

Emanuel Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1862)

Abstract

Born in Württemberg, the German-American artist Emanuel Leutze (1816–1868) grew up and began painting in the United States before returning to Europe to continue his studies at the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf, and also in Munich and Italy. Leutze is probably best known for his large historical painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), as well as various depictions of Christopher Columbus. He first returned to the United States in 1859, and in 1861 he was commissioned by the U.S. government to paint the mural that became *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* for the Capitol Building. Most of the actual painting was carried out in 1861–62 during the U.S. Civil War. While guns are quite evident in the painting, the emphasis is on the settlers and explorers making the long trek across the continent, thus associating the U.S. pursuit of empire with the pioneer and frontier spirit rather than military conquest. Such an image also owes much to the notion of Manifest Destiny, whereby the young republic was supposedly preordained to grow and spread from the East Coast all the way to the West Coast on the Pacific Ocean, just as the stream of families and wagons flow from right to left across the mural in the painting's narrative. The viewer looks towards the Pacific and the sunset to the west, at the end of a successful if arduous journey. Underneath the main scene is a depiction of San Francisco Bay in California. The border of the mural includes (on the right) an oval portrait of pioneer woodsman Daniel Boone (1734–1820); on the left is an oval portrait of William Clark (1770–1838), of the Lewis and Clark Expedition to the Pacific from 1804–06. In the center is a young African-American participant in the westward movement, perhaps a freedman; he is symbolic of a moment during the Civil War when enslaved persons in the District of Columbia had been emancipated (but not yet those in the Southern states who would only be freed under President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863).

Source



Source: Mural in the U.S. Capitol, image from the Architect of the Capitol. Available online at:
<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/westward-course-empire-takes-its-way>

U.S. Capitol, Architect of the Capitol

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