

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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NATIONAL GALLERY ACQUIRES COLE VOYAGE OF LIFE SERIES

WASHINGTON, D.C. May 17, 1971. The Voyage of Life, a series of four famous allegorical paintings by Thomas Cole (1801-1848), founder of the American school of romantic landscape painting, has been acquired by the National Gallery of Art.

Each measuring more than four by six feet, the paintings were acquired with funds given by the late Ailsa Mellon Bruce. They are now on temporary exhibition in Gallery 62.

The paintings were purchased from the Bethesda Hospital and Deaconess Association in Cincinnati, where they had remained for more than 100 years in relative obscurity. They were hanging in a room used as the Association's chapel, which had been an art gallery when the Bethesda Hospital was the mansion of George K. Shoenberger, an art collector who bought the four paintings around 1845. The works were "rediscovered" in 1962 by Edward H. Dwight, Director of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, New York, and Richard J. Boyle, Curator of Painting of the Cincinnati Art Museum, who followed up a clue published by the Cincinnati Enquirer.

J. Carter Brown, Director of the National Gallery, has said: "The great achievements of Romantic painting have only recently

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begun to receive the attention they enjoyed in their own day. These paintings, in their breadth of imagination and brilliance of execution stand as landmarks in American cultural history."

The National Gallery's series is the second of two versions Cole painted of the "allegory of human life" he had been considering for at least 10 years before he found someone to commission it. The first version, now in the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, was painted in 1839 for Samuel Ward, Sr., a New York banker and art collector. Ward died while the work was in progress, and quarrels with his heirs led Cole to paint a second set of the allegory in the belief he would be unable to exhibit the first.

For the second set, painted in Italy in 1841-2, Cole worked from watercolor sketches he had brought with him from America. There are some differences in composition between the two sets, especially in the third picture, Manhood, while in all the pictures the details vary considerably. The series was highly praised and much copied in the nineteenth century.

Each of the paintings is a fantastic landscape, devised to suit Cole's moralizing purpose: a description of the human condition at each of four stages of life. He wrote a detailed explanation of his intentions. In the first picture, Childhood, the Voyager in his boat emerges from a cave representing "our earthly origin, and the mysterious past." The "rosy light of morning" illuminates a landscape filled with flowers symbolizing the joys of childhood. An "Angelic Form," the Voyager's guardian spirit, steers the craft.

In Youth the Voyager, now a young man, steers the boat himself toward a distant "air-built Castle...emblematic of the day-dreams of youth, its aspirations after glory and fame." The stream

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and landscape have broadened to suggest the wider scope of youth's experience.

In Manhood the Voyager is represented in a stormy, rugged landscape. The boat's helm is gone, so that the middle-aged passenger cannot steer, but looks imploringly toward heaven as the craft speeds toward the ocean "that figures the end of life." Demonic forms representing the temptations of suicide, intemperance and murder hover in the sky.

In Old Age the Voyager and his battered boat are becalmed at an opening onto the vast ocean "to which all life is tending." The landscape is vague, dark and barren--"the world to Old Age is destitute of interest." The Angelic being, present in each of the paintings but hitherto unseen by the traveler, now shows him "glorious light" streaming from the sky, and angels descending to welcome him.

Cole, born in England and largely self-taught, was "the first to make the recording and expressive interpretation of the America wilderness his major theme," Howard S. Merritt writes in the 1969 catalog of a large Cole exhibition. The artist came to believe that paintings should be "the conveyor of moral, religious and philosophic truths, and that landscape...could be the means to this end."

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