

Book Two

# UNDERSTANDING AND CREATING ART

*Second Edition*



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# **UNDERSTANDING AND CREATING ART**

*Second Edition*

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**Ernest Goldstein  
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*Cover:* Detail from Frederick Remington, *The Buffalo Runners, Big Horn Basin*. 1909. Oil on canvas. 30 1/8" × 51 1/8". Courtesy Sid Richardson Collection of Western Art, Fort Worth. *Page iii:* Detail from Gilbert Stuart, *Portrait of Washington* (The Athenaeum Portrait). 1796. Oil on canvas. 48 × 37". Jointly owned by The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. *Page iv:* George Catlin, *Mint, a Pretty Girl*. 1832. Oil on canvas. 29" × 24". National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr. *Page v:* Joseph Stella, *The Bridge*. The fifth panel of *Voice of the City of New York Interpreted*. 1920–1922. Oil and tempera on canvas. 88 1/2" × 54". Collection of the Newark Museum. Purchase 1937, Felix Fald Bequest Fund. Photograph © The Newark Museum.

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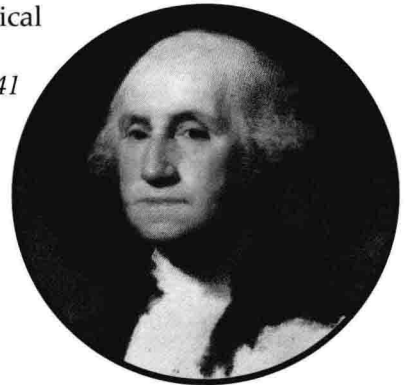
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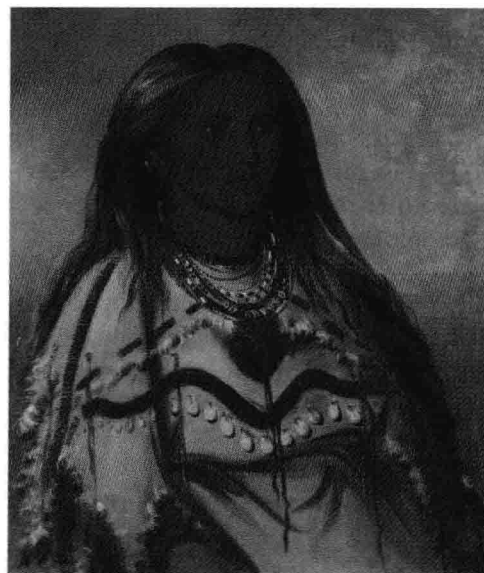
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P A R T



THE ARTIST AND  
HEROES AND  
HEROINES

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A detail from Stuart's *Portrait of Washington*.

