

Name:

Date:

Emanuel Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware is a monumental work of art that captures the desperate and freezing journey of the Continental Army on Christmas night in 1776

FACT OR FICTION



Leutze, E. (1851). Washington Crossing the Delaware [Oil painting].

Which parts of this painting show what really happened in 1776? Pick two items and explain the evidence behind them.

Which parts are 'Fiction' and do not show what really happened? Pick two items and explain why the artist might have changed the truth.



1) Visual Evidence: How does the artist use the light in the sky and Washington's position to show he is the leader?

2) Empathy: It is December 25, 1776. You are one of the soldiers rowing. Your boots are wet, and the wind is freezing. What are three things you are thinking about to keep yourself rowing?

3) Sensory: Imagine you are on that boat. List three sounds you hear (e.g., ice cracking). How do these sounds add to the "feeling" of the painting?

4) Reflection: This painting was made 75 years after the event happened. Why do you think the artist chose to make it look so heroic and "perfect" rather than showing how dark and messy it really was?

Teacher's Guide: Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*

This guide is designed to help you lead a classroom through a deep dive into George Washington's pivotal Revolutionary War moment using Emanuel Leutze's massive 1851 oil painting. Suggested grades 4 to 6.

Phase 1: Leading the Discussion

When discussing historical turning points, use the "See, Think, Wonder" method to keep students grounded in the visual evidence before moving to historical analysis.

See: Ask, "What do you see?" (Only facts: a boat, chunks of ice, a flag, many people, a bright light in the sky, different types of hats).

Think: Ask, "What do you think is happening?" (They are in a hurry; it looks cold; they are trying to get somewhere important).

Wonder: Ask, "What does this make you wonder about the birth of the United States of America?"

Teacher Tip: Point out the different types of people in the boat. While Washington is the leader, emphasize that the boat includes a diverse group—a man in a Scottish bonnet, an African American man (traditionally identified as Prince Whipple), and frontiersmen. This represents the "collective effort" of the colonies.

Phase 2: Analyzing Art Elements & Principles

Use these talking points to help students understand how Leutze "tells" a story of determination through art:

Composition (The Wedge): Notice how the boat forms a wedge shape pointing toward the left. This creates a sense of forward momentum. Even though the ice is pushing against them, the composition tells us they are breaking through.

Light (Chiaroscuro): There is a bright light behind Washington's head. This is a focal point technique. It makes Washington look like a "beacon of hope" leading his men out of the darkness of a cold, difficult winter.

Movement (Diagonal Lines): Look at the oars and the flag. They are all slanted. In art, diagonal lines create tension and action. Nothing is standing still; the scene feels urgent and energetic.

Focal Point: Leutze ensures your eyes land on Washington first by:

- Placement: He is standing tall, higher than anyone else in the boat.
- Contrast: His dark silhouette stands out against the glowing morning sky.
- Scale: He is the largest figure, looking toward the future (the shore).

Phase 3: The Fact or Fiction Challenge (Harvard Project Zero)

The Harvard Project Zero "Fact or Fiction" routine helps students distinguish between historical reality and artistic license.

The Detail	Fact or Fiction	Reality
The baat	fiction	The painting shows a small boat, but they actually used "Durham boats," which were much larger with high sides to carry heavy cannons.
The flag	fiction	The "Stars and Stripes" shown wasn't created until 1777. In 1776, they likely used the "Grand Union Flag."
The time	fiction	The crossing happened in the middle of a dark, stormy night (a Nor'easter), not in the bright light of dawn shown here.
The ice	fact	The Delaware River was indeed choked with "ice cakes," making the crossing incredibly dangerous and slow.
Washington Standing	fiction	Standing up in a small boat during a storm and icy river would have likely caused it to capsize! He almost certainly sat down.

Phase 4: Historical Evidence & Reflection

1. Identify the Fiction: List two things that are fiction.

- The Flag: Students should identify the "Stars and Stripes." The Fact: This flag wasn't adopted until 1777; in 1776, they used the Grand Union Flag.
- The Boat: Students might point out it looks small or crowded. The Fact: They used large, flat-bottomed "Durham Boats" meant for hauling iron ore, not these low-sided rowboats.
- Washington's Stance: Standing up in a small boat during an icy storm. The Fact: He almost certainly sat down to keep the boat from tipping in the high winds.
- The Weather/Light: The bright, glowing sunrise/dawn. The Fact: The crossing occurred in the middle of a "Nor'easter" (a snow-and-sleet storm) in the pitch-black of night.

2. Explain the "Why": Why did the artist change the truth?

- To Inspire: Leutze wanted to show Washington as a "larger-than-life" hero to inspire people who were fighting for democracy in Europe.
- Symbolism: The bright light represents "the dawn of a new nation" or hope, even though the real weather was miserable.
- Visual Clarity: If he painted it accurately (dark, snowy, and everyone sitting low in a big cargo boat), it wouldn't look as dramatic or "heroic."

3. Sensory & Empathy (Possible Student Answers):

- Sounds: Ice chunks "thumping" against the wood, the wind howling, the heavy breathing of the rowers, the metal of the oars clinking.
- Emotions: Fear (the ice is dangerous), Determination (they have to win to save the revolution), or Exhaustion (they haven't slept and it's freezing).

4. Reflection: Why does it look so "perfect" vs. the "messy" truth?

- Students should conclude that art is often used to tell a legend rather than provide a photographic record. It's meant to make us feel proud of the bravery required to start the country.

Phase 5: Historical Context for Teachers

- The Subject: General George Washington leading the Continental Army across the Delaware River to surprise Hessian forces in Trenton, NJ.
- The Artist: Emanuel Leutze, a German-American who painted this in Germany. He hoped the image of the American Revolution would inspire reformers in Europe. Europe was going through its own revolutions. Leutze was a passionate supporter of democracy, and he used the American Revolution as a "model" to inspire German reformers.
- The Message: He wanted to show that even in the darkest, coldest hour, a group of determined people could overcome a "storm" to find freedom.
- Vocabulary:
 - Composition: The way the artist organizes everything in the picture.
 - Teacher Note: Point out the Triangle (Pyramid) Composition. The boat serves as the base, and the flag's top is the "peak." This makes the image feel stable and strong, even in a storm.
 - Atmospheric Perspective: Making things in the distance look blurry, lighter, or more "blue" to show depth.
 - Teacher Note: Look at the boats in the far background. They are hazy and soft compared to the sharp details of Washington's coat.
 - Chiaroscuro (Light & Dark): Using strong contrasts between light and dark areas to create drama.
 - Teacher Note: The "theatrical" light behind Washington's head acts like a spotlight, making him the hero of the story.
 - Artistic License: The freedom an artist takes to change facts to tell a better story or create a certain mood.
 - Teacher Note: This is why the flag is there (even though it didn't exist yet) and why Washington is standing (even though it was dangerous).
 - Foreshortening: A technique used to make an object look like it is sticking out toward the viewer.
 - Teacher Note: Look at the arm of the man in the front pushing the ice with the pole. His arm looks shorter because it is "pointing" at us.