

A Study of Emmanuel Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware

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Abstract: Washington Crossing the Delaware was created by painter Emmanuel Leutze in 1851. It depicts the scene of Washington leading the 14th Army of the Continental Army across the Delaware on Christmas Eve, 1776, during the American Revolutionary War, preparing to raid Hessian mercenaries. This operation was the first step in the Battle of Trenton and a key turning point in the American Revolutionary War. This article is dedicated to conducting a formal language analysis of the work, revealing its implicit image meaning, creative process, and the attitude of the US government towards historical paintings, in order to enrich the research on thematic historical paintings of the 19th century in the United States.

Keywords: Dusseldorf school of painting; Historical paintings; American revolutionary war

1. Introduction

When the Civil War broke out, Americans' idolatry of Washington's founding father became increasingly strong, believing that only by treating Washington as a "role model for the people" could the United States explore the right path in times of danger. Although he was oppressed by Prussia's strong militarism and conservatism in Germany, Emanuel Leutze created Washington Crossing the Delaware around Washington and rebelled against the Prussian authorities as a liberal artist. At the same time, in a speech to the United States Congress, Emanuel Leutze highlighted the lack of national thematic history paintings in the United States like that of Prussia, and he felt that there was an urgent need to increase the importance of this type of painting. In this regard, this paper studies the creation background, artistic style and composition of Washington Crossing the Delaware River, so as to enrich the theoretical materials about the 19th century American thematic historical painting.

2. Creation background

From the course of the incident, it can be seen that after losing several cities such as New York and Philadelphia in consecutive battles, the army led by Washington lacked food and clothing, and even many people had no shoes, and the overall morale of the army was low, and it was on the brink of death. On the evening of December 25, 1776, Washington personally led 2400 soldiers across the river from Trenton, sailing while breaking ice and encountering a snowstorm. Despite encountering difficulties crossing the river and the army arriving later than planned, the artillery still generated additional firepower and achieved victory in the surprise operation. This action was the first step in the Battle of Trenton and a key turning point in the American Revolutionary War, which greatly promoted the development of the Independence movement.

From the creative process, when he began to paint Washington Crossing the Delaware, Leutze found it difficult to find models in Germany who fit the American image, especially those who fit the Scottish, Indian image. So, Loiz tried to capture the Americans around him as models as much as possible. The painter found a Norwegian who was familiar with ice and ships as a model and posed with a bandage around his head. This was also the only character in the work who did not use an American model. In terms of the details of the creation of the work, first, in order to paint the sky at one time, Leutze asked two students who were good at landscape painting to help paint the sky, and prepared the paint the night before to ensure that the sky was as expected. Second, Leutze invited the model to work for two hours while he painted Washington's cape in one go. Third, there were three more guns in the studio, including a Prussian gun, a Star-Spangled banner, three guns, and a lot of wine. The walls of the studio were scarred by artists, models, and friends who fired guns to experience the battle. In the end, it took Leutze less than a year to complete this great work.

3. Artistic style

In terms of image form, the background schema of Washington Crossing the Delaware is probably influenced by the seascape painting of Clearing Up Coast of Sicily, in which the position of spray, sky and sunshine are very similar. In terms of artistic language, Leutze often made a living by drawing portraits on the streets of Philadelphia during his youth. He had a strong ability to grasp the characteristics of characters, so he could complete paintings of such large and diverse figures in just one year. Leutze's handling of ice, waves, and distant mountains is very similar to the language processing of Laishen's landscape paintings. His handling of the sky is similar to the Hudson River painting technique, and his handling of task light and shadow is a typical Munich painting technique. It can be seen that Leutze combines American history with European painting traditions and the characteristics of the Dusseldorf school of painting. In terms of color tones, the overall color scheme of Washington Crossing the Delaware is very dark, with shades of dark green, red, blue, brown and black. The brightness of the sky, the ice on the water surface, and the darker colors in the middle of the composition create a color contrast. The main light source comes from the sunrise, which plays a prominent effect, so that the contrast between Washington's face and hat is clear, emphasizing the central figure. In addition, Leutze uses red hair to suggest the Scots, while cold blue appears in large areas of the upper 2:1 sky, highlighting the sense of space through the contrast between warm and cold colors. Leutze uses red, olive green and ochre in a large area, and he has a large area of dark green in the lower right part of the work to express the deep dark water and red reflection, increasing the weight of the boat.

