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Viewing Adam and Eve's brokenness shakes us: we cannot continue in our dangerous innocence, believing that we can heal ourselves. We continually seek God's forgiveness thanks, in part, to this experience.

Thomas Cole, American (born England) (1801-1848), EXPULSION FROM THE GARDEN OF EDEN, 1828. Oil on canvas; 39 3/4 x 54 1/2 in. Gift of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815-1865, 47.188. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with permission. ©2000 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All Rights Reserved.

Our ‘Dangerous Innocence’

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK
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We will welcome God’s forgiveness with an open and humble heart only if we acknowledge and are sincerely sorry for our evil and wrongful acts. Yet the great novelist Henry James believed that Americans suffered from a dangerous Adamic innocence, the conviction that all ills can be cured with a sufficiently ingenious application of human intelligence. In other words, we think that nothing is deeply broken, so we don’t need forgiveness.

Their act of eating from the forbidden tree provokes guilt and anxiety in Adam and Eve and they hide themselves from God’s forgiving presence (Genesis 3:8-11). God’s expelling of the man and woman from the Garden of Eden makes clear the enormity of their betrayal and resulting separation from God. Isn’t this a loving response by God, to show them the truth about their evil? God provides clothing for the couple and cares for them, even in the moment of their shame (3:21).

Artists usually convey the couple’s pain through emotion in their faces or body gestures. Thomas Cole uniquely expresses their sorrow and anguish through the landscape that dwarfs them. God’s presence and enormity is understood by the rock formations surrounding the tiny figures of Adam and Eve. The supernatural light bursts forth onto Adam, Eve and a desolate tree, from a cleft-like area in the center of the composition and directs the couple outward.

Cole was a founding artist of the Hudson River School in the early 19th century. This group of painters used the majestic river valley that originates in lower New York State as the setting for their paintings. In some cases such as this, they wove the landscape into the actual narrative or subject of their work.

Adam and Eve must now contend with those results of sin that we call pain, guilt, and discontent. Viewing their brokenness shakes us: we cannot continue in our dangerous innocence, believing that we can heal ourselves. We continually seek God’s forgiveness thanks, in part, to this experience.