



May 2012



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

1861

Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze

Born: Schwabisch-Gmund, Germany 1816

Died: Washington, District of Columbia

1868

oil on canvas

33 1/4 x 43 3/8 in. (84.5 x 110.1 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Bequest of Sara Carr Upton

1931.6.1

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

Celebrating the belief of Manifest Destiny and the unspoiled beauty and infinite promise for a better future that the West held, Emanuel Leutze's Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (mural study, U.S. Capitol) was created during of one of the most tumultuous times in American history; the onset of the Civil War. Researcher Laura endeavored to find out the answer to one of her first questions concerning this artwork:

- **Leutze created this oil study in 1861 and the mural it would inform the following year; right at the onset of the Civil War. Did the war inspire any changes in Leutze's final composition for the mural?**

This was of course a rather broad question to begin with for this artwork but, as I will reveal later on, this question would open up a host of new questions and other avenues to explore. As this oil on canvas work by the German-born Leutze was a small study for the much larger mural that resides on the walls of the United States Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., I felt that it was an essential step to research the final mural as well as the study. After all, researching just the study would only tell us half of the story.

After arranging a meeting with the Capitol's curatorial staff, I went to view the mural in person. The work, which is located on the third floor wall in the west stairwell of the House of Representatives wing of the Capitol, is of monumental proportions measuring approximately twenty feet in height and thirty feet in length. Members of the curatorial staff there were more than happy to address any questions I had and to also spend time with myself and other members of the education department examining the differences between our mural study and the final product. One of the most interesting discrepancies that stood out to me was the inclusion of a young African-American male in the final mural. He is given a place of prominence in the composition; Leutze having placed him in the central foreground of the work. He dutifully leads a mule that is carrying as its passengers a young woman and her infant child. Many authors have posed theories as to why Leutze added the black youth in the final version, but one might have discovered Leutze's true intentions via a contemporary of the artist's. According to author Barbara Groseclose, an art critic named Anna Brewster had questioned Leutze in 1868 about the grouping at a party. Brewster reportedly asked the artist: "Did you not mean this group to teach a new gospel to this continent, a new truth which this part of the world is to accept – that the Emigrant and the Freedman are the two great elements which are to be reconciled and worked with? The young, beautiful Irish woman, too, is she not your new Madonna?" The artist's face glowed and a grim smile gleaned out under the rough mustache . . . In the first flush of his pleasure he told me I was the first American that had understood his picture." (Groseclose, 1975)

Additionally, according to author Daniel Lewis, Leutze "stated in his program notes: "A mother [is] kissing her babe with tears of joy, mounted on a mule led by a Negro boy who caresses the beast for the work done." He also identified the "Negro boy" as a freedman. Even though Leutze presents the African American in a position of subservience – his responsibility is to lead the mule – he does not cast him as a slave. But in viewing the African American boy as a freedman, Leutze implies that this individual had previously been a slave. In the context of the Civil War, the artist's freedman was an ideologically charged image because slavery in the Southern states had ultimately led to the crisis of the Union. For Leutze, the figure of emancipation resonated with a distinctive meaning in the nation's capital. During the time Leutze was painting *Westward Ho!* Washington was a beacon of liberty for thousands of African Americans fleeing slavery. Between 1861 and 1862, slaves migrated to Washington because the Union military in a number of campaigns in Virginia and Maryland had confiscated the farms and plantations on which slaves resided. On April 15, 1862, the federal government emancipated all slaves in the District of Columbia." (Lewis, 2000) Evidently the events that occurred in Washington D.C. in this short span of time at the onset of the Civil War encouraged Leutze to include the African American figure.

While observing the mural, I noticed an interesting inscription written across the overall strap across the black boy's chest that read "John Hay// INVE." This inscription did not show up in any of the reproductions I had seen previously. With some prior knowledge of the Civil War, I knew that the John Hay being referred to here might be the John Hay who was the personal

secretary to President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. But what was Hay's name doing displayed in the mural this way? What were Hay's and Lincoln's connection to the mural or to Leutze?

This prompted me to have a look at the curatorial files that the Capitol keeps on the mural. What I found were papers that began to weave together a more cohesive narrative. In the files was a transcript of an interview entitled "Questions and Answers by E. H. C. Leutze, Son of Emanuel Leutze, Painter of "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way." The son of Emanuel Leutze, Eugene Henry Cozzens Leutze, answered various questions pertaining to his father's life in this undated interview. Eugene Leutze talks of the location of his father's studio in Washington, D.C. (the southwest corner of G and 14th street) and of the famous men that frequented the studio. Leutze states that "[Nathaniel] Hawthorne, [Abraham] Lincoln, [Secretary of State William H.] Seward, [U.S. Treasury Secretary Salmon P.] Chase . . . and many others [visited] . . . Lincoln and Father were great friends. The President frequently came to the Capitol to watch Father paint, he liked the subject as it was the life he knew about. At times he came to the studio in the evenings and met the men above mentioned. All of them good story tellers and wits." Hay was most likely included on these visits to Leutze's studios as in his own diaries written during the Civil War years, Hay mentions many evenings spent listening to Leutze's "crabbed wit," (Hay, 1997) Through this anecdote, we also learn how Leutze came to know Secretary of State William H. Seward, who was the original owner of the oil study in the museum's collection. Leutze gave the study to Seward, who in turn gave it to his adopted daughter, Olive Risley Seward. Olive Seward then left the study to her friend Sara Carr Upton, who gifted it to the museum in 1931.

Another document in the Capitol's file entitled simply "From the Scrap Book of Admiral Eugene H. C. Leutze," further details the relationship between Lincoln and Leutze: "Few persons had better cause to recall Abraham Lincoln than Rear Admiral Eugene H.C. Leutze, commandant of the New York Navy Yard, who with pride mentioned that the martyred President appointed him to [the United States Naval Academy in] Annapolis. Rear Admiral Leutze's father was Emanuel Leutze, an artist, who came to America from Prussia. Seeing so many leaving their native lands, the naval officer's father painted "Westward Ho," which now is in the Capitol. Later he painted "Washington Crossing the Delaware." The first mentioned picture delighted President Lincoln. He wanted the painting for the White House. Negotiations were closed, the artist agreeing to [sell] the picture to the government for \$20,000. When the Civil War started \$10,000 still was due for the painting. President Lincoln sent for the artist and told how the national treasury was being drained, asking that Mr. Leutze wait until the close of the war for the \$10,000. With great agitation Mr. Leutze bowed to the Executive and said: - "Mr. President, I wish to donate that \$10,000 to the war fund of my adopted country." The President was deeply impressed with this show of patriotism. He learned that the artist had two sons, the younger, Eugene, being seventeen years old, and offered to appoint one to the Naval Academy. Mr. Leutze replied that he would be proud to have a son in the navy, and [Eugene Leutze] went to Annapolis."

Unfortunately, all of this information does not explain why Leutze chose to include Hay's name on the figure of the African American boy. It has been proposed that it might have been Hay who suggested to Leutze to include the figure, but nothing so far is conclusive.

For further research, I would like to explore if it is possible to understand the meaning of the inclusion of Hay's name. Additionally, I would like to expand my research on the following question:

- **What other events or occurrences would Leutze have observed in Washington, D.C. at the onset of the Civil War that might have informed either the oil study or the mural?**

Selected Bibliography:

Groseclose, Barbara S. *Emanuel Leutze, 1816-1868: Freedom Is The Only King*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975.

Hay, John and edited by Michael Burlingame and John R. T. Ettliger. *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997.

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