

Washington Crossing the Delaware, 1851

In Emanuel Leutze's painting, the commander of the Continental Army against Great Britain stands boldly near the prow of a crowded boat and navigates the treacherous Delaware River on Christmas night, 1776. The Declaration of Independence had been signed earlier that year in the summer heat of Philadelphia, and through the sobering autumn months General Washington led an army of dwindling numbers, with defeats mounting and morale sinking.

Soundly beaten in New York, Washington was pursued through New Jersey into Pennsylvania by British General William Howe, who fully expected to take Philadelphia, the seat of the Continental Congress. However, in his retreat across the Delaware River, Washington shrewdly seized all the available boats to ferry his men from the New Jersey banks to the Pennsylvania side. A confident General Howe, certain the war was all but won, had already returned to New York in mid-December, leaving his British and Hessian mercenary troops in the Trenton area. The commanders left in charge plotted a river crossing as soon as the Delaware iced over. Washington acted immediately when his spies uncovered the plan. With the same boats used to flee the British, he and his men recrossed the river at Trenton, found the enemy, killed several officers, and captured more than nine hundred prisoners. The surprise attack not only checked the British advance but helped restore morale to the rebels. The victory confirmed Washington's leadership and the brilliance of his military strategy, both vital to reinvigorating the American cause.



4-A Emanuel Leutze (1816–1868), *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851. Oil on canvas, 149 x 255 in. (378.5 x 647.7 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John Stewart Kennedy, 1897 (97.34). Photograph © 1992 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Leutze grew up sharing the democratic ideals of the American Revolution and frequently represented them in his historical and literary paintings. The December battle at Trenton, a turning point in the war, appealed to the German-born painter, who had immigrated to the United States as a child decades after the Revolution. His works are combinations of carefully researched information presented in a meticulously rendered dramatic style. Leutze's theatrical interpretations of historic events brought him private and government commissions.

The sheer size of Leutze's canvas, twelve by twenty-one feet, pulls anyone standing before it into the scene. The viewer is nearly the same size as the painted figures and the action seems only a few feet away. Washington stands fast in the lead boat as his men struggle to maneuver the craft through the choppy, ice-filled waters. Other boats follow, crowded with soldiers and jittery horses. We feel Washington's resolve and courage in facing the battle ahead as he leans forward into the blustering wind. As his men strain to pull the oars through the water, one deflects the ice while another at the back of the boat uses a paddle like a rudder to steer the course. Dawn glimmers below the troubled sky, and the American flag, blown and knotted by the wind, rises to a peak behind the General.

The Continental Congress did not officially adopt the flag shown in the painting until June 14, 1777, but according to tradition, Betsy Ross is said to have completed one of this design in late May or early June of 1776 at the request of George Washington and two other members of the Congress. Leutze, a passionate abolitionist, included an African American as the third boatman from the front.

Hoping for a government commission, Leutze put the painting on public exhibit in New York in 1851. Within four months, fifty thousand people had paid to see it. Not long after, a private collector bought the work for ten thousand dollars, a stupendous sum at the time. Engraved reproductions, popular in nineteenth-century American homes, expanded the fame of the work even further. The attention and high praise Leutze received helped the artist obtain the commission for his mural *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, which now occupies a stairway in the U.S. Capitol.

Originally, Leutze's painting was held in a carved and gilded wooden frame. Along the top of the work's original frame was a twelve-foot carved eagle holding a banner with the famous words eulogizing George Washington: "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to let their eyes travel around and into the background of this painting.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

Ask the students to compare the size of this twelve- by twenty-one-foot painting with something in the classroom, such as a wall. Explain that the figures in this painting are almost life-size.

E

Ask students to find these items.

Washington's white horse: *It is in the boat behind Washington's.*

A branch floating in the water: *It is on the left.*

E | M

Have students describe the men's clothing. Explain that they wear a variety of hats and shirts representative of their regions.

E | M | S

Ask students how Leutze emphasized Washington and the American flag.

He surrounds their upper bodies with white light, almost like a spotlight or halo.

Most of the colors in this painting are muted blues, grays, and browns. What bright color did Leutze include?

He included the color red.

In what part of the picture is this red located? *It is found only in Washington's boat.*

Why do you think he used red only in Washington's boat? *Red is a bright color and helps to lead our eye to Washington.*

E | M | S

Ask students to describe how Leutze created an illusion of great distance in this painting.

The distant men and land are smaller, lighter, bluer, and less detailed than those in the foreground.

E | M | S

Ask students who and what are moving in this scene. Who is standing still?

Only Washington and the distant land seem to stand still in the midst of moving water, ice, wind, and men struggling to control the boat.

How are they controlling the boat? *They are rowing the boat across the Delaware River, pushing ice floes away from the boat with their feet and oars, and trying to steer around the ice.*

How do you think they felt when they reached the opposite bank? *They were cold, tired, and wet.*

INTERPRET E | M | S

Have students describe the weather and water conditions. Why isn't it an ideal day for boating?

A powerful storm is approaching from the right, creating a strong, bitter-cold wind. Floating ice clogs the swift, rough river.

Why would anyone want to cross the Delaware River in this weather?

Washington believed that the British were planning to attack his army as soon as the river froze. Washington knew the British would not expect an attack during this storm.

E | M | S

Ask students to describe the flag. Even though it is knotted and wrinkled by the wind, ask them to find symbols that appear on today's flag.

In the pictured flag, a circle rather than rows of stars are on an upper blue field, while red and white stripes fill the lower part of the flag.

S

Ask students if Washington's boat seems stable to them.

The boat is dangerously overloaded with this many men. The actual boats used by the army were larger but crowded with thirty to forty men.

Why do you think Leutze shows a smaller boat in this painting?

He is more interested in showing Washington and his brave men than the boat.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections:

Revolutionary War; Battle of Trenton; Continental Congress

Historical Figures: George Washington; Nathanael Greene; Hessian soldiers; Charles Cornwallis; Abigail Adams; Mercy Otis Warren, Betsy Ross

Civics: Founding Fathers; American flag; Declaration of Independence

Geography: rivers

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *Crossing the Delaware: A History in Many Voices*, Louise Peacock (elementary); *The Secret Soldier: The Story of Deborah Sampson*, Ann

McGovern (elementary); *Poems of Phillip Freneau, Poet of the American Revolution* (middle, secondary)

Arts: compare to works of Delacroix, Géricault, and other Romantic painters