



EMANUEL GOTTLIEB LEUTZE

Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (mural study, U.S. Capitol), 1861

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oil on canvas, 33 ¼ × 43 ¾ in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Sara Carr Upton

Background Information for Teachers

Emanuel Leutze's painting depicts a group of weary travelers on their journey westward as they catch their first glimpse of the rolling descent to the "promised land" of California. A band of frontiersmen leads the migrants, clearing a path toward their destination. The hardships of the journey are emphasized through a burial scene at the base of the central summit and several injured pioneers. The landforms in the background are condensed to suggest a treacherous route. An immigrant family occupies the center of the composition. The woman, with her infant child, is comforted by her husband, who points out their destination—an allusion to the Holy Family, the American "Madonna" dressed in red, white, and blue.

Small scenes within the ornate border link the pioneers to a long line of biblical, mythical, and historical figures who were considered "explorers." On the left edge, Leutze included Moses parting the Red Sea; the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts with Jason's ship, the *Argo*, sailing home with the Golden Fleece on its sail; and the Three Wise Men traveling to Bethlehem. On the right border, we see Christopher Columbus, the "Spies of Eshcol" (who explored Canaan before the Israelites journeyed there), and Hercules splitting

a mountain to form the twin pillars of Gibraltar. At the bottom, portraits of explorers Daniel Boone and Captain William Clark surround a view of San Francisco Bay, the ultimate reward that awaits these exhausted pioneers.

This painting represents the concept of Manifest Destiny, the belief, popular in the mid-nineteenth century, that Americans were destined by God to settle the continent westward to the Pacific Ocean. At the top of the canvas, an eagle holds a scroll inscribed with the painting's title, taken from a 1726 poem by the Irish poet George Berkeley. Two Native American figures appear within the border, pushed out from the center by the eagle's powerful wings. The emptiness of the golden western landscape, which in actuality was home to Native American tribes at the time, suggests the mass expulsion of Native populations from their homelands before the Civil War.

This painting was a study for a larger mural, completed in 1862, for the U.S. Capitol Building. The final mural features several changes the artist made, including the addition of a free African American boy in the foreground. He likely added the figure after reading Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, issued September 1862. With the nation divided by civil war, Leutze encoded the mural with a deeper message of national unity, quietly advancing the aims of Lincoln's proclamation and altering the meaning of Manifest Destiny and the West, especially for freed slaves and immigrants. Images of past and present are woven together, juxtaposing the hardships of the pioneers with the triumphs of heroes and explorers. Leutze wrote that his intention was 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."

Guided Looking Questions for Students

- How many distinct "scenes" or groupings of people can you find in this painting? Pick at least three and describe what you think is happening in each "scene." Why does the artist include them?
- The background landscape is loosely based on reality. It combines aspects of several parts of the overland journey of the pioneers. Describe the landforms you see. Why do you think the artist combined different landforms in this way?
- The final version of this painting is installed in the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. Considering its location, what is the "big message" Leutze communicates? How does the content and style of the vignettes amplify this message?

Primary Source Connection

Pair this artwork with the excerpt below from John Louis O'Sullivan's editorial on the U.S. annexation of Oregon Territory (at the time claimed by Great Britain) from the *New York Morning News*, December 27, 1845. O'Sullivan, an American columnist and editor, is credited with coining the phrase "Manifest Destiny." The concept had existed for a long time, but when he used it in two editorials in July and December 1845—promoting the

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annexation of the Texas and Oregon Territories—the phrase caught on immediately and resonated deeply with the American people.

To state the truth at once in its naked simplicity, we are free to say that were the respective cases and arguments of the two parties, as to all these points of history and law, reversed—had England all ours, and we nothing but hers—our claim to Oregon would still be best and strongest. And that claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the Continent which Providence has given for the devolpment [sic] of the great experiment of liberty [sic] and federative self-government entrusted to us. It is a right such as that of the tree to the space of air and earth suitable for the full expansion of its principal and destiny of growth—such as that of the stream to the channel required for the still accumulating volume of its flow.

Suggested Questions

- How does O’Sullivan support his argument that Oregon should belong to the United States? (You can create a map to help visualize the steps that he takes to reach his conclusion.) Would that same logic work today for claiming ownership of a piece of land? Why or why not?
- Describe how elements of O’Sullivan’s argument are illustrated in the symbolic details of Leutze’s painting.

Literary Connection

Pair this artwork with a letter, excerpted below, from John C. Frémont to his wife, Jessie Benton Frémont, dated January 27, 1849. John Frémont made his reputation leading survey expeditions into the West, particularly California. Jessie Frémont made her reputation as a writer, recording their travels as engaging narratives for a public hungry for information about the exotic West. The letter was published in her 1878 memoir, *A Year of American Travel*, which recounts her journey to meet her husband in California.

About the 11th of December we found ourselves at the north of the Del Norte Cañon, where that river issues from the St. John’s Mountain, one of the highest, most rugged, and impracticable of all the Rocky Mountain ranges, inaccessible to trappers and hunters even in the summertime. Across the point of this elevated range our guide conducted us, and having still great confidence in his knowledge, we pressed onward with fatal resolution. Even along the river-bottoms the snow was already belly-deep for the mules, frequently snowing in the valley and almost constantly in the mountains.

Suggested Questions

- From Frémont’s letter, make a list of the possible dangers of traveling overland to the American West. Why do you think people were willing to endure so much hardship to cross the country?
- Where do you see evidence in the artwork of dangers similar to those Frémont described in his

letter? What artistic “tricks” does Leutze use in his composition (arrangement of people, objects, light, setting, etc.) to counter those dangers?

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