew cartoons for the Hopkinsville Community College's newspaper, the Chronicle. I believe that it was the brainchild of my friend, Mike Herndon.

I was in my military green uniform. One of the security guards recognized me for my



Thomas Cole's "Youth" National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

service. I walked into a very large room and observed the largest pointing that I have ever seen. I walked over to examine the massive painting. I learned that Thomas Cole was intent on advancing landscape painting in a way that conveyed the universal truths about human existence, religious faith, and the natural world. His paintings trace the religious journey of every man along the "River of Life." The river flowing through each canvas reflects life's twists and turns, while the season and time of day mirror each stage of life. The landscape of each painting reflects one of the seasons of the year. In each picture the boat's direction of travel is reversed from the previous painting. In the "Youth" painting, the boy takes control of the boat and aims for a shining castle in the sky. In the "Manhood" painting, the adult relies on prayer and religious faith to sustain him through rough waters and a threatening landscape. In the "Old Age" painting, the man becomes old and the angel guides him to heaven across the waters of eternity.



Thomas Cole's "Manhood" National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

I was standing alone in this large room looking at an amazing painting. Thankfully, Thomas Cole wrote explanatory texts to accompany each painting. The texts effectively served as a reading companion for the

viewers. Certainly, there is no way that I, ignorant of art, could even come to What Thomas Cole wanted to convey in his paintings. Cole wrote this about his “Childhood” painting: “A golden boat emerges from a dark cave—a mysterious earthy-source— from which a joyous infant reaches out to the world with wonder and naivete. Rose light bathes the scene of fertile beauty as an angelic figure guides the boat forward.”

I remember when I was a young boy, a life time ago, I remember hearing the expression, “Castles in the sky.” I always wonder what a castle in the sky would look like. There is in my distance memory a song with those words. Thomas Cole wrote these about his “Youth” painting. “The voyager confidently assumes control at the helm of the boat. Oblivious to the increasing turbulence and unexpected twists of the stream, the pilgrim boldly strives to reach an aerial castle, emblematic of adolescent ambition for fame and glory.”

Thomas Cole's third painting, to me, is spot on that Christ is in charge of our lives as we fear the unknown. Nature's fury, evil demons, and self-doubt threaten the voyager in Cole's “Manhood” painting. Cole wrote, “The helm of the boat is gone; the voyager has lost control of his life. The angel looks down from the clouds as he is whirled towards violent rapids and bare, fractured rocks. Only divine intervention can save the voyager from a tragic fate.”

I sometimes think that I survived Cole's rapids and that I have not yet reached his fourth and final painting, “Old Age.” I'm young at heart thanks to my grandchildren, Andrea,



Thomas Cole's "Old Age" National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Heather, John-John, Skyler, Jade, and Lexie. I have friends like Trish, Mike, Dr. Butler, and Audrey, that find some merit in my stories. Cole wrote this about his “Old Age” painting, “The stream of life has reached the ocean of eternity where the voyager floats aboard his broken, weathered vessel. All signs of nature and corporeal existence are cast aside. The guardian angel, whom the voyager sees for the first time, directs his gaze towards a beckoning, soft light emerging from the parting clouds—the vision of eternal life.”

In Psalm 18:2 are these words, “God is bedrock under my feet, the castle in which I live, my rescuing knight. My God—the high crag where I run for dear life, hiding behind the boulders, safe in the granite hideout.” As I walked out of the National Gallery of Art, so many decades ago, I may never know how long I would be in that wooden boat on that river of life.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:

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