

CREATING WORK THAT MATTERS - TIMELESS LESSONS FROM JOHN TRUMBULL'S STORY

1. Turn Physical Limitations into Fuel for Focus

As an infant, Trumbull suffered convulsions. A childhood accident left him blind in one eye. Being the youngest and frailest of six children, he couldn't join in games, so he poured all his energy into schoolwork and drawing (his earliest sketches were on his parents' floors).

Lesson: Limitations can become an advantage when they force deeper concentration and development of other strengths. Trumbull's challenges pushed him toward the very talent that defined his life.

2. Recognize and Act on Life-Changing Inspiration

On his way to Harvard, Trumbull visited the studio of celebrated artist John Singleton Copley. Seeing Copley's work showed him, for the first time, that it was possible to have a career as a professional artist.

Lesson: One powerful encounter or example can open an entirely new path. Be open to inspiration — and act on it. Trumbull didn't just admire Copley; he used that moment to commit to becoming an artist.

3. Serve Your Country with Whatever Skills You Have

Trumbull formed a militia in 1774, learned to use a musket, and joined the patriots after Lexington and Concord. He witnessed the Battle of Bunker Hill through a telescope. When Washington needed a map of British positions, Trumbull drew one and was hired as an aide (and later sent out as a spy/listening post).

Lesson: You don't need to be a soldier to contribute meaningfully in a crisis. Use the skills you actually have. Trumbull's artistic ability (map-making) got him directly into Washington's inner circle.

4. Build Relationships with People Who Matter

Trumbull's father (Governor Jonathan Trumbull) was Washington's trusted confidant and a major supplier to the Continental Army. John himself became close to Washington ("fast friend"), Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and artist Benjamin West.

Lesson: Strong relationships with mentors and leaders multiply your opportunities. Trumbull's connections opened doors in both the military and the art world.

5. Be Willing to Take Risks for What You Believe In

Trumbull resigned his military commission to study painting in Europe. In London, he was arrested and imprisoned for seven months on charges of high treason (as retaliation for the hanging of British Major John André). Benjamin West appealed directly to King George III, who personally guaranteed Trumbull's life would be spared.

Lesson: Pursuing your passion or principles often involves real risk. Trumbull took calculated risks and survived because of his talent, connections, and integrity.

6. Use Your Unique Perspective to Create Lasting Value

Trumbull was one of the few people alive who had personally witnessed key Revolutionary events and could paint them with historical accuracy. He painted The Battle of Bunker Hill, The Declaration of Independence (with direct input from Jefferson and Adams), and other iconic scenes.

Lesson: Your unique combination of experiences and skills can create something no one else can. Trumbull's value came from being both an eyewitness and a skilled artist.

7. Document and Preserve What Matters

Trumbull dedicated decades of his life to memorializing the Revolution so future generations would remember it. His paintings became the visual record of America's founding.

Lesson: One of the highest contributions you can make is preserving important stories, values, or history for those who come after you — especially when others might forget.

8. Balance Multiple Callings and Adapt Over Time

Trumbull moved between art, military service, diplomacy (he served as secretary to John Jay), and business. He sometimes struggled financially ("drifting perilously close to the fatal lee-shore of debt") but kept creating.

Lesson: A fulfilling life often involves wearing multiple hats and adapting as circumstances change. Trumbull didn't limit himself to one role.

9. Persistence Through Setbacks Defines Legacy

Trumbull faced blindness in one eye, imprisonment, financial difficulties, and the challenges of studying art in enemy territory during wartime. He still produced the most important historical paintings in American history and lived to be 87.

Lesson: Long-term impact requires persistence. Setbacks are normal; what matters is continuing to create and contribute.

10. Combine Talent with Service and Relationships

Trumbull's greatest works came from the intersection of his artistic skill, his firsthand Revolutionary experiences, and his close relationships with the founding fathers.

Lesson: Talent alone is rarely enough. Combine it with real-world experience and strong relationships, and you can create work that endures for centuries.