Artist Robert Colescott is best known for his 1970-era paintings appropriating earlier, canonical works such as Emmanuel Leutze’s 1851 *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Colescott’s own interpretation focuses on cultural and racial exclusions within historic and contemporary society within the United States and Europe. Colescott’s rendition of Leutz’s painting, entitled *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1975), is considered one of his most famous pieces as it reimagines the first U.S. president as the famous twentieth century African American inventor.

The large painting (7 x 9 ft.) is a colorful scene of a heroic figure crossing the Delaware River. However, instead of soldiers accompanying the scientist turned general and future president, Colescott has filled the boat with stereotypical images of African Americans. In this way the artist presents extreme representations of black people within U.S. society: cultural and scientific icons whose contributions and intelligence are often overshadowed by widely spread images of those same looking people in marginal and condescending roles.

The work is also representative of Colescott’s painterly style, which has been described by scholars as a melding between cartoonish figures, similar to Robert Crumb, yet featuring scenes and backgrounds that are lyrical and unfinished, similar to the painter Willeim de Kooning. Colescott’s style combines his experimentation with abstraction and figuration. The former was from his early training in the U.S., while the later he learned in Paris under French painter Fernand Léger in 1949.

Born in 1925 in Oakland, California, Colescott grew up during the Depression era. He gained an interest in the arts from his parents; his mother was a pianist and his father was a jazz violinist, and from the latter’s friend with sculptor Sargent Johnson. Colescott pursued his passion for painting and drawing after receiving his BA from the University of California, Berkeley in 1949. Though initially wanting a career in the Foreign Service, he changed to art. After completing his degree Colescott went to Paris under the G.I. bill and worked with Léger for a year. The young artist then returned to the northwest where he worked and taught until 1964. That same year he received a grant to be the first artist-in-residence at the American University in Cairo (1964-67), followed by the same position at the Centre Culturel Americain in Paris (1967-69), before finally settling back in the Bay Area.

While teaching at San Francisco Art Institute from 1976-85 Colescott made some of his most famous works including *George Washington Carver* and *Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People* (1976) and *Eat dem Taters* (1975), an appropriation of Vincent van Gogh’s famous Potato Eaters. During the period Colescott witnessed various political and social actions in the U.S. by the Black Panthers, and earlier student protests in France. Thus these famous 1970 pieces were concerned with the problematics of history and how contemporary social issues within one country can still be aligned with those in another.

The themes of history, memory, continue throughout Colescott’s oeuvre, though women and eroticism feature more prominently in Colescott’s later works of the 1980s -90s. These include his lesser known charcoal works, which are simple black and white drawings featuring one or two nude figures. (Name) (1982/92?) depicts a male nude figure painting from a presumed live, nude female model. While the male’s erection indicates his arousal, he does not look at his model, but is focused on his work. Moreover, the model seems to float above the artist perhaps as a dream, emphasized by the lack of a completed body. Finally, the model has been scribbled over with charcoal, though she is still visible. What is the relationship between these individuals? Colescott gives no clear clues and thus leaves the scene open-ended.

Another work from this time is ? (1983). Here a voluptuous woman stands partially naked in profile. Colescott presents her in the mundane task of undressing. Her body posture and position are not for viewer consumption because she is not seductive. She does not engage the viewer at all, but is doing an action that viewers are witnessing. Yet, that rejection of the male gaze adds another layer of ambiguity to the piece. What is Colescott’s objective? Is it to have the viewer contemplate how this woman could be sexual when in a non-sexual pose or situation? Or is it that not all images of nude women need to be for a sexual response? Moreover despite the lack of color of the figure, her wide nose, large lips and close-cut hair suggest she is black, thus also creating a vague commentary on the highly complex relationship between sexuality, viewership and black female bodies.

Colescott’s later works expanded into more abstract paintings and collages.