

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

<https://www.wsj.com/arts-culture/history/the-deeper-meaning-of-washington-crossing-the-delaware-0546b902>

ESSAY

# The Deeper Meaning of 'Washington Crossing the Delaware'

The iconic painting by Emanuel Leutze is often criticized today for being historically inaccurate and simplistically patriotic, but the truth is far more interesting.

*By Meir Soloveichik*

Updated Feb. 17, 2024 12:00 am ET

The most famous image of the American Revolution hangs not in the Capitol but in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Emanuel Leutze's enormous 1851 painting "Washington Crossing the Delaware" depicts the general's journey on Dec. 25, 1776, as he launched a surprise attack on hundreds of Hessian troops quartered in Trenton, N.J. Few American paintings are so recognizable, as countless parodies attest.

But as its fame has increased, so have criticisms of the work. Some detractors focus on Leutze's alleged errors and inaccuracies. Washington's troops crossed in the dead of night, not during the dawn's early light; the boat that carried the general would have been much larger than the one in the painting and could not have contained so many soldiers. The stars-and-stripes banner held in the painting by future president James Monroe was not adopted as the nation's flag until 1777. And the river, with its large, blue blocks of ice, looks more like the Rhine in Leutze's native Germany than any American waterway.



Emanuel Leutze photographed ca. 1860. PHOTO: SEPIA TIMES/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES

Other critics are made uncomfortable by what they see as the painting's simplistic glorification of the American past. The description of the painting on the Metropolitan Museum's website notes that its focus on George Washington reflects a "Great Man theory of history." The museum commissioned a modern version, featuring Native Americans rather than Continental soldiers, in order to reflect on "the biases of American history and mythmaking."

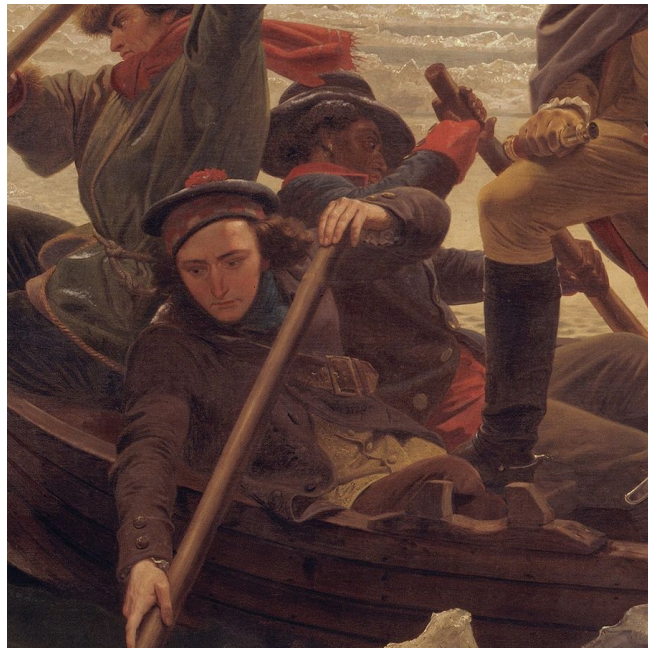
In truth, however, while Leutze's painting is certainly patriotic, it is not simplistically so. It is a complex reflection on both the inspirational achievements of the revolution and the ways it failed to live up to its ideals. In dramatizing the past, the work expresses aspirations for the American future.

Understanding the painting begins with Leutze's own story. Born in Germany in 1816, he was still a child when he came to the U.S. with his parents, and in his mid-20s he returned to the land of his birth. After the revolutions that swept Europe in 1848, Leutze sought to bridge the two continents that formed him by creating an image from the American past that would inspire the growth of democracy in Europe. At the same time, he wanted to express his hopes for the future of the country embraced by his parents and so many other immigrants in the 19th century.

The first clue to the painting's complexity can be found in the image of a Black man seated near Washington's knee. He has long been identified as Prince Whipple, a man enslaved by William Whipple, an officer in the

revolutionary army. Prince Whipple served alongside William and received his freedom at the end of the war. But as the historian David Hackett Fischer has noted, all the evidence indicates that Prince Whipple was not present at the crossing of the Delaware.

Fischer argues that the man's dress indicates he is meant to be a member of the Massachusetts 14th Regiment, led by John Glover. Hailing from Marblehead, the regiment was comprised of a group of seamen who had worked together in civilian life before serving under George Washington. According to the New England Historical Society, these men comprised "the first integrated regiment" of the American military, and Washington relied on them during critical moments in his campaigns.



Clockwise from top left: General George Washington as a "great man"; large blocks of ice make the Delaware River look more like the Rhine; Black and Scottish immigrant rowers; the anachronistic Stars and Stripes.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART (4)

It was Glover's men who helped Washington escape across the East River to Manhattan after the loss of the Battle of Brooklyn, and the same regiment navigated the icy floes of the Delaware to reach Trenton. What Washington achieved there was a testament to his leadership, but without the rowers, there would have been no chance for the surprise attack.

Leutze, an avowed abolitionist, featured a member of the integrated 14th Regiment as a model for what America could be. The painting deliberately depicts a diverse group of rowers. In addition to the Black man, there is a man wearing a Scottish hat—apparently an immigrant, like Leutze—and a Native American on the other end of the craft. The boat, for Leutze, is America itself.

Perhaps the best recent interpretation of "Washington Crossing the Delaware" comes from Makoto Fujimara, an artist whose life and career offer a striking parallel to Leutze's. Born in Massachusetts to Japanese immigrants in 1960, he spent part of his childhood in Japan and part in the U.S. In a 2014 commencement address at Cairn University in Pennsylvania, Fujimara reflected on how Leutze sought to "capture the very essence and ideal of democracy itself," embodying a "diverse coalition of unlikely heroes gathered together in a boat cast into the icy waves."

Fujimara argues that Leutze deliberately depicted the Delaware as if it were the Rhine because he was asking his fellow Germans to embrace the American example. The painting, on this view, expresses the same idea that Abraham Lincoln voiced in a speech in Trenton in 1861: that Washington's crossing of the Delaware embodied "something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come."

This idea allows us to understand other alleged errors in the painting as deliberate artistic choices. If Washington's journey is shown taking place in the early morning, rather than in the dead of night, it is to suggest that the American experiment could herald the dawning of democracy elsewhere and a new birth of freedom for many in America. The flag held by Monroe calls America to embrace its founding principles.

Putting so many soldiers in a tiny boat was also a symbolic choice. At a time when many in Europe were excluded from civic life and many in America were enslaved, "Washington Crossing the Delaware" urges Europeans to embrace democracy while reminding Americans, as Fischer put it, that they were all in the same boat.

As we mark the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln this year, Leutze's remarkable painting shows us how not to idolize or idealize the past but to celebrate its best aspects, in order to inspire us as we face the future.

*Meir Soloveichik is director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University and rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York. He is the author of "Providence and Power: Ten Portraits in Jewish Statesmanship."*

*Appeared in the February 17, 2024, print edition as "The Deeper Meaning of 'Washington Crossing the Delaware'".*