

*Envisioning Manifest Destiny*  
*Emanuel Leutze's Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*



Study for *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1861  
Smithsonian American Art Museum

Grade Levels

This lesson is recommended for students in grades five through twelve.

National Standards (from National Center for History in the Schools)

Grades 5--12

Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801--1861)

Standard 1: United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861 and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans

Resources

- Image of study for *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1861
  - In this document and from the Smithsonian American Art Museum Web site: [http://americanart.si.edu/images/1931/1931.6.1\\_1a.jpg](http://americanart.si.edu/images/1931/1931.6.1_1a.jpg)
- Image of final mural of *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1862
  - From the United States Capitol Historical Society Web site: <http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/murals/westward-course-empire-takes-its-way>
- Leutze Graphic Organizer and teacher sample
- Leutze Primary Source Handout

## Procedure

### **Visual Analysis** (suggested duration: 15--20 minutes)

1. Pass out the Leutze Graphic Organizer and printouts of Emanuel Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*—both the study and final mural. If possible, provide magnifying glasses. Instruct each group to fill out the first two columns of the Graphic Organizer, focusing on major elements of both works.
2. After the groups have had time for concentrated looking, ask each to share several observations with the class as a whole. Use these observations to closely observe the images together. If groups had a hard time seeing important elements of the paintings (such as the burial scene in the study or the Native Americans in the margins of both paintings), use this time to point them out.

#### Suggested Questions for Visual Analysis of both paintings:

##### Narrative interpretation

- What is happening in the main portion of the painting? Try to read it from right to left.
- What evidence from the scene are you using to recreate the narrative?
- Where have these pioneers come from? What has happened to them in the recent past?
- Where are they going? What in the work alludes to their destination?

##### Art Elements

- Where is the movement in this painting? If you had to draw a directional arrow between two points, where would it be?
- Where is the brightest point in the central image? Why would the artist want to draw your eye there first?
- Where are the major areas of light and dark? What are the moods of these areas?
- How do the landscapes to the left and right of the central part of the painting differ?
- How do all these elements add to your interpretation of the mood and significance of the scene?

### **Historical Context** (suggested duration: 15--20 minutes)

3. Tell the class that the study was completed in early 1861, during the Civil War, and the final mural was completed in late 1862, while the war was still being fought and a preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation had been published. Review information about these events from the textbook.
4. Distribute the Leutze Primary Source handout to each student.
5. Ask each group to fill out the second two columns of the Leutze Graphic Organizer using this information.
6. After the groups have had time for discussion, ask each to share several observations with the class as a whole. Use these as a prompt to closely observe the images and related primary sources together.

Suggested Questions for Historical Context section:

Role of Minorities

- Can you find the two American Indians in the study and the three in the final mural?
- What do their location and posture say about contemporary attitudes toward American Indians?
- What allusions to encounters with Indian tribes can you find in the center of the painting?
- What inspired Leutze to add a freedman to his painting of future western settlers? What impact might this image of the nation's future have on contemporary audiences?

