

## UNIT 1: WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE





## PREVIEW THE ARTWORK

**What is your first impression or emotional response to this artwork? (Consider mood, tone, or feeling before analyzing details)**

**What questions or ideas come to mind immediately? (About the subject, artist, or technique)**

## LEARN ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

# WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE

Emanuel Leutze, 1851 : Oil on canvas : Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Imagine standing before a painting so large it would nearly cover your classroom wall – over twelve feet tall and more than twenty-one feet wide. This is Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, painted in 1851. Although it shows a famous event from the American Revolution, it was created far away in **Düsseldorf, Germany**. Leutze, a German-American artist, wanted the painting to do more than record history. He hoped it would inspire people with the **virtues of courage, unity, and freedom**, especially in Europe after the failed revolutions of 1848.

The event it portrays happened on Christmas night, 1776. The American Revolution was going badly. Washington's soldiers were cold, hungry, and discouraged. Many had left the army. In a desperate gamble, Washington ordered his men to cross the icy Delaware River at night and march on Trenton, New Jersey. The river was full of ice, the weather was harsh, and the soldiers were exhausted, but the plan succeeded. The Americans surprised the Hessian troops the next morning, winning a badly needed victory that lifted hope for independence.

Leutze shows this moment as more than a military crossing – it becomes a heroic symbol. At the center, Washington stands tall at the front of the boat, his face lit against the stormy sky. Around him are men from many different backgrounds: an

African American oarsman, a man in a Scottish bonnet, Pennsylvania farmers in broad-brimmed hats, a frontiersman in a coonskin cap, a figure in clothing suggesting Native American heritage, and a soldier with a bandaged head. Each figure is distinct, yet they all strain together against the ice, **united by one purpose**.

Every part of the painting adds to the **drama**. Ice jams push against the wooden boat. Oars slash through dark water. A young soldier raises the American flag high above the chaos – according to an exhibition catalogue from 1853, this figure represents James Monroe, who later became president. Distant boats fade into the mist, reminding us that many men crossed that night. Cool colors – blues, whites, and greens – fill the river and sky, while warmer reds and browns highlight the figures and the boat, making them stand out. Light breaks through the clouds behind Washington, almost like a sign of hope or divine guidance.

Of course, **not everything in this painting is accurate**. The soldiers actually crossed in the middle of the night, not at dawn as shown here. They used large flat-bottomed Durham boats that could carry horses and cannons, not the small rowboat Leutze painted. The flag with stars and stripes did not yet exist – it was created in 1777, months after the crossing. Washington was only forty-four years old at the time, but the artist used an older, idealized likeness of him. And no one could have stood so steadily in such rough waters. **These “mistakes” were intentional**. Leutze wanted to tell a deeper truth: that freedom requires courage, unity, and heroic leadership.

The painting itself has an adventurous story. Leutze painted three versions. The first, kept in Germany, was destroyed during World War II. The second was displayed to huge crowds in New York in 1851 and became famous across the nation. From the 1950s through 1970, it was exhibited at Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania, close to the site of the real event, before returning to permanent safekeeping. The third, smaller version once hung in the White House and later was sold at auction in 2022 for forty-five million dollars.

**So what should we learn from this painting?** Even though its details are not strictly accurate, it speaks powerfully about determination, unity, and courage in the face of danger. Washington is not just shown as a general in 1776 but as a timeless leader guiding a diverse people toward freedom. Leutze reminds us that **art can shape how we remember history** – not only the facts of what happened, but also the meaning behind it.

## OBSERVE THE ARTWORK

What is the **subject**?

- Person       Group of people       Landscape       Still Life  
 Scene: Scripture       Scene: History       Scene: Mythology       Other:
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How would you **classify** this artwork?

- Secular       Religious       Abstract       Concrete/Representational

## TECHNIQUE & DESIGN

What is the medium used in this piece of artwork?

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What do you observe about **brushwork**?

- Invisible and smooth       Careful and methodical       Other:  
 Visible and expressive       Quick and free
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What do you observe about **texture**?

- Smooth, polished surface       Rough or layered surface       Mixed. Explain:
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What do you observe about **line**?

- Sharp outlines around forms       Blended/soft transitions

What do you observe about the **proportions**?

- Natural / Realistic       Idealized / Perfected       Distorted / Altered

## LIGHT & SPACE

Can you locate the **light source**?

- No       Yes      If yes, from where?
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What do you observe about the light?

- Natural       Symbolic/Unrealistic       Studio Light       Direct Light/Harsh

Are there areas of shadow or deep darkness?       Yes       No

Is there a sense of **movement**?

