

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome back to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, an audio series from the National Gallery of Art. I'm Celeste Headlee.

When we engage with art, it kick-starts our five senses. We hear music or feel the beat of a drum in our chests. We see the vivid colors of a photo. We take in the three dimensions of a sculpture. We savor the taste of fine food.

Sometimes, you can smell the carved wood or the smeared oil paint.

But when there's crossover, when a piece of art activates multiple senses and they begin to interact and intertwine, that's when things really get interesting. When we listen to melody, what images flash through our minds? When we study the brushwork in a painting, what do we hear?

This podcast lives in that crossover, in the space at the center of our five senses' Venn diagram.

In each episode, you'll learn about a work at the National Gallery. And you'll hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music.

Sound Thoughts on Art delves into our personal relationship with art and the unique response we have to beautifully made things.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[RIVER RUNNING SOFTLY]

CELESTE HEADLEE: If life were a river, what would you see as you navigated its twists and turns? When in your life has the sky gone dark, the water rough? And when has the water been smooth, the sun shining? And since it's growing closer with every passing second, it's worth musing on: What do you see at the end of the river?

The American naturalist painter Thomas Cole tackled these questions in a four-part visual odyssey called *The Voyage of Life*.

These works are unusual, and not just because there are four—*Childhood*, *Youth*, *Manhood*, and *Old Age*. They're also large paintings, with vivid, high-contrast colors and tiny details nestled among the painted leaves.

When Hawaiian musician Daniel Ho combed through the National Gallery's collection for us, *The Voyage of Life* jumped out at him. As someone whose childhood revolved around being in the water, certainly—and as someone who's still grappling with what it means to grow up.

Daniel was so moved by the Cole paintings that he composed an original suite for us. Music that takes us on a journey inspired by Cole's voyage—and by Daniel's, too.

DANIEL HO: These four paintings are so special to me because I feel like I've experienced these things, and I relate to them on a personal level and visually as well. And I wanted to see

how I could create art—instead of using colors, I have 12 notes to work with. And making it personal by tying it to themes. For example, in *Childhood*, the motif for the entire piece is E, G, A, and C. And I base that on the degrees of a C scale.

E the third degree, C-D-E. So three, five, six, eight, are the notes E, G, A, and C. And March 5, 1968, is my birthday. And I started in the highest registers of the ukulele, because a child is tiny and small and it's cute. And I wasn't cute, I was a brat. But it's a tiny sound.

I use very simple harmony. Not too much—or no dissonance at all. So it's very pure, and happy. And as the music progresses, make it a little warmer by changing the modes to Mixolydian for the youthful part. And in *Manhood*, it turns to a minor key, and it has a rhythm going, and it's—you're supposedly in your prime, so I did it in a prime meter, which is a meter of seven-four, which we call an odd meter.

And there's turmoil in it, and there's rhythm, and there's energy, and there's angst, and there's anger.

And then, in the *Old Age* part, I returned to the original theme, which is birth and death, the two for-sure things in life.

And I returned to the original theme, but did it in a more thoughtful way, with counterpoint and a little more wisdom about music. Not so simple harmonies. And ending with the slowing of movement, and harmonics, which are like bell-like tones on the ukulele.

And that is when our body slows, and slows, and slows, until it stops moving.

[MUSIC - DANIEL HO, "THE VOYAGE OF LIFE"]

CELESTE HEADLEE: For more on Thomas Cole, we're joined by Franklin Kelly. He's an expert on the Hudson River School of painters and the Christiane Ellis Valone curator of American paintings at the National Gallery of Art.

So tell me about how these paintings are exhibited at the Gallery.

FRANKLIN KELLY: They are exhibited in an octagonally shaped room, which has four walls and four doorways. That room is a gallery that you enter right off of one of the garden courts of our main floor of our West Building, the older of the two large buildings that comprise the National Gallery.

And when you come into that space, you basically are surrounded by the paintings.

Because each wall—each of the four walls—has one painting. And so, if you can get oriented—and there are these text panels that actually reproduce Thomas Cole's own descriptions. They're not some curator like me telling you what to think. They're Thomas Cole, Thomas Cole the artist, telling you what to think, which is—that's better.

And you get oriented with *Childhood*, the first one. And then you can follow them around that sort of circle. Literally follow the course of *The Voyage of Life*. Now, people think, gosh, that must have been constructed exactly for those paintings and exactly how those paintings were meant to be seen. We don't know, in fact, *precisely* how the paintings were meant to be seen. Because if you imagine them—and let's say whether this is Samuel Ward, the man who commissioned the first set, or the man in Cincinnati who bought the second set—if you imagine those four large paintings framed, we're looking at nine-foot-wide objects. Four of them in a line is going to take a *very* long wall. And imagine that in a domestic setting.