4. Composition analysis

4.1 Picture analysis

The landscape is the icy stretch of the Delaware River, covered in large chunks of ice, revealing a portion of the water in the middle. The entire painting is majestic, with faint distant mountains and white clouds connected to the water surface, and an endless fleet of ships in the background. The foreground of the work is composed of four sets of icebergs arranged in different ways, expressing texture through dark and cold light and direct strokes, presenting different depths in space, hinting at the hardships of the road ahead and the difficulties of the War of Independence. The sky appears to be covered in dark clouds, and the right side of the image is darker, with strips of sunlight penetrating through the thickness on the left, indicating a sunrise at dawn. On the right side of the screen are many ships carrying militia, horses, and artillery. In the distance, someone stepped off the ship and pushed it on the ice. Leutze cleverly utilizes atmospheric perspective to create three-dimensional spatial illusions, making the viewer more focused on the foreground by creating smaller, less recognizable figures in the background.

4.2 Picture composition

The interaction of various lines is implied in this painting, which not only conveys the sense of motion of the ship in the left direction, but also emphasizes strength and bravery (as shown in Figure 1). General Washington is on the golden line 0.618 on the left, and his body and head are also slightly tilted back. The first rower in green ahead leans his legs and oars 45 degrees to the right,



Figure 1. Composition analysis of Washington Crossing the Delaware

and the negative shape formed under his legs also presents a right leaning triangle. This right leaning triangle is reflected in both the national flag and the entire ship, with many right leaning lines throughout the painting, while the last rower's oar forms a left leaning line. Moreover, all diagonal lines are not parallel, but have unique angles. The lower part of the flag forms a faint halo, making the left leaning triangle very obvious in the entire picture, and heading west also seems to indicate the development of American territory from east to west. The horizon in the background is at the 2:1 centerline, and the reduction of the ships and characters in the back row enhances the spatial depth of the image. The contrast between black and white on the far left of the work is the strongest, while the contrast gray is on the right. By using colors and a right angled triangle composition, the gravity on the left side of the image is greatly enhanced, making the force to the left. The diagonal line is formed by a long oar extending into the water in the foreground and a flagpole extending upwards, conveying a sense of space and depth. In addition to straight lines, the circular arc of the ship's hull, iceberg waves under the ship, and the circular arc in the sky strengthen the radiation center towards Washington.

5. Historical authenticity

In fact, there are some elements in the work that violate historical authenticity. First, the Star-Spangled Banner was not used until September 1777. In the winter of 1776 Washington's Continental Army was supposed to use the colonial Union Jack. Second, the ship was too small to accommodate a crew of 11, and the cargo ship needed to store guns and horses, which would have been a large wooden flat bottomed double headed cargo ship. Third, the crossing actually took place at 3 a.m., and it had already reached shore late at night. But the work is at dawn, and it has a certain meaning. Fourth, the river where the river crosses is very narrow, less than 300 meters wide, and the ice should be large ice. The river in the work is wide and the ice is large. It can be seen that Washington's crossing of the Delaware is not a correct presentation of historical events, but the purpose is to create a piece of art that beautifies General Washington and the cause of the Revolutionary War.

6. Summary

Washington Crossing the Delaware River is one of the most typical images in the history of American art, and many painters and poets have created many copies on this basis. On February 20, 1852, the New York Evening News pointed out that Washington Crossing the Delaware had an unprecedented success, with more than 50000 people filling the Capitol exhibit. At this exhibition, Marshall O. Roberts, the president of Pacific Post, purchased the painting for \$10000. Subsequently, after a transaction, Washington Crossing the Delaware River was placed in the lobby of the Capitol and later auctioned off. When Emmanuel Leutze created Washington Crossing the Delaware, it was during the period of the Mexican American War and the expansion of the United States. At this time, Washington played the role of both a citizen and the father of the nation, symbolizing nationalism and civic values, and he was loved by the American people. Washington Crossing the Delaware has a total of 11 human figures, symbolizing the main body of the American nation, and presents the scene of Protestant English and Scottish people leading some ethnic minorities to unite against the colonial government and fight for freedom and independence. Different from the praise of the victor, the painting shows Washington at his lowest point leading a ragtag militia to defeat the British. At the same time, the painting uses a large number of right-leaning oblique lines and triangles in the form to strengthen the power of the ship moving to the left, forming the unique characteristics of the work.

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