

John Quincy Adams in response to an editorial survey,
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Nothing is more difficult for the creative artist than to determine in retrospect which of his works means the "greatest" success for him, especially if he does not want to judge his works according to external standards, such as awards, medals, or purchases by state galleries. Who has succeeded in many things on his creative path, may speak of successes, but the greatest success? Perhaps an artist always expects it from the work on which he is working at the moment, since in every artistic dedication lies a great task, in which is anchored the hope that this work will surpass all previous ones, becoming the greatest success.

To declare one of the works created to be the most significant, is not only an impossible thing for an artist who is in the midst of active creations, but it would also be an arrogance, since the evaluation of an artist's work rests with the fellow citizens and with posterity, if it ever reaches the latter. Nevertheless, the question posed to me by the editors does not leave my mind and I am reflecting on the question in a kind of soul-searching: What was actually your greatest success? Was it the great Dutch triptych: "A Life's Journey", which was purchased by the Italian government for the Roman gallery, or was it one of the many paintings and portraits for which I have received medals and other external honors? Or was the greatest success when a person, who in her nervousness proved to be a "difficult" model, could nevertheless be portrayed on the canvas, or when in portraying a person's innermost being behind the rigid mask of everyday life only with difficulty, I was finally able in conversations to capture posture and facial expressions to such an extent that it was possible for me to portray a person true to his/her nature? But after all, these tasks are part of the job of a painter, and the solution of such difficulties may mean success - but the greatest success?

As I browse among older sketches I get hold of some movement studies and suddenly I realize what "my greatest success" may have been. For that I will tell a little story: Some years ago, the well-known gynecologist Professor Dr. Wertheim, with whom I was befriended, and who has since passed away, asked me to take a look at the environment of an operating theater perhaps finding there the subject for a larger painting.

The theme of depicting a modern surgeon performing an operation seemed to

me to be a tempting task, but the side circumstances associated with this work: Staying in the operating room, drawing precise studies during the operation and experiencing the whole hospital milieu instilled a certain shiver in me initially. I am a sensitive person, bleeding wounds, sick people's faces, not to mention to witness the performance of an operation, were things that I would certainly not have decided to do voluntarily. But the friendship with Professor Wertheim finally persuaded me to attend an operation at his gynecological clinic. I put on a surgical gown and had some sketch sheets with me, on which I was able, quite unnoticed, to draw studies of movements. A patient was placed on the table, and Professor Wertheim and his assistants at the time, Professor Dr. Weibel, who has recently received an honoring appointment to Prague, and Professor Dr. Micholitz, also an outstanding gynecologist, began the operation without delay, which was performed extremely quickly. I was so moved by the moral seriousness of the high task of the surgeons that I did not even notice the physically repulsive nature of the disease, but, completely captivated by my artistic task, aimed to as quickly and unerringly depict how the surgeons operated. Afterwards reaction set in; I could hardly eat anything, nor did I feel like doing any work. But the next morning the irritation had somehow disappeared and I found myself back in the operating room.

The further my work progressed, the more resolutely my artistic will sought to overcome my physical and psychological resistance against the milieu, and finally I had almost completed the work. There were still room studies to be made in the operating room itself, and for this purpose I was left alone in the room immediately after an operation. Here now the sweetish anesthetic smell of ether and the sight of the organ parts removed by the operation, which stood near me in spirit containers, had such an effect on me that I was overcome with severe nausea. Nevertheless, I managed to complete this part of the work also.

The final painting, "The Operation", intended for the Bettina Pavilion of the Rothschild Foundation, was generally considered a great success. For me this work means however more, because in the creation of it, my artistic will had to triumph over my physical resistance. I had to conquer my own nature in order to overcome all obstacles in reaching my artistic goal. That I succeeded in this was probably my "greatest success"