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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
19 January 2021

In fourth grade, my son had the good fortune to have a wonderfully engaging teacher, Mr. Howard Nusbaum. History came under the heading of “social studies,” and once Mr. Nusbaum learned that my work has “something to do with art,” he asked me if I could come visit the class one day and perhaps talk about Emanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), to add some “color” to the American history class that was part of this grade’s curriculum. To the embarrassment of my son, I agreed and went about preparing some remarks that I hoped would be of at least some interest to those eleven-year-olds. They were already aware of the worlds that could be found behind swipeable electronic screens but had not quite yet been sucked into the foam bath of social-media bubbles.

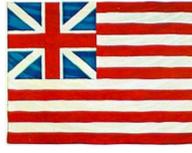


Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

I started my presentation by showing a photograph of a restaging of General Washington’s daring feat and asked the kids if they thought that this is what really happened that Christmas night in 1776.



Straight away, Mr. Nusbaum needed to jump in to bring me up to speed on his students’ terminology. He explained that what I meant to ask was: could the photo count as a “primary source”? That prompted a dozen or so eye rolls in my direction after which the kids told me that no, this photo did not show the real event since photography had not been invented back then, etc. I realized that it would be better to quickly retreat to art-historical arcana, telling them that the famous painting now at the Metropolitan Museum was actually the second version the artist painted, that the first was lost during a British air raid on the Kunsthalle Bremen in 1942, and that there was at least one egregious inaccuracy: the flag.



What Leutze depicts is an early version of the “Stars and Stripes,” although this only became the national flag six months after the crossing. In December 1776 Washington’s troops would have still carried the “Grand Union Flag.” However, I did elaborate that this was, in all likelihood, a deliberate decision by the artist. Had he shown the historically correct banner, the first detail a viewer noticed would not have been the familiar white stars but the red cross and the white diagonals of the “Union Jack”—too confusing a message in a composition that was meant to show the very moment when the American heroes were about to attack the Hessian mercenaries under British command at Trenton. I was relieved to have found at least one thing those young history buffs did not already know, and to have pointed out to them that, as primary sources, paintings are as unreliable as photos of historical reenactments. After that, the only thing left for me to teach was the correct German pronunciation of the surname of the painter Leutze (the first syllable being pronounced like “loit” in “loitering,” and the second syllable sounding like the “cir” in “circuit”).

I was reminded of this triad—historical event, artistic representation, and reenactment—when I came across an astonishing meme the day after the horrific events that unfolded on Capitol Hill two weeks ago—that deeply disturbing and decidedly unholy epiphany on the feast of Epiphany 2021.



I first saw it in a friend’s Instagram story, accompanied by the name of another account that turned out not to be its creator either. It therefore required a bit of online research—appropriate for an internet meme—to establish that the collage had originated from the department of classical studies at the University of Salzburg. It is based on a wood engraving by Heinrich Leutemann (1824–1905), who trained at the academy in Leipzig and made a career as a highly successful illustrator, creating an untold number of prints for such popular magazines as the *Gartenlaube* and the *Münchener Bilderbogen*. The latter’s special series *Bilder aus dem Alterthum* had already included an earlier, more elaborate depiction by Leutemann of the Vandals looting Rome.



Still more intriguing is the fact that the image used by the Salzburg archeologists was actually published in Charlotte M. Yonge’s *Young Folks’ History of Rome*, published in Boston in 1880. Yonge was an extremely prolific British writer and novelist who was famous in her day, admired by Lewis Carroll, George Eliot, and William Morris, and compared to Jane Austen and Honoré de Balzac, even if today she is virtually forgotten. In her book, Yonge presents an overview of Roman history aimed at what is now called “young adults,” illustrated with all sorts of images, some derived from Piranesi’s views of Rome, others from archeological inventories. Leutemann’s reimagining of the Germanic raid stands out, and Yonge’s prose sets the stage: “The nobles were almost all vain, weak cowards, who only thought of themselves, and left strangers to fight their battles; and every one was cowed with fear, for a more terrible foe than any was now coming at them.”

A little speculation might be allowed here since, given the apparent iconographic parallels between the print and the images from two weeks ago, one does indeed wonder: what in the world gave those modern-day vandals at the Capitol the idea to dress up the way they did? Easiest to explain is perhaps Adam Johnson’s relationship to Nancy Pelosi’s lectern, since looting and carrying away the spoils is as old as war itself. But why did Aaron Mostofsky line his bulletproof police vest with fur pelts? Could it be a case of arrested development in someone who read too many novels by James Fenimore Cooper and is dreaming of becoming a trapper? And, most “iconic” of them all, why was the conspiracy theorist Jacob Anthony Chansley (a.k.a. Jake Angeli) wearing a fur headdress with horns?



Could it be, perhaps, that one of them found Yonge’s book when clearing out some distant aunt’s attic? Incidentally, the original English edition of the book is titled *Aunt Charlotte’s Stories of Roman History for the Little Ones* (London 1877). It is obviously a very old book, and, who knows—whoever found it might have even believed it to be a primary source? In it, one could read all about the decline of the Roman elite and then about those Vandals whom Yonge describes as “another tribe of Teutons—tall, strong, fair-haired, and much like the Goths, and, like them, . . . Arians.”

One thing seems to be clear, though: none of those Trump-loyal terrorists who mistake themselves as “patriots” had someone like Mr. Nusbaum to teach them about the validity of historical sources and help them distinguish which ones are primary and which ones are not. Instead, they had Facebook and its terrific “Groups” feature: “spaces for friends, acquaintances, or people with similar interests to discuss or share about broad or narrow topics.” And what this can lead to, the whole world was able to witness on that fatal day.