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# UNIT



## LET'S GET LOST IN A PAINTING

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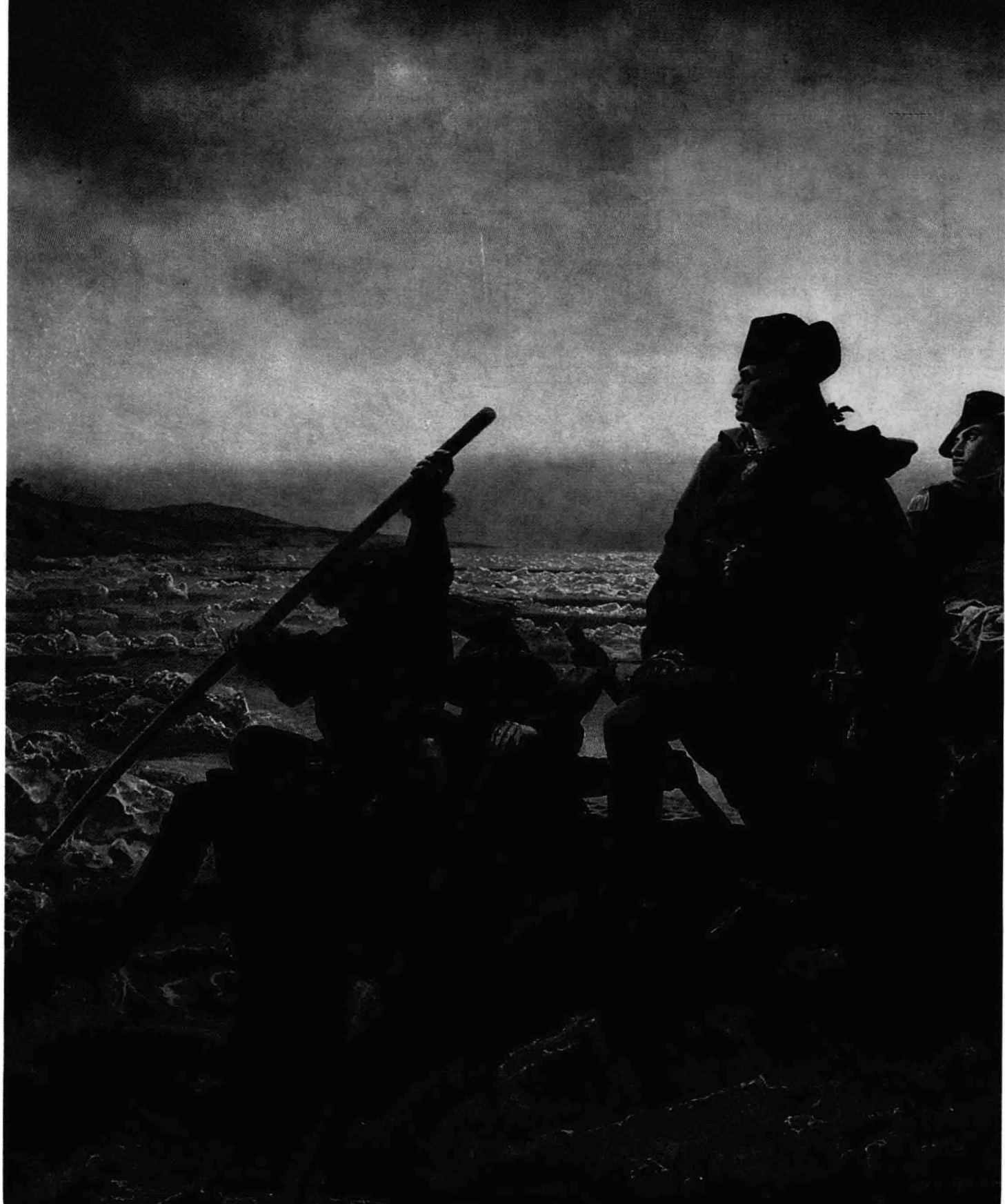
### *Washington Crossing the Delaware*

by Emanuel Leutze

*"It is doubtful whether so small a number of men in so short a  
space of time had greater results upon the history of the world."*

**A.G. Trevelyan**

**Figure 1. Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. 1855.**  
Oil on canvas. 14' x 20'. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of John S.  
Kennedy, 1897.





On the day before Christmas 1776, the Hessian commander in Trenton heard a startling rumor: George Washington was planning to cross the Delaware River and attack the British and Hessian troops. The commander, a certain Colonel Rall, roared with laughter. He is reported to have said, "If Washington and the Americans dare cross, I will personally chase them back in my stocking feet."

The colonel's statement tells much about the American army in the winter of 1776. The so-called army was a ragged group that had been defeated and driven from state to state and from river to river. The exhausted soldiers were suffering from lack of food, medical supplies, and protection from the cold. The winter had been especially severe—ice covered the Delaware River. Rall knew that crossing there was not only unthinkable, it was laughable.

On Christmas Eve, convinced that the rebellion would soon be over, Rall ordered his men to "lighten the guards and prepare for the holiday." This was Rall's last command. On the day after Christmas the American army had won the Battle of Trenton and the colonel was dead. He had made one fatal mistake. He and the entire British army had underestimated the character of a man and the power of an idea.

In 1851, seventy-five years later, an American artist living in Düsseldorf, Germany, finished painting his version of that fateful night. The public loved it immediately. To this day it remains America's most popular historical work, even though the artist is hardly known. The name of the painting is *Washington Crossing the Delaware*; the name of the almost forgotten artist, Emanuel Leutze (*loy-tse*).

You are about to take a journey into history through Leutze's painting. Since you have probably seen *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, stop before going on. Visualize the painting in your mind's eye. What do you remember most? Then go to the work. How much history can you read in it? What is the mood of the painting and of the men?

