

NEW CLASSIC ART JOURNAL

REVIEW

The Ebenezer Stone, A Painting By the American Artist, Matthew Lawrence Almy

In the 18th Century Christian Hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, which is still sung in some Christian communities to this day, there resides a cryptic second verse, which reads, *Here I raise mine Ebenezer, hither by thy help I've come...* The verse references an Old Testament passage, where the prophet Samuel erects a stone of remembrance celebrating God's help and faithfulness to his people. Ebenezer in the Hebrew is literally, "a stone of help, or a monument or stele to Divine assistance." This is the subject for Matthew Almy's stirring and mysterious painting, *The Ebenezer Stone*.



The first remarkable aspect of the painting is that Matthew Lawrence Almy chooses a biblical subject in a culture where serious painters do not paint biblical subjects. Every modern person knows that from the point of view of art, every subject from the Bible has been fully exhausted. While there might be some residual interest in comparing a young artist's treatment of let's say a *Decent from the Cross*, with the drama of collapsing death in Rembrandt's *Decent...*, or the stage set intensity of color and emotion in Rogier Van der Weyden's work on the same subject, or even the complex turbulence found in Rosso Fiorentino's *Decent from the Cross*; we instinctively sense that any such effort is probably derivative.

In this case, Almy's choice of a biblical theme is a deliberate link with past masters. Masters who worked with technical skills rarely achieved by modern artists. It is a statement similar to Micahaelangelo's carving of a full sized nude in marble, the first since antiquity, a celebration of the revival of forgotten skills. Even if the subject may be recycled, Almy is declaring something new. He can paint like past masters.

And so our mind prepares to compare Almy's Samuel and the Ebenezer stone with other great painters of Western art. We search our brains for Samuel raising the Ebenezer stone from Titian, Rubens, Van Dyke, Caravaggio, Tiepolo, Rembrandt, Raphael, Veronese etc. Maybe we better check a few references on Christian Art themes. Well, certainly the image databases will yield something. Wait a moment, the second remarkable aspect of Matthew Lawrence Almy's work is that there is no Western tradition of painting Samuel and the Ebenezer stone. This is truly astonishing for the subject is rich and psychologically complex. After 2000 years of Christian art history, Almy is innovating, which is something totally unexpected.

The New Classic artists are convinced that traditional skills can create significant new art. Here Almy demonstrates that even traditional genres can produce new themes. In a wry twist, Almy is using his finely tuned traditional painter's skills and the traditional Biblical genre to tread wholly new ground. Almy has a new biblical theme and it may well bear portent witness to his own artistic journey.

In Almy's painting, Samuel stripped to the waist from his battle gear leans and pushes against the large stone. Two soldiers, who seem unconvinced that the danger is completely past keep watch, staring in different directions. The central figure of Samuel, side lit in the chiaroscuro is focused solely on the stone. Samuel has left the chaos of battle behind and is singly concerned with the action of acknowledging the Divine. His armor and helmet are off, with the strong light highlighting the vulnerability of his flesh. Yet Samuel shows no fear, confident that God's help, which brought the preceding military victory protects this physical act or worship.

In searching for comparison and inspirations for Almy's style, one sees some of the painterly qualities of the Norwegian artist Odd Nerdrum without Nerdrum's twisted psychology. And of course, in the lighting and in the subject lifting a hefty object, there are reminiscences of Caravaggio's *Entombment*.

In contemporary Christian practice, the concept of the Ebenezer stone is often used as a metaphor in creating personal written journals of God's presence in life. Here Almy's painting may be a journal of his own progression to professional maturity. It is hard work to become a new classic artist. It takes discipline and struggle to raise your Ebenezer stone. The exuberance of silly paint splashing from the previous century has been transformed into a long road of arduous discipline. Almy is at the end of the road of training and at the beginning of years of production in the search for beauty. This

painting may mark Almy's arrival in the same way that Samuel marked the military victory.

The technical rendering of this painting is exquisite. The dance of light upon flesh contrasts brilliantly with the near monochromatic earth toned background. The anatomy is real and the structures bear real weight on the two-dimensional picture plane. It takes a full set of artistic skills to successfully complete such a work. It would be foolish to underestimate the required difficulty of such a painting. The young painter Almy is showing himself a master of technique, a virtuoso comparable to past masters.

Almy showed tremendous promise even in his student figure studies at the Florence Academy of Art. His nudes were full of beauty, grace, and mystery. It is exceptional to achieve significant esthetic and spiritual quality in compulsory academic studies.



The Ebenezer stone is a mature work for a young artist. The painting itself may be a marker; a right of passage from student to teacher to master. It is a vivid declaration of the flowering of a career. Almy is raising his Ebenezer Stone.

In Almy's painting, the prophet Samuel is not a super hero. His body tenses against the effort of raising the stone. Painting itself is hard work. Yet, the Samuel character portrays a peace and sense of calm assurance that the struggle will achieve its ultimate purpose. Perhaps Almy, after years of study and effort is confident that his career will make its mark and the painting is a visual manifestation of that confidence. However, in the presence of this confidence there is humility and focus. The monument is not an arch of triumph, but a marker of gratitude to Divine assistance. The painting may also be a personal thanksgiving to God for the path that brought Almy through the years of difficult study to the mysteries of the painter's craft and profession.

For the new classic artists, years of study and toil are necessary to achieve the skills required to dance the paths of beauty. In some ways, the Ebenezer stone is a metaphor for all of the new classic artists. Out of tradition, new and wonderful things can spring. Tradition is not dead, but living. Even the Biblical narrative can bring to light new insights. And yet, in the training there is effort, struggle, hard work-- and even mystery. This is a journey where the search for skill acquisition itself creates new opportunities for fine artistic achievement. Matthew Lawrence Almy has raised his Ebenezer stone and this young painter should be a significant artistic force for years to come.

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