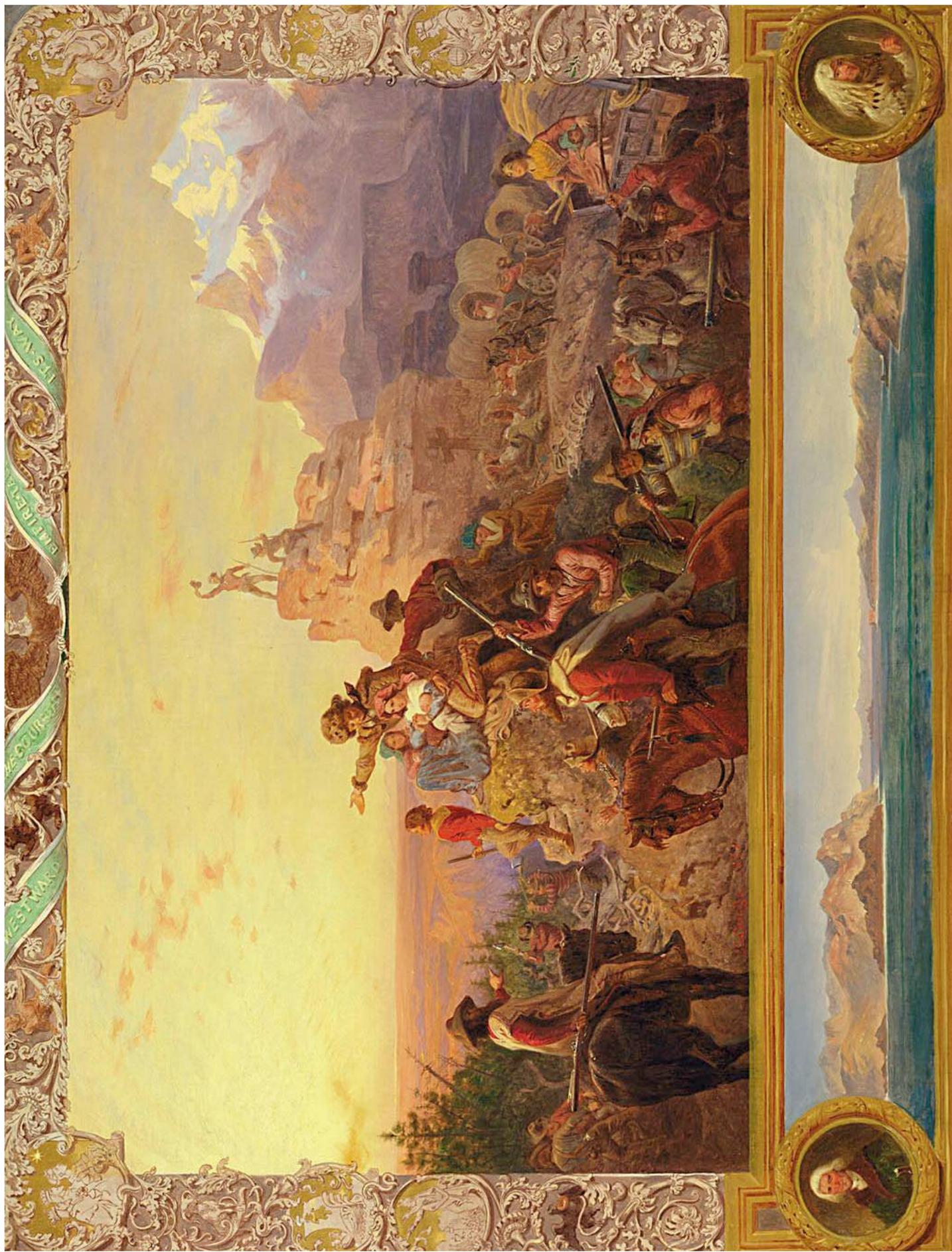
**Final Interpretation** (suggested duration: 5 minutes)

7. Lead a wrap-up discussion with the class reviewing information and student observations about Leutze's mural and relating it to the concepts of Western expansion, manifest destiny, and nationalism.
8. Have students record their answers to the final question at the bottom of the Leutze Graphic Organizer.

Suggested Questions for Final Interpretation section:

Role of Minorities

- Do you think this is what Western expansion looked like? Why or why not?
- What does the inclusion of minorities (African American, Native American, Irish American, German American) in the larger group say about American identity at this time? What picture of the nation's future is being offered?
- How has that picture played out in history?
- How does Leutze's mural project reflect manifest destiny and American history?



Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (mural study, *U.S. Capitol*), 1861, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Sara Carr Upton

# Handout One: Graphic Organizer

Analyzing an Artwork:

*Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze

List Differences		Relate to Historical Context	Primary Source Evidence
<i>Mural Study, 1861</i>	<i>Final Mural, 1862</i>		

How does Leutze's mural project reflect manifest destiny and American history?

