

Activity: Observe and Interpret



[Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way \(mural study, U.S. Capitol\)](#), 1861, Emanuel Leutze, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Emanuel Leutze painted *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (mural study, U.S. Capitol) during one of the most tumultuous times in American history – the onset of the Civil War. The painting celebrates the belief that the American West held both unspoiled beauty and infinite promise for a better future. It advocates “manifest destiny,” the belief that it was America’s divinely ordained mission to settle and civilize the West – an alliance between nation-building and religion. 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 and then placing them in

historical context enables the viewer to interpret the artist’s overall message.

Observation: What do you see?

In his 1862 notes, Emmanuel Leutze described the central image as a scene of immigrants, having labored to the top of the hill, observing 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 three-person family group seated on a promontory and looking to the sunset – an allusion to the Biblical holy family. 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 their “promised land.”



At the bottom of the composition are small, round portraits of explorer William Clark, at left, and frontiersman Daniel Boone, at right. The portraits flank a landscape painting of San Francisco Bay – the western destination of the pioneers. Both men were entrusted to lead settlers into western territories, with Boone exploring and settling the lands of Kentucky, and Clark (of Lewis and Clark fame) a pioneer explorer of the land acquired in the Louisiana Purchase and later governor of the Missouri Territory.

Focus now on the margin. What symbols or stories do you recognize?

Leutze wrote of the border: “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.” The artwork on the borders reinforces the composition’s overall message with a blend of mythological and Biblical allusions. These fall into two broad themes: predetermined fate and the hero’s journey. In one section, Leutze depicts 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 prophecy 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.



Leutze reinforces his theme of exploration through a profile portrait of Christopher Columbus (left), seemingly taking measure of the world with a globe and calipers. At the bottom right, Leutze situates a dove bearing an olive branch. 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.

At the top of the margin, front and center, is an American eagle with wings spread. Green banners curl outward, heralding the painting’s title: “Westward the course of empire takes its way.” This line begins the closing stanza of a [poem by British philosopher 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.”

Interpretation: What does it mean?

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. Over the next few decades the status of newly admitted western states and territories as free or slave would add fuel to the already contentious relationship between the North and the South. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 allowed the people living in those territories to decide whether slavery was allowed within their borders. This “popular sovereignty” caused pro- and anti-slavery settlers to flood the land with the goal of voting slavery up or down. This ultimately led to violent political confrontations known as “Bleeding Kansas” – the most significant event to presage the Civil War. By the time Leutze executed this mural study in 1861, the war was underway and the nation torn in two.

With *Westward the Course...* Leutze encoded a message of national unity, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This study, and the final 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, juxtaposing the hardships of the pioneer voyagers with the triumphs of heroes and explorers. 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.”