

The Man in the Arena

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Narrative Paintings

Lettering Arts

"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."

Theodore Roosevelt - "Citizenship in a Republic," Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910

Thus begins the painting entitled "The Man in the Arena" after the popular name for the above Theodore Roosevelt excerpt... a widely sought after and identified—with quote, this text forms the keystone of the painting.

Over the course of the year 2002 and 2003, I have been meeting with a group of men of common faith whose purpose it is to encourage and support one another. During this time, I have been in transition from a career in Sales to my gift/calling of using my artwork to create these contemplative paintings. This group has provided me with inspiration and support as well as a place for debate and growth.

Robert Hasson, my brother, is a man who has built a successful business as a major painting contractor in the United States. I have watched as he began as a single individual painting rooms and houses to earn money in college, to taking on employees gradually in building his business. I have watched his small victories, and his struggles. I have watched him overcome adversity to achieve a high level of success, all the while keeping his integrity throughout the process. I am proud of the man he has become, proud to call him my brother. The "Man in the Arena" has long been the guiding quote of Bobs in his business and his life.

As a student in Calligraphy, I had interpreted this text, but only as an exercise in a lettering project. Bob has been on me for years to do a proper rendering of the text, and it was finally the right time for the "interpretation" to begin.

Within our small "band of brothers" is a man named John Block. John is a former NBA player (he is 6'10") and spent over 20 years coaching in the college ranks. I chose him as my model because he has the right "experience"; he has the tracks on his rugged face that show he has indeed been "in the arena", literally as well as figuratively.

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Strangely enough, while I had my model and guiding text, I did not initially have the overall theme. I knew that John would be on the canvas, and that the Roosevelt quote would be prominent, and I had an idea to have the ancient Coliseum in Rome as a background element, but beyond this I had no direction for the rest of the painting.

I had measured a space in the conference room of Bob's contracting firm, and so I cut a canvas that would stretch to 36 X 60 to fit there. I began to write the Roosevelt text in a dark navy ink in a vertical column that I knew would remain prominent throughout the painting process.

I then had John come over to the studio for photos. I articulated to John the feelings that I was trying to capture, and also asked for some of his input on the text. One thing that we both agreed that should be portrayed in his expression was "quiet confidence". This would allow the viewer to feel that the man portrayed in the painting was experienced in battle, and though he had been scarred, he was a man who knew victory and defeat. Furthermore, this man is willing to enter into future battles for cause: I wanted to see a man that, if I went into battle, I'd want on my side.

After the initial text, I then began to integrate the background washes. More than any other canvas before, this background needed to be an earthy but active one. I used umbers and reds to symbolize the "dust and sweat and blood", and then continued with umbers and greens to symbolize the field of battle or the "arena". This background was painted with energy and force, and with a splashing element that gives the feeling of being in the fray, and both speed and force are elements in its formation.

Onto this background, (painted to seem to be "behind" the text) comes "the man in the arena". John Block is portrayed in profile, his arm resting on his knee, his hand hanging limp and gazing intently to his left off into the distance. ¹ His gaze is one that has seen much, and that looks forward into the future as a new horizon, a new adventure, a new challenge.

At this point, the painting came to a standstill. I had a deadline on another project, but more importantly I could not "see" the painting finished yet.

While the painting "sat", I was introduced to a book called "Wild at Heart"². The gist of this faith based book (for me) was about a man reclaiming his masculinity, not shrinking from "the adventure" and entering into "the battle". This book began to resound in me, and the further I read, the more it rang true to me personally. The idea began to form for the theme of "Arena", and I began to research quotes and scripture about a man's quest in life, and following his passion or gifting... and fighting the battle to get there.

-----Past-----Present-----Future-----

It is easy to go down into Hell; night and day, the gates of dark Death stand wide; but to climb back again, to retrace one's steps to the upper air - there's the rub, the task.

Virgil (70 BC - 19 BC), Aeneid

Many of us have had experience "going into the depths"... and of fighting to come back again. It is a part of the human experience. The key to the victor's life is the will and the vision to come back again, and not to stay in the abyss or wallow in the mud... to realize there are greater things God has for him to accomplish.

