Activity: Observation and Interpretation

Celebrating the belief that the American West held both unspoiled beauty and infinite promise for a better future, Emanuel Leutze’s *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (mural study, U.S. Capitol)* was created during one of the most tumultuous times in American history – the onset of the Civil War. What can we learn about the ideals surrounding westward expansion from this artwork? How do artists employ symbolism to augment a specific message in their work? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting then placing them in historical context enables the viewer to interpret the artist’s overall message.

Observation: What do you see?

Dissect the overall composition. How might you divide this large canvas into three sections?

In his 1862 notes, Emmanuel Leutze described the central image as a scene of emigrants, having toiled up to the divide, espying the flat, golden West spreading before them with the rocky, cold “valley of darkness” at their backs. The surging crowd of figures records the births, deaths, and battles fought as European Americans settled the continent to the edge of the Pacific. Central among them is a vignette alluding to the Madonna and child, seated on a promontory and looking to the sunset. Leading the migrants – some of whom are walking injured, others driving exhausted mules before covered wagons – are a band of frontiersmen clearing a path toward ‘Eldorado’.

Flanking the waters of the San Francisco Bay at the bottom of the study are small, round portraits of explorer William Clark on the left and frontiersman Daniel Boone on the right. Both men contributed to the movement of European Americans into western territories, with Boone crossing the Mississippi River 1799 and Lewis and Clark reaching the Pacific Ocean in 1805.

Of the border Leutze wrote: “All subjects in the margins are but faintly indicated without any attempt at imitation or deception and kept entirely subservient to the effect of the Principal picture.”
Focus now on the frame, or margin. What symbols or stories do you recognize?

While “subservient to the effect of the Principal picture” the margin reinforces the artwork’s overall message with a blend of mythological and Biblical allusions. These fall into two broad themes: predestination or fate and the hero’s journey. Beginning in the bottom left amongst a filigree of western flora and fauna, a raven sits holding food in its beak, an allusion to divine intervention in the Old Testament. Just such a bird brought the prophet Elijah bread and meat as he escaped persecution by hiding in a desert ravine. In another Biblical reference we see Moses, with arms upraised as he parts the Red Sea. This miracle allowed his people, the Israelites, to escape slavery in Egypt and begin their quest through the desert to the Promised Land of Canaan.

Now Leutze switches to the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts. We see Jason’s ship, the Argo, sailing home with the Golden Fleece shown on its sail. This fleece, having been won after a long quest, fulfills a prophesy and returns Jason to his rightful place as king. At the top left are the three Magi – travelers from the east – who figure into the Nativity in the Bible’s New Testament. They gaze up at the star that will, ultimately, lead them to Jesus’ birthplace so that they might present him with gold, frankincense and myrrh.

At the top of the margin, front and center, is an American eagle with wings spread. Green banners curl outward from it, heralding the painting’s title: “Westward the course of empire takes its way.” This line begins the closing stanza of a poem by British empiricist Bishop George Berkeley. In it, Berkeley predicted that Western expansion would make America the site of the next golden age. At the far left and right of this detail, Leutze explained, are “Indians creeping and flying before them [the eagle’s banners]--to the left the axeman, preceded by the hunter whose dog has attacked a catamount [cougar], the Indian creeping, discharging an arrow at the hunter.”

Opposite the Magi, Leutze includes one of Hercules’ mythical twelve tasks of atonement, which ultimately resulted in Hercules separating Europe from Africa by creating the Strait of Gibraltar. Here we see him at the
edge of the Greek’s known world, standing between the wide Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea. Returning to the story of Moses, Leutze depicts Israelite spies returning from the Promised Land with news that the land is fertile—signified by the grapes the figures carry. They know, however, that entering the land of milk and honey will not be easy as it is peopled by strong Canaanites.

Leutze reinforces his theme of exploration by weaving in a profile portrait of Christopher Columbus, seemingly taking measure of the world with a globe and calipers. Finally at the bottom right, Leutze situates a dove bearing an olive branch opposite the raven. Here he alludes to the end of the Old Testament flood. The dove carries proof of dry land to Noah, bearing with it assurances that his seven-month journey across a decimated, watery world is nearing its end.

**Interpretation: What does it mean?**

*This mural study was completed in early 1861, 57 years after the Lewis and Clark expedition. What significance might this image have held for Americans at the start of the Civil War?*

Emmanuel Leutze was trained abroad as a history painter. Curator Richard Murray explained: “History painting is not necessarily the facts as they occurred, but how an artist could arrange the facts to make a significant point.”

In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase almost doubled the size of the United States. The status of the western territories as free or slave states added fuel to the already contentious relationship between existing states. When Leutze executed this mural study, the Civil War was underway and the country was torn apart.

With *Westward the Course...* Leutze encoded a message of national unity, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This study, and the mural that would ultimately decorate the House of Representatives side of the U.S. Capitol embodies ideas of Manifest Destiny, elevating the journey to settle the western United States to mythical status. To that end, Leutze wove together images of the past and present, suffering and success. He chose the vignettes of heroes on the move for the margin to reinforce this point.

Leutze intended to provide “…glorious examples of our great men for the benefit of future generations, and as a token of a nation’s glory, that they may be continued as our history advances…” (from Emanuel Leutze’s letter to Montgomery C. Meigs, Captain of the U.S. Engineers, February 14, 1854).