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## COMMANDING COMPOSITION

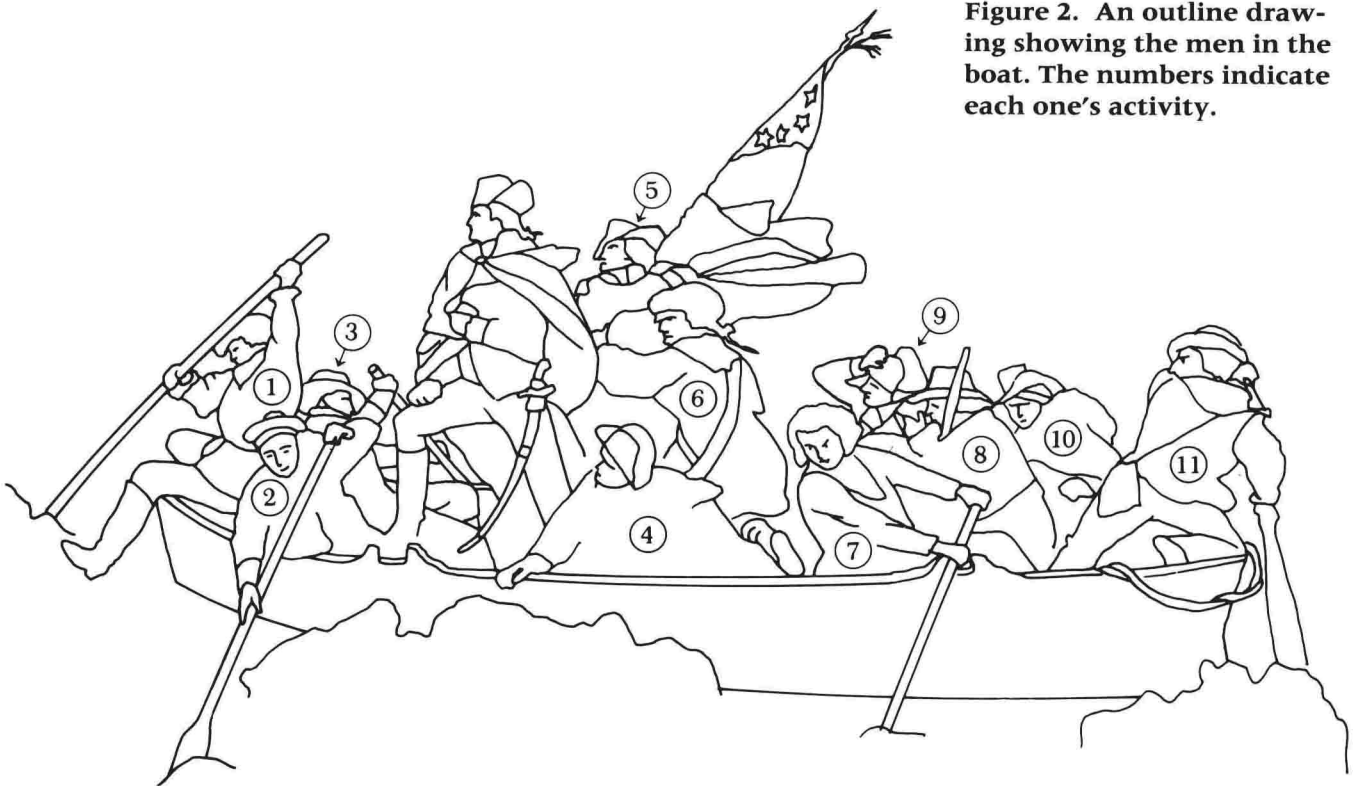
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What people see and remember most is a sublime George Washington. He is dressed in yellow knee breeches, high boots, a dark coat lined with yellow, a gray military cloak lined with red, and a black cocked hat. His sword hangs at his side, and in his right hand he holds a spyglass. The confidence in his face and the quiet strength of his pose

reassure the soldiers and tell of the coming victory. But the power of his look goes beyond this one battle. He is the commander-in-chief who has measured the shoreline, and the statesman already planning the future of the young country.