- Everything appears still & stable       A sense of motion (describe what suggests it):
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Is there a sense of **depth**?

- Illusion of distance       flat/lacking depth

How did the artist suggest depth? (Overlap, scale, perspective, color, etc)

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## COLOR & SYMBOLISM

What **hues** do you see?

- Red       Red-Orange       Orange       Yellow-Orange       Yellow       Yellow-Green  
 Green       Blue-Green       Blue       Blue-Violet       Violet       Red-Violet

Where do these hues appear on the **color wheel**?

- Complementary (opposite)       Analogous (side-by-side)       Warm       Cool

What **saturation**s are used?

- Bright/Intense       Pale       Darkened

Are there **symbolic uses** of color? Explain.

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## INTERPRETATION & MEANING

What do you notice about the **gesture, posture, or gaze** of the figures?

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What **story, idea or emotion** might the artist be communicating?

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How might someone in the original time and place have understood this artwork differently than we do today?

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Does this work **remind you of another** artwork, story, or cultural symbol?

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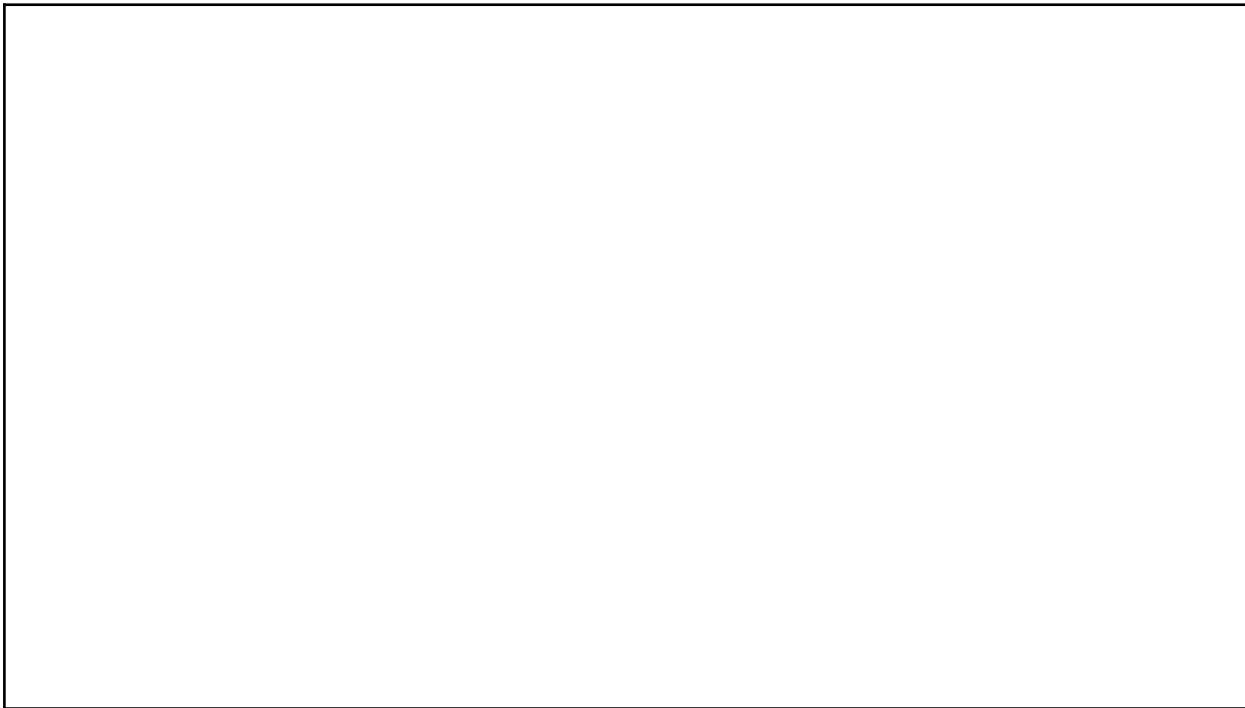
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## COMPOSITION SKETCH

Draw (only) the major shapes and composition in simplified shape form.



## \* KEY FACTS FOR MEMORIZATION \*

**TITLE:**

**ARTIST:**

**YEAR**

**CREATED:**

**LOCATION**

**CREATED:**

**MEDIUM:**

**STYLE:**

Sources consulted: Smarthistory (video & essay), Metropolitan Museum of Art label texts, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association resources, Fischer *Washington's Crossing* (2004), Groseclose *Emanuel Leutze* (1975), Hutton *Portrait of Patriotism* (1959), Osborne *History of Washington Crossing Historic Park* (2014), encyclopedia entries.