So we don't know for a fact whether Cole meant for them to be in a line. More likely, he may have meant for them to be hung as two pairs. One over the other, in the case of *Childhood*, and *Youth*. And then *Manhood*, and *Old Age*. That's possible. They may have been meant to hang as two pairs on two separate walls.

Anyway, this is all speculation. We don't know for a fact. We actually do know how he meant *The Course of Empire* to hang, because he made—fortunately for us—a nice little design, which survives. But we don't know that.

And the room—the gallery, the octagonal gallery where they currently hang—is where they've always hung. But people are often amused to know that octagonal gallery was there from the beginning.

When the Gallery opened in 1941, that octagonal room was there. We didn't make it specifically for *The Voyage of Life*. We've painted it, and we've done some architectural details here and there, but no. That was one of those fortuitous things. It was the perfect space, almost.

When I first saw *The Voyage of Life*, I can remember exactly when it was. It was my senior year in high school, in 1971. I grew up in Richmond, Virginia. We came on a field trip to Washington to visit the art museums and the other museums. And of course, senior in high school, a boy. Probably imagine I was trying to do other things—escape and not...

But I remember we came to the National Gallery. And one of the places we walked into, the paintings had literally just been acquired. I think there must have been a sign or something that said, recent acquisition. And I walked into that room, and I went, wow, you know. And I actually bought postcards of the four paintings. And I had those postcards with me for years and years. Through graduate school and everything like that.

And then one day I was—one holiday season I was making some homemade Christmas cards, and I cut them up and glued them onto cards, but—anyway, I remember. But I remember walking into that octagonal room, and maybe I didn't think to myself, oh, this is perfect. I just thought, wow, what an experience. What a group of paintings. What a way to experience them.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So maybe we can go through them bit by bit, and talk a little bit about parallels between your own life and each stage of life Thomas Cole portrayed. Because we start out with *Childhood*. Tell me a little bit about your own memories of childhood and how they resonate with his portrait of them.

DANIEL HO: Wow. I grew up in Hawaii, and I spent a lot of my time on the water. I surfed. I started on boogie boards, and hand boards, and paipo boards, and then surfboards. And then my dad bought us a boat. And it was called a folbot. F-O-L-B-O-T. And it was a little sidebar in a *National Geographic* magazine, we had collected *National Geographic* magazines. And it was a boat that you built, you put together. It was a wooden frame, and vinyl stretched over it. So it was very much like a kayak.

So we spent a couple of months varnishing the wood, and putting this frame together. And built this boat. It was a 16-foot kayak. And my brother, and father, and I would go in Wahiawa Reservoir, and Kahala Stream, and Ala Wai Canal. And go crabbing, and fishing, and paddling in Ala Moana Yacht Harbor. And I just had a wonderful time on the ocean. And I know how to steer a boat. I've paddled the Hawaiian outrigger canoes before.

So I also relate on a personal level, of being on a stream and listening to the water lapping up against the side of the boat. I really love that sound. Or the bottom of a surfboard. The ocean, and rivers, and streams are a big part of my life.

I lived in Kaimuki, and Saint Louis Stream was between me and my high school, Saint Louis High School. And all summer long, my brother, and friends, and I would spend the days in the stream: going all the way down the stream, up Manoa Valley. Catching swordtails, and guppies, and cichlids, and tilapia. And racing crayfish—we used to catch crayfish, and race crayfish.
[LAUGHS]

CELESTE HEADLEE: (LAUGHING) Oh my god. I love that so much.

DANIEL HO: Yeah, I mean, it was quite a life. It was a lot of fun. The streams weren't—they were dirty, but they weren't quite as polluted as they are now. So it was really a joy. After school we had to finish our homework then we'd go to Waikiki. And we surfed until sunset, I used to sit on my surfboard between sets. And I would stare out at the sunset, and dream of being a musician in Los Angeles.

And, well, I liked groups like Journey at the time. [LAUGHS] But I always wanted to be the lead guitarist in a rock group or something like that. So there's really nothing else I've ever aspired to be.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So I wonder—that kind of takes us into the next painting in the series, which is *Youth*. And in that painting you see the child saying farewell, right? Waving off the youth. And there's the castle, which you assume is representing the youth's dreams, right? And for you, that dream was being in tight pants like Steve Perry and singing Journey songs? Your dream was becoming a musician, was it not?