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## Teacher Sample: Graphic Organizer

Analyzing an Artwork:  
*Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze

<b>Compare and Contrast</b>		<b>Relate to Historical Context</b>	<b>Primary Source Connections (when available)</b>
<i><b>Mural Study, 1861</b></i>	<i><b>Final Mural, 1862</b></i>		
only white settlers	inclusion of freedman	Emancipation Proclamation, free blacks are the future in the West	“mounted on a mule led by a negro boy who caresses the beast for the work done”
no American flags	two American flags flying	Stars and stripes represents unity of divided nation. Refers to hope for the end of the Civil War	
pyramidal composition	same	Emphasizes leader at apex of pyramid pointing to Pacific Ocean—destination of group	
burial scene	scene removed	Evidence of hardship might detract from glorious image	
Indian figures marginalized	same	Western expansion meant dispossessing Indian tribes	“To represent as near and truthfully as the artist was able the grand peaceful conquest of the great west”
figures move from dark to light	same	East Coast caught in divisive Civil War, West represents promise and future	“having passed the troubles of the plains, ‘The valley of darkness’”
inclusion of recent immigrant	same	Immigrants from Ireland and other countries left overcrowded Eastern cities and found a home in the West	

## Handout Two: Primary Sources

### Bishop Berkeley's Poem

*America or the Muse's Refuge:  
A Prophecy*

The Muse, disgusted at an Age and Clime,  
Barren of every glorious Theme,  
In distant Lands now waits a better Time,  
Producing subjects worthy Fame:

In happy Climes, where from the genial Sun  
And virgin Earth such Scenes ensue,  
The Force of Art by Nature seems outdone,  
And fancied Beauties by the true:

There shall be sung another golden Age,  
The rise of Empire and of Arts,  
The Good and Great inspiring epic Rage,  
The wisest Heads and noblest Hearts.

Not such as Europe breeds in her decay;  
Such as she bred when fresh and young,  
When heav'nly Flame did animate her Clay,  
By future Poets shall be sung.

Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way;  
The four first Acts already past,  
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;  
Time's noblest Offspring is the last.

—Bishop George Berkeley

*This poem inspired Leutze's work and its title. In these verses, Berkeley predicts that Western expansion will make America the site of the next golden age. Europe, despite past glories, has become decadent, and the world needs the hope that America promises.*

### Inscriptions on the Mural

“The Spirit grows with its allotted Spaces  
The Mind is narrow'd in a narrow Sphere”

*The source of this inscription is unknown, but it may be based on Friedrich Schiller's Wallenstein Trilogy, set during the Thirty Years' War. The plays explore the Catholic general's downfall in one of Europe's most destructive conflicts. Schiller's line reads:*

“Thus in a narrow sphere the mind contracts,  
But man grows great along with greater goals.”

“No pent up Utica Contrasts our Powers but the whole boundles[s] Continent is ours.”  
--- Jonathan M. Sewall, 1778

*This is an excerpt from Sewall's "Epilogue to Cato." Sewall was a Massachusetts lawyer and poet. Cato the Younger, a Roman statesman known for his probity in public life, committed suicide at Utica, a Roman province of Africa, after losing to Julius Caesar at Thapsus. Leutze broadens the meaning of the quote to include the entire United States.*

### Emanuel Leutze's Letters and Notes

“Let me propose, that a series of pictures representing the history of our country may be painted for the capitol, with just regard to the truth of history, with regard to the exhibition of the glorious examples of our great men for the benefit of future generations, and as a token of a nations 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

*Meigs began supervising the Capitol construction project on April 4, 1853, at the request of the Secretary of War Jefferson Davis. He also influenced the artistic design of the building by his choice of artists. Leutze argues at length that American artists have an important role to play in elevating the young nation to the international status that European countries enjoyed.*

“Subject---‘Emigration to the West’ being one, it takes its place on the Western staircase of the House of Rep.

“Design---**A party of Emigrants have arrived near sunset on the divide (watershed from whence they have the first view of the pacific slope, their ‘promised land’ ‘Eldorado’ having passed the troubles of the plains, ‘The valley of darkness’ &c----**  
The first are eagerly pressing forward--- the dim line of the Western ocean can be traced on the horizon to the left---on the right rise rocky mountains---at the foot of which the ‘mesa,’ ‘tableland’ and the rolling prairie with the commencement of one of the ‘fathers of the water.’”

