

DRISCOLL | BABCOCK



'Washington Crossing the Delaware' lands in Winona museum

Mary Abbe

After decades in D.C., the famous 1851 painting "Washington Crossing the Delaware" leaves the White House for a new home.

George Washington has crossed the Mississippi and landed in Winona, the Minnesota Marine Art Museum (MMAM) announced Monday.

The Winona museum unveiled Sunday night one of only two authentic surviving versions of "Washington Crossing the Delaware," one of the most famous paintings in American art. A larger version is owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where it has long been a popular attraction.

The 1851 painting was recently acquired by museum founders Mary Burrichter and her husband, Bob Kierlin, founder of Fastenal, a Winona-based hardware-supply company valued at \$15 billion. They purchased the picture from a private collector who had, for the past 35 years, loaned it to the White House.

"It looks just terrific," said Burrichter. "We had people crying in the audience last night when we unveiled it. People were gasping and didn't know what to say. The painting is smaller than the one at the Met, but it has the same presence. George Washington looks so determined; the water is so icy and it's Christmas night. But you see right there in the picture that it's a turning point in the Revolutionary War."

Burrichter declined to say what the picture cost, as did John Driscoll, the Minnesota-born, New York-based art dealer who arranged the purchase. The previous owner was not interested in selling at first, Driscoll said, but eventually the dealer persuaded him that it belonged in Minnesota.

"It's probably the most famous American painting west of the Hudson River," Driscoll said Monday. "At auction this picture would have pulled out not only art collectors but ultra patriots who are very wealthy. There's nothing else like this in the world."

The artist, Emanuel Leutze (1816-68), was a German-born immigrant who grew up in the United States but painted his most famous pictures — three heroic images of George Washington crossing the Delaware River — back in his homeland.

The first, completed in 1850, was sold to a museum in Bremen, Germany, where it was accidentally destroyed by British bombs in 1942.

New York's Metropolitan Museum owns the second version, a grandiose, 21-foot-wide image of General Washington improbably standing upright in a crowded boat being rowed across the icy water for an attack on the British that turned the tide of the Revolution.

The Winona painting is Leutze's third and final treatment of the theme. Like the Met's painting, it was completed in 1851 but on a more domestic scale. More than 3 feet tall and nearly 6 feet wide, it has the same cast of characters, a melting pot of buckskin-clad American frontiersmen, farmers and hunters, including a black man and an androgynous rower who is probably a woman in a man's outfit. James Monroe, the future fifth president of the United States, holds the enormous flag fluttering behind Washington.

The painter conceived it in part to inspire Germans to rebel against their aristocratic rulers. The troops that Washington attacked that Christmas night in 1776 were Hessians, German mercenaries employed by the British.

When the big version was shown in New York City in 1854, some 50,000 people lined up and paid 25 cents each to see it, "and that was a good chunk of change in those days," said Driscoll. Though always privately owned, the Winona version was exhibited in New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Omaha and even Düsseldorf over the past 160 years. It hung in the White House from 1979 until 2014, when Burrichter and Kierlin bought it.

"They were searching for an iconic American masterpiece that could be the centerpiece of our American collection, and this is a slam dunk," said Andrew Maus, executive director of the nine-year old Marine Art Museum.

Burrichter and Kierlin have loaned the painting to the museum, intending that it eventually join the museum's permanent collection.

Located on the banks of the Mississippi, the museum has expanded three times to accommodate an ever-growing collection of water-themed art. A gallery and education room were added in 2009, followed by a \$1.3 million wing for European paintings in 2013 and a \$1.8 million gallery for American art in 2014.

The collection features about 1,400 paintings, sculptures and photos, of which about 100 are considered masterpieces. Among the latter are paintings by such European luminaries as Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso; American modernists Georgia O'Keeffe and Marsden Hartley; and 19th-century American and Hudson River School talents including Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt and Winslow Homer.