DANIEL HO: It was, it was. Yeah, I just loved music so much, for a couple of reasons. If you pick up an instrument like a guitar or sit at a piano, everything you're thinking and feeling kind of disappears. And you're just in this space. It's peaceful, it's beautiful. And I thought, wow, it'd be really neat to have a life, and to see the world playing music, like these musicians were doing.

I can look back on it now as kind of a confusing time because you're gathering knowledge, you're learning, you're learning about things you knew nothing about. And even in childhood, right?

But what was confusing in my youth is the mixture of faith and fact. The knowledge that we were learning and the things that we were being taught. I went to a Catholic elementary school and a Catholic high school: Saint Patrick's Elementary and Saint Louis High School. And faith and fact, they can be kind of two different things. [LAUGHS] As we can see now, here in the pandemic, right?

And I think it wasn't until decades later when I realized like, hey, wait a minute, you know? So it was a confusing time because it didn't all add up. And I didn't know what to believe. Do I believe what I was told or taught? Or do I believe knowledge?

CELESTE HEADLEE: Is it common for artwork of the 19th century, American or not, to try to tell a story?

FRANKLIN KELLY: It's common for art to try to tell a story in other types of art and other types of painting. And there's something called history painting, which is a grand catch-all term, and it's much older than the 19th century. It was being done by artists long before that. But the kind of paintings where you think of a story being told quite literally, whether it's a biblical story, Adam and Eve or the Prodigal Son or whatever. Or whether it's an historical event, an actual historical episode. Or whether it's a story from literature or mythology.

But in those works, it's the figures—it's the human figures—who enact the drama, and tell the story. And quite frankly, make the narrative somewhat easier to understand visually. What Cole was doing, in some ways, quite simply, was trying to fuse history painting with landscape painting. And one of the earliest ways he looked into doing this was borrowing from contemporary American literature subjects.

For instance, he created several paintings in 1827, right at the beginning of his career, based on James Fenimore Cooper's popular novels, *The Last of the Mohicans*. And he, in a sense, illustrated scenes from that book. Which allowed him to do, number one, something he was already very good at: portraying American nature. And number two, to add a layer of meaning. In the case of using James Fenimore Cooper's story, people who read the book could associate with it. They could understand that.

Cooper himself, knew Cole's work. And when he saw those works inspired by his literature, he said, he's trying to do something that has not been accomplished before. I think he meant in American art specifically, but certainly he meant that in a very positive way. And that was essentially to fuse historical meaning, or meaning from literature or whatever, with landscape painting.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So did he often make multiple paintings as a set?

FRANKLIN KELLY: You can't say that he often did it, but he did it enough that it's a major, major part of what we consider his great achievements. Cole was very interested, from the beginning of his career, in doing something with landscape painting that you don't necessarily normally think a landscape painting would do. And that is conveying meanings, and messages, morals, and elevated lessons, in some ways through more than just depicting the visual facts of nature—whether that's trees, fields, rocks, mountains, clouds, whatever.

He really wanted his paintings to have meaning. And one of the ways he decided he would work towards that goal was the notion of series paintings. First he started with just two paintings. Two views of the Garden of Eden: one before the expulsion of Adam and Eve, one after. But by creating more than one picture, he was able to create a kind of narrative that goes across time and space, literally, that gives him a chance to build a story.

He went on, very determined to make that part of his artistic intention and purpose. And in 1836, he finished the first of his multi-part—of more than two—series pictures, which is called *The Course of Empire*. Which was a five-part series, looking at the rise and fall, in landscape paintings, set in landscape, of an imaginary civilization, from its primitive origins, to its rise to a grand city on the side of a bay, to its destruction by outside invaders, and then ultimately its decline into ruin.

Those were the most ambitious landscape paintings, by far, that had been created in America up to that time, 1836. And they were quite—understandably, they were a sensation when he exhibited them in New York. And people, I think, they responded to the quality, to the power, but also to this notion of meaning, of important lessons that could be learned by looking at art.

CELESTE HEADLEE: And he created two versions. He did these four paintings twice, did he not?

FRANKLIN KELLY: He did. When he conceived of an idea for a grand series of paintings—and these are not just four paintings, they're large scale. And you have to imagine, there's a lot of work. There's a lot of expense, in terms of materials and time, that go into these. And for an artist to undertake something like that on his own is fairly daring. So Cole always hoped that he could find a patron to commission his works. And indeed, after *The Course of Empire* was completed in 1836, he immediately started looking for patrons who would do his next—who would help fund his next idea for a multi-part series, *The Voyage of Life*.