“Emigrant Train of wagons toiling up the slope, jolting over the mountain train, scarcely a road, or diving into water worn gullies--upheld by the drivers from tilting over---On the nearest pinicale of a rock, a frontiere farmer (Tennesseeian) has carried his suffering wife with her infant in her arms, to show her the glories of the promised land---her boy with his fathers rifle, a jackknife, string and newspaper, looks thoughtfully into the future (type of young American)---while his little sister is cheering her mother with expressions of delight and surprize---the mother has folded her hands thanking for escape from dangers past. (religious feeling indicated).”

“In the ravine below axemen are clearing the Trail from fallen Trees---before them the guide, an old trapper, clad complete in buckskin, pointing to the way which lies before them, he rests his horse---next to him a young adventurer rides in stirrups to catch the first glimpse of the distant land, while his horse is training up the last slope of the divide--next to him another of the same class, cheering on the followers---both have their complete outfit strapped to their breasts, caricette, mealbag, frying pan, coffeepot, &c, &c, extra blankets.”

“Above them a young vagrant with a fiddle on his back, is assisting his equally young partner for life, up to the rock to peep at the distance, they express careless happiness spite of their scanty equipments.”

“Below a mother kissing her babe with tears of joy, **mounted on a mule led by a negro boy who caresses the beast for the work done---** She hopes to meet the father of her child who has preceded them.”

“ Next to her a rough but bighearted hunter of the border, **assisting a lad who has been wounded, probably in a fight with the Indians,** up the rocky path---behind and in the immediate foreground a team of oxen drawing a wagon, in which a young woman with a still younger girl in her lap is straining to look at the far land---in doubt whether there be not more troubles ahead, while the child is thoughtless of the scene enjoying life in wanton capers---a young brother guides the oxen, **a boy astride of one of them, has Indian arrows and a bow,** with a dead squirrel . . .”

“Intention

**To represent as near and truthfully as the artist was able the grand peaceful conquest of the great west** (paper torn off) . . . without a wish to date or localize, or to represent a particular event, it is intended to give in a condensed form a picture of western emigration, the conquest of the Pacific slope, while if ever the general plan be carried out the side walls will have the earlier history of Western Emigration, in illustrations from Boone's adventures the discovery of the valleys of the Ohio, Mississippi . . .”

“In the ornamental border which is but to serve as a margin to separate this picture from the others, or the blank wall, is the motto, ‘westward the course of Empire makes its way’ in the arabesque a playful introduction from earlier history as a prelude to the subject of the large picture.”

**“In the ends of the upper margin the standard bird shields union and liberty under his wings---influences of superior intelligence---the Indians creeping and flying before them---to the left the axeman, preceded by the hunter whose dog has attacked a catamount, the Indian creeping, discharging an arrow at the hunter.”**

**“To the right--the agriculturist, preceded by the missionary--a prairie owl and rattlesnake seeking the hospitality of a Prairie dog hide themselves, and Indian covering himself with his robe sneaking away from the light of knowledge. . .”**

“Margin below

Golden Gate, entrance to harbour of San Francisco--in the poem by Bishop Berkeley from which the motto is taken the last verse runs

Westward the course of Empire takes its way

The first four acts already past.

A fifth shall close the drama with the day.

The drama of the Pacific Ocean closes our Emigration to the west. 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.”

“This is the first mural painting in the capitol painted in this new manner which has been tried with complete success in Germany and England, based on the chemical quality of the Silicates--called the Stereochromatic manner also the first attempt in this country.”

—From Emanuel Leutze's notes (about 1862)  
describing *Westward the Course of Empire Takes  
Its Way*

*All punctuation and spelling are original, but bolded emphasis has been added to key sections of the notes. Leutze later identified the woman on the mule as an Irish immigrant, adding another new American to his image of the westward journey.*