The Virgil text is rendered in a bold, heavy hand in the color of blood, symbolizing the battle. It is also placed behind the man in the arena, signifying his emergence from a hard-fought contest. He knows the battles of the past, but is looking forward (literally and figuratively) to greater things. He is figuratively "elbowing them out of the way" to move forward.

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Over the text of Virgil is placed the “present”:

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.

Philippians 4: 12, 13

The passage from Philippians talks about being grateful, and being confident, and having the confidence and faith to allow God to work in our lives and trust that He knows what he is doing. This text, written in a white script, is intended to portray the freedom and weightlessness of allowing God to work in our lives and knowing that “all things work together for good”³ It is written over the Virgil text and in front of the man in the arena.

And finally, a man must have a “future”... something to look forward to.

The proper function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.

- -- Jack London

For me, to add this quote to the other two is defining. It speaks to me of the necessity of a man to use his gifts and talents to the fullest... to function at full capacity in the adventure of what life will bring in the future.

-----The Pillars of Strength-----

Symbolically, in addition to the “Arena” text, two other text columns are placed one behind, and one on the same plane as, “the man in the arena”.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Ephesians 6: 12 - 17

A man in the arena, in preparing for battle, must have armor for protection. This symbolic passage about armor relates to the battles of life and our need for the strength of One other than ourselves to go through them. It is placed behind the man, and symbolically is also in the distance (written in a way that shows this to be an ancient text, written at the time of the Colosseum, that has weathered over the centuries but nevertheless has stood the test of time).

It is behind him also because it is a foundational truth for the overall balanced success of a man in dealing with the cares, trials and temptations that life has to offer to distract him from his higher goals, dreams and aspirations.

To live in the presence of great truths and eternal laws, to be led by permanent ideals - that is what keeps a man patient when the world ignores him, and calm and unspoiled when the world praises him.

- Honore De Balzac

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The Balzac text is placed on an even plane with “the man”... it speaks of how a man can keep things in perspective in relating himself to the people around him and humanity as a whole.

The most prominent and foremost text remains Roosevelt’s “Man in the Arena”. This speaks of the struggle, the battle, and the aspiration of trying to be all a man can be.

These three text columns taken together surround the “Man in the Arena”. Columns, or pillars, in architecture, are used to hold up a roof or a covering. The number three symbolizes the Trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Spirit functions as a spiritual covering over a man’s life as he tries to walk in God’s way, and is not visible to the naked eye. Therefore, though there is no visible covering, the symbolism of the protection is there.

This brings us to the final text of the canvas.

We have a man, portrayed as a seasoned warrior, in the arena (the ancient Roman Colosseum).

This Colosseum was the symbol of man’s strength... a feat of Roman architecture, the site of testing for warrior against warrior. Onto the architecture of this structure is rendered the seventh and final quote (seven symbolizing the number of completion). As a counter to what man attempts as a show of his strength is the assertion of an all powerful God who unfathomably surpasses anything man can accomplish. Rendered in the classic Roman letters⁴ made famous in the era of the Colosseum, is the assertion

“Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD”- Zechariah 4:6.

A reminder to us, that no matter what the best of our efforts, and no matter our talent, and no matter what we may accomplish, The God of Creation is far above our efforts. In this painting, it is my way of asserting that a man must always remember that he doesn’t stand alone in his accomplishments.

¹ Michelangelo’s famous statue of David comes to mind here. Scholars speculate that David looks “guardedly off to his left” is perhaps a reflection of the “medieval belief that the right side is protected by God while the left is open to evil”. – “The World of Michelangelo” ©1961 Time Inc. Robert Coughlan, Ed.

² “Wild at Heart” ©2001 by John Eldredge - Thomas Nelson Publishers

³ Romans 8:28

⁴ The Trajan inscription is perhaps the most famous example of the Roman letterform that still survives today as one of the most beautiful and elegant. Most government buildings, for example, still use this in carved letterform.