A critic praised this picture because “unlike many good historical paintings which must be studied before being appreciated, Leutze’s immediately strikes the eye.” What you notice first is Washington. His stance and stature give a feeling of calm and control. But the artist has created an illusion. Once you go beyond the standing figure, the mood quickly changes to extreme danger. Wind, currents, and ice threaten the boat. The men battle the river, the cold, and their own fatigue. Hidden beneath Washington’s gaze is turmoil, commotion, and great physical tension. Look at the arrangement of the men in the boat. What is each man doing? (See Figure 2.)

**Figure 2. An outline drawing showing the men in the boat. The numbers indicate each one’s activity.**



- Figure 1 Pushing ice floes
- Figure 2 Pushing ice floes
- Figure 3 Rowing
- Figure 4 Watching for danger
- Figure 5 Flagbearer
- Figure 6 Flagbearer

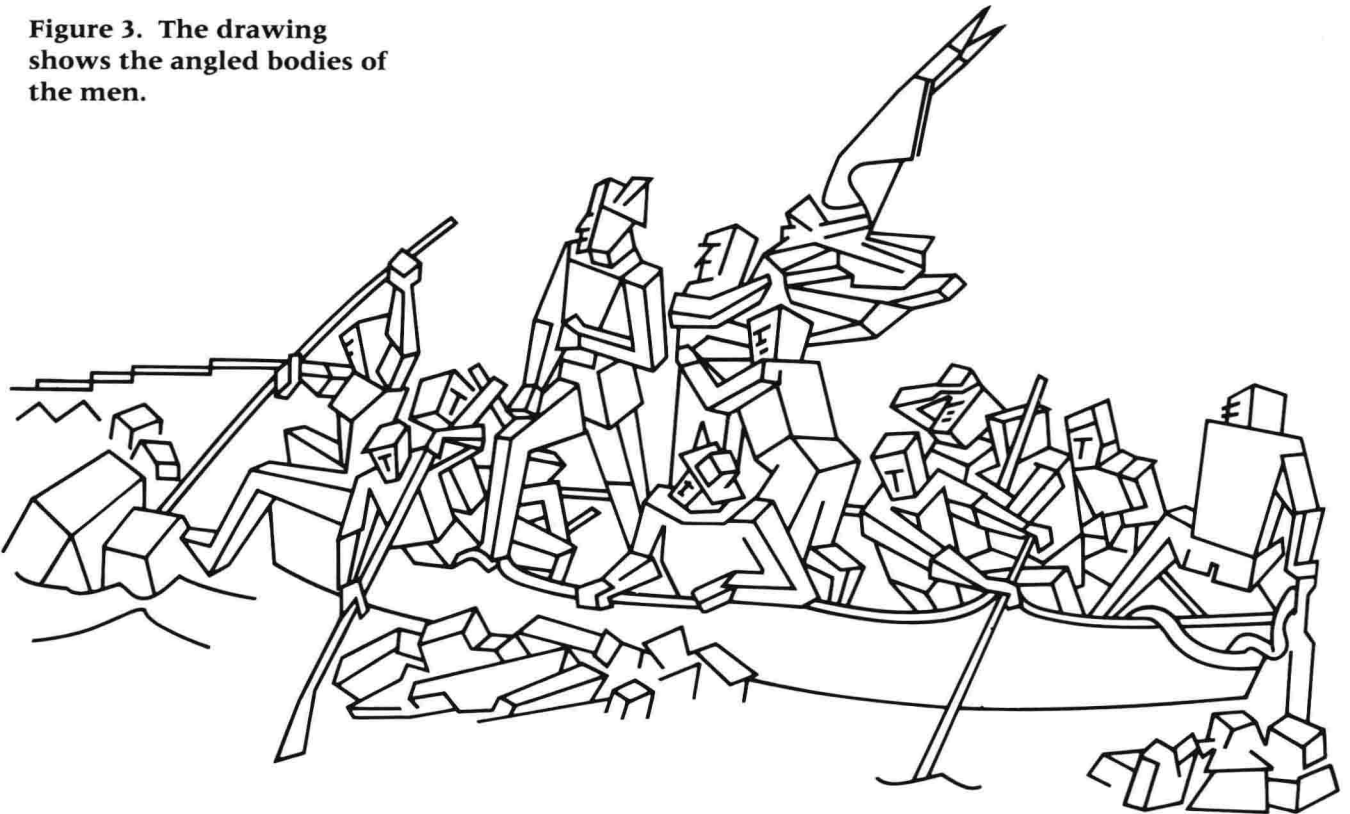
- Figure 7 Rowing
- Figure 8 Huntsman holding a gun
- Figure 9 Watching for danger
- Figure 10 Awaiting the battle
- Figure 11 Helmsman using an oar as a rudder