And he found such a patron in a New York banker named Samuel Ward, who agreed to commission the paintings. But unfortunately, Samuel Ward passed away before that first set of four paintings was complete.

Cole went on to complete them. They were paid for. They went into Samuel Ward's estate.

And then Cole had no access to them. He couldn't exhibit them. He couldn't show them to people. He couldn't go look at them himself, if he wanted to make prints after them, whatever. So he did something else. He painted a second set. A complete repainting. Largely the same, not

entirely. There's some differences. But he did that on his own, during 1841, '42, while he was, interestingly enough, living and working in Rome.

And then he brought that set back to America. And that second set is the one that became actually the one that was known first. Because the first set was still tied up in the estate.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Oh, right. Of course, yeah.

FRANKLIN KELLY: Yes, indeed. So it's a sort of curious historical fact. The second set becomes the first known. But then eventually, the first set works its way out and becomes known. And Cole actually sells the second set in 1845 to a wealthy Cincinnati patron. And the pictures go off to Cincinnati, and they're seen there, and they're seen by artists who visit there. And Cincinnati was quite an interesting center for the arts in the 19th century.

But after a while, the paintings are forgotten, and they sort of fade into obscurity. And that second set then disappears from public and historical knowledge and recognition really until the 1960s, when it's quote "rediscovered." And then, not long after its rediscovery, acquired by the National Gallery.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's the suite Daniel Ho composed for us, titled *The Voyage of Life*, played in full.

[MUSIC - DANIEL HO, "THE VOYAGE OF LIFE"]

CELESTE HEADLEE: You've mentioned the pandemic and the impact it's had on your thinking a couple of times. And we're focusing on *Manhood*, which is what Thomas Cole called the third painting. Which is full—it's got—the sky's parting to let through the light and maybe the figure of an angel or divine spirit, something like that, and he's praying. But at the same time, the landscape is, dark and stormy, and scary. And the water is turbulent, and there are sharp rocks sticking out of it.

And I wonder if that has relevance for you, if some of what you've gone through over the past two years echoes in the darker side of this painting.

DANIEL HO: I think it does, I think it does. So March of 2020, I think was when it started, the lockdown began. We had just come off a tour with the State Department in Brunei and Thailand. And they were starting to close up countries. The Philippines was already closed to tourists. And we got home just in time, and the lockdown began. And for the first time since I started my professional career in 1990, I actually didn't have any work at all.

So I pretty much work seven days a week. Like, I'm always recording something, or writing something, or finishing a project, or doing something. And that's been my life for a long time, 30 years. And suddenly, every gig got canceled, every record project got canceled. And it was a little surreal. And certainly unpredictable, because nobody knew what was going on. And we're staying home, and I didn't know what to think.

I spent time in—I dug a 50-foot terrace on the hillside, thinking that I'd plant something in the backyard. I never work in the garden, that was my first time. Dug two terraces, but I'm really trying to figure out what to do going forward. Luckily, I didn't have so much financial pressure so it wasn't too bad. It wasn't too worrisome, but it was kind of surreal, and a little bit unnerving to think that, wow, you could just go to a grocery store and catch this virus, and you're kind of done.

I kind of roll with the punches, so I just look around me, see what's going on, and decide how I can best survive this situation, or be happy in this current situation.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It's interesting that this painting uses the waterway. Because so often these passages from, say, youth to childhood and then adulthood, they really are a transition, right? They are a day-to-day, sometimes it changes so gradual that you don't realize they're happening.

And then, over time, you'll realize—if you look at the difference between *Youth* and *Manhood*, those two paintings—the difference is vast. And that's sort of what adulthood, I feel like, is to me. There's all these little changes happening bit by bit. And then suddenly one day you look around and you realize, oh my god, this is not what I thought adulthood was, but here I am.

DANIEL HO: Yeah, I totally agree with that. Growing up, sitting on my surfboard, dreaming of being a musician someday. Of course you don't know what to expect. And then in your youth, and going to school, and studying, and practicing, and learning, you still don't know what to expect. You're still gathering knowledge about the world. And my experiences were limited to an island in the Pacific.

