



NEW SPIRIT

Suozzi vows
LI artist's new
painting will tell
'what really
happened'
when
Washington
crossed the
Delaware

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Mention Washington crossing the Delaware and one image immediately comes to mind: the future president standing tall in a small boat, in daylight, in front of a wind-whipped American flag, with ice chunks clogging the river.

That scene, depicted in an iconic 1851 painting by artist Emanuel Leutze, is rife with historical errors. Now former Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi has commissioned Cove Neck artist Mort Künstler to paint an accurate depiction of Gen. George Washington's Christmas night 1776 crossing of the Delaware River.

The surprise Revolutionary

War assault on British mercenaries in Trenton, N.J., that followed the crossing reversed the flagging fortunes of the commander.

"I've always been excited about the story," Suozzi said. "Everything had gone wrong for Washington and his important decision [to make the unusual winter attack] changed the whole course of America. . . . It's raining, it's sleeting and three other columns can't get across. In Leutze's painting the sun is shining and he is standing up in front of the boat with this glacial ice — it's so unrealistic."

When Suozzi, who has known Künstler for five years, suggested the artist undertake a new rendering of the crossing, the artist resisted. He feared a revised version of an image so ingrained in America's consciousness might not be well-received.

"I said, 'How do I go against this iconic image?'" said

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Künstler at work.
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Künstler, who suggested a scene of Washington on horseback on the riverbank instead.

Suozzi was unmoved. "I said, 'No, Mort. We have to go right up against this painting and use it as a vehicle to tell the true story of what really happened,'" Suozzi said.

Künstler — whose past work includes paintings that correct romanticized depictions of Custer's Last Stand, Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders' charge up San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War, and other events — finally agreed.

In the third-floor studio of his house overlooking Oyster Bay Harbor, the artist has been making a series of small pencil sketches after visiting the site of the crossing and conferring with historians. They show a rough outline of Washington standing in a ferry holding a cannon wheel.

Scattered around Künstler's easel are a copy of the Leutze painting, images of Colonial river craft, and photos he has taken of the Delaware from the New Jersey and Pennsylvania parks that commemorate Washington's daring initiative.

He expects to finish the oil painting by the anniversary of the event in December.

Suozzi, who lives in Glen Cove, said he commissioned the work for which he will pay the "mid-to-high five figures." Suozzi said he plans to lend it to museums but hasn't decided where its permanent home will be.