While the men appear to be in control, they are actually struggling. Study their various positions. Each body turns in a different direction. Each turn represents a human force against the force of the elements. Each twist of a body creates more tension and more activity. With such turmoil, why, asked one critic, is Washington standing? Before going on, look at the positions of the men again and try to answer this question.

Let's imagine Leutze's problem: how to dramatize the history of the country with a few men in a small boat. The men are not posing for a picture. Every action increases the feeling of danger outside the boat and the commotion within. In Figure 3 the figures have been turned into cube-like forms. Without the soft textures of their clothing, it is easier to follow the variety of ways Leutze positioned the bodies. The cubes allow you to feel the activity. In this presentation every action becomes an essential part of the design.

Notice how the angled bodies of the men create a circular motion around the fixed stance of Washington. He is the axis within the moving circle. As the men work together around him, his position stabilizes the boat.

**Figure 3. The drawing shows the angled bodies of the men.**





Inside the small area of a boat, Leutze made a compact design. He succeeded in creating tension and movement from eleven men working furiously, cramped and huddled together. The term for this technique in art is depth of motion. Leutze then calms the swirling motion with the standing figure. The arrangement of the men dramatizes danger, while Washington's fixed position makes order out of chaos.

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## DANGER ALL AROUND

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The dangers outside the boat can be seen in the sea of ice. The artist designed the ice floes as heavy floating shapes—wandering aimlessly with the currents, banging against the boat. Figures 4 and 5 show the complex details of the two main ice floes.

Only a small portion of the ice floes shows above the water; as with icebergs, most is hidden below. It is hard to judge the floes' real size. Imagine they are above the water; then they would easily be as large as the boat. These giant floes are like mountains with jagged rocks jutting out in all directions. In the drawing, the threat of these pointed shapes can be felt. On the lower-right ice chunk, Leutze's name is splattered in blood. The two large ice floes in the foreground

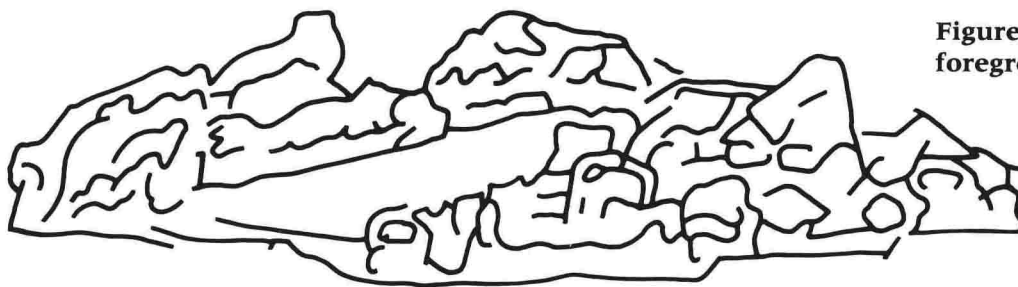


Figure 4. Ice floes in the foreground.



Figure 5. Outline of jagged ice floes.





**Figure 6.** Detail showing the expression on Washington's face in *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Leutze (Figure 1).



**Figure 7.** Detail of ice floe that resembles a human face in *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (Figure 1).

take on the shapes of frozen masks of death floating in the water. The response to the threat is the calm look of Washington, repeated in the flagbearers, the huntsman, and in the helmsman at the rudder (compare Figures 6 and 7).

Nature's shapes are terrifying and destructive. Without Washington's presence the boat could end up like the large tree twisted into the ice (Figure 8).

Leutze resolves the conflict by the stability of the boat. Although it seems to be going smoothly ahead, this is another illusion. The boat is rocking, but the design hides the movement.



**Figure 8.** Tree branch embedded in the ice. (Detail from Figure 1.)

The drawing in Figure 9 shows the directions of the oars and the flag. Each oar slants in a different direction. By slanting them at various angles, Leutze shows the force of