And as you mentioned, transitioning to womanhood, or manhood, or adulthood: wow, there's a lot of responsibilities. Things that keep you from living your dream. You're doing what you have to do, rather than what you want to do. And finding the balance there is kind of a tug of war, and it's a big sacrifice. If you want to be a musician, a musician has no clear path to a career, right? You don't go to school, and pass the bar, and say, OK, I'm a musician.

It just doesn't work that way, like being a painter. But you have to have that passion. You have to do it seven days a week. And you really got to believe in yourself and work at it, and even when no one's believing in you. And then and you kind of get a little something going, but then you throw responsibility on top of that, like a mortgage. Or my father had a stroke when I was 19 years old, and I had to drop out of school, move back to Hawaii, and caregive for a couple of years. And take care of a lot of financial responsibilities as well, for the next 20 years, and so on.

And those things are part of being an adult. And it was not an easy time. It was a very long time. Decades, right? And not a lot changes except going gray, and losing hair, and things like that. But you don't really notice the year-to-year or day-to-day changes like we did in our youth and childhood.

And I think Thomas Cole's painting is a little bit darker than I imagined my—looking back on my experience during this period. But certainly, the rapids? Yeah, I went there. I did that.

CELESTE HEADLEE: When music becomes not *just* something you love, but something that is work, something that has to happen in order to pay the bills, how do you maintain your joy in it?

DANIEL HO: Wow, that's a good question. When I was in high school, I had a mentor: my band teacher, Ray Wessinger. He used to be the director of radio at NBC, assistant music director at MGM back in the '50s and '60s, in its heyday. He retired to Hawaii, and to pass his time he became a band director at Saint Louis High School. He took me under his wing, and he told me he saw potential in me. And he said, if you want to be a musician you have to do everything I say. I said, OK. This is in seventh grade, when I first met him.

So he had me learn how to arrange, how to write for a big band, play bass, play percussion, play piano. And he said, the reason you need to know all these things is, because you never know what you will be doing for a living. If someone needs an arranger, if somebody needs a bandleader, if someone—if you play guitar, and there's an opening for a bass player, you better know how to play bass.

And I moved to Los Angeles with—not being particularly good at anything, but I was versatile. So I always worked in one way or another. I've orchestrated for films, I've had stuff in TV shows, I sang on films, or played different instruments.

I started my career in the '90s, in contemporary jazz. And then I went to Hawaiian slack-key guitar, and played solo guitar, and then ukulele, and then started singing. And then publishing instructional or music books. And now I design instruments with Pepe Romero.

I still have a passion for learning, so right now I'm learning about filming, and video production, and lighting, and apertures, and shutter speeds. And I love it. And it's all the same, as we look at these paintings with Thomas Cole, I see the lighting, I see the point of focus, I see the way he—well, I don't know if it's called framing when you paint, but his composition. The subject is not in the center, it's—And the movement, and the energy, and the—I can identify those things and its components in the same way that we would look at music and say, oh, that's a C chord. And that's the melody. And she's singing on the 9th or raise the 11th, and that's why it has that sound.

So I think what keeps it exciting for me is turning over new stones, and learning new skills, and doing different things. And it probably was 10 or 12 years ago when I actually kind of stopped working in music and focused entirely on original music and my own art. And I gave up our record company. We had a lot of different artists, maybe nine different artists on our label. We did acoustic music, and Hawaiian music.

It was more of a job.

Back then I used to produce a lot of records, and a lot of business, and a lot of accounting, and royalty payments, and things like that. And about 10 or 12 years ago I thought, I really want to spend my time going forward focusing on my art and original music.

And that was one of the neatest decisions I made in my life.

Because I'm not working for money anymore. But I'm trying to make a living doing my art. So the art took priority over the business. But, see, the other thing about manhood—or adulthood, I should say—is responsibility. So we're talking about balancing responsibility: things you want to do with things you have to do. So that changed when my father passed away. And I have a daughter who graduated from college, and I'm not paying NYU tuition anymore. So I'm not as responsible for many things. And that allowed me so much more freedom to not think about money and focus on art. And I think it's sort of an opportunity or right that I had to earn over the years.

[MUSIC - DANIEL HO, "THE VOYAGE OF LIFE"]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks once again to Daniel Ho for joining us. You can find out more about him, and all the artists we meet on this show, at nga.gov/podcast.

Sound Thoughts on Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art's music department. The show was created by Danielle Hahn, the National Gallery of Art's head of music programs, and it was mixed and produced by Maura Currie.

To support the show, share *Sound Thoughts on Art*, and subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or wherever you listen. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until we meet again, be well.

[MUSIC PLAYING]