

THE CENTENARY OF LORD LEIGHTON

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FREDERIC Leighton was born at Scarborough, England, on December 3rd, 1830, the son of a physician. His grandfather, Sir James Leighton, was long resident as court physician at St. Petersburg. The boy, Frederic, had the advantage of being taken abroad when very young, for we find him at the age of ten studying drawing in Rome under Signor Meli, and later pursuing his studies—for which he showed great aptitude—at Dresden, Frankfurt and Berlin. In the winter of 1844 he accompanied his family to Florence, where he studied at the Accademia delle Belle Arti, and attended anatomy classes under Zanetti; but, though his future career in art was now decided upon, on account of his extreme youth he soon returned to complete his general education at Frankfurt-on-Main, receiving no further instruction in art for nearly five years.

During a visit to Brussels in 1848 he met Wiertz and Gallait and painted a few pictures, including "Cimabue finding Giotto" which recalled his Florentine influences, and later the attraction of Paris induced him to copy Titian's and Correggio's works in the Louvre; but he soon returned to Frankfurt to settle down to serious art study under Edward Steinle, whose pupil he declared he was "in the fullest sense of the term."

In spite of the fact that his training was mainly German, Leighton's intense love for Italian art is evidenced by his first picture "Cimabue's Madonna carried in procession through the streets of Florence"—exhibited in the Royal Academy of 1855, when the artist was but twenty-five years of age. It made him instantly famous. Queen Victoria purchased it immediately for £600, and it now adorns Buckingham Palace. Its success with the public was all the greater since the artist was virtually a stranger in England, and from the fact that the works of the Pre-Raphaelites were then absorbing popular interest, for this memorable year witnessed Holman Hunt's celebrated "Light of the World"; yet Ruskin pronounced it "a very important and very beautiful picture." "It possesses," he said, "both sincerity and grace, and is painted on the purest principles of Venetian art. Everything in it is done as well as it can be done. . . . In the background is the church of

San Miniato, strictly accurate in every detail; on the top of the wall are oleanders and pinks as carefully painted as the church." Thackeray was in the Eternal City while this masterpiece was being painted, and its merits so impressed the great "word delineator of intellect" that, on his meeting J. E. Millais in London, he chaffingly said to that noted artist—who later related the story publicly—"Millais, my boy, I have met in Rome a versatile young dog, called Leighton, who will one of these days run you hard for the Presidentship!" The prophecy came true.

With his attention turned now to themes of classical legend—treated at first by the artist in a romantic spirit—"The Triumph of Music," in which Orpheus by the power of his art redeems his wife from Hades, was not so successful as later subjects like "Samson and Delilah" and "The Fisherman and the Syren." In 1858 Leighton visited London, met the leading Pre-Raphaelites, and renewed his acquaintance with many of the artistic world whom he had known in Rome; but the next spring found him at Capri—always a favorite resort of his—making many studies from nature, including his famous drawing of a Lemon Tree, which is now a valued possession of one of the colleges at Oxford.

It was not till 1860 that he settled in Bayswater, London, where he remained six years till his removal to that celebrated house, No. 2 Holland Park Road, in which he resided till his death. This unique home of the versatile and distinguished later President of the Royal Academy was built from designs by Mr. George Aitcheson, R.A., at great cost, and stands in a prettily laid out garden of nearly three-quarters of an acre not far from Kensington High Street Station on the Underground Railway. It is undoubtedly one of the most interesting houses in London, as it enshrines many original paintings as well as scores of sketches made for his famous works. The domain where a man lived and executed the work which won him renown has always a fascination for the public, and Leighton House—a decided novelty in its way, and probably the most perfect artist's home extant—was generously handed over by his sisters without cost (until the lease expires in 1963) to an influential committee, unfettered by any conditions, so that they might act as considered desirable to make the gift of artistic benefit to the nation for ever.

The exterior is just the usual semi-city house, slightly set back from the road-way, and screened by a hedge of closely cut limetrees. It gives no hint of the lavish wealth of decoration of what is essentially a painter's home. In fact this whole neighbourhood is an artistic centre of London, for nearby lived the late

Sir Luke Fildes, R.A.; Hamo Thorneycroft, R. A., sculptor; Marcus Stone, R.A.; Ralph Peacock, Mr. Watson, the late W. Holman Hunt, O.M.; Mr. Shannon, A.R.A. Passing through a small porch the entrance hall opens into an inner *patio* lit from the sky, where in the centre stands an excellent bust portrait of the former owner by T. Brock, R.A.—a reproduction of that artist's diploma work for the Royal Academy, and presented by him to Leighton House; while the walls of the hall are ornamented with photographs of Raphael's pictures in the Sistine Chapel. A delightful lounge seat between two pillars on the stair-case is formed of inlaid Damascus work, and matches the beautifully carved wooden mantel on which stand two charming little statuettes—reproductions of Leighton's well-known works in the Tate Gallery, "The Sluggard" (1866) and "Frightened" or "Needless Alarms" (1866); the latter representing a woman startled by a toad at her feet, and which was presented by the sculptor to Sir John Millais, as an acknowledgment of that artist's gift of his picture "Shelling Peas." The spacious grand corridor on the left of the *patio* leads to the Arab Hall—the chief feature of Leighton House and which is alone worth the pilgrimage, as its treasures are priceless and quite unique. Begun in 1877, it took practically two years to complete, and its Caserta marble columns, capped by alabaster, were designed by George Aitcheson, R.A.; while the ornamental birds, flowers, etc., were modelled by Sir E. Boehm. The column niches are lined with brilliant marbles of every shade of Genoa, Irish and Pyrenean green and Belgian blue, while their bases and the lintels are formed of Irish black and red set in mosaics, making a glorious wealth of colour. The walls are of superb blue, white and green Persian tiles, three hundred years old, collected by Leighton himself during his visits to Rhodes, Cairo and Damascus; and he also acquired two magnificent Saracenic inscriptions in delicate colours and charming design, one of which, sixteen feet long, runs over the entrance and is thus translated:

In the name of the merciful and long-suffering God:
 The Merciful hath taught the Kurân;
 He hath created man and taught him speech;
 (He hath set) the sun and the moon in a certain course;
 Both the grass and the trees are in subjection (unto Him).

The Arab Hall is a perfect square surmounted by a dome with eight exquisite Damascene windows, while the three lower stained glass lights at the side are wonderfully coloured, and provided with delicately carved shutters from the Far East. Beneath these stand divans of most beautifully carved black wood to match the Oriental

gallery—a superb piece of ancient workmanship overlooking the entrance—and which still has its tiny latticed doors through which Mohammedan ladies once peeped at the outside world. In the centre of the mosaic floor a dainty fountain plays constantly into a large black marble basin, and at the end of the room stands a cabinet of inlaid metal work containing vases of rare porcelain and china, while a priceless urn, filled with laburnum, ornaments a lovely table of mother-of-pearl.

The interior towers upwards in dim mysterious solemnity till the Oriental shadows are met by the tiny scintillating shafts of light—gorgeous reds; rich blues; deep oranges—which filter through the brilliant bits of Oriental glass set up like tiny stars in the vault above. The silence is unbroken, save for the rhythmic fall of the thread-like silver streak of water soothingly splashing in the ebony black monolith on the floor in the centre. Visit it on a hot July or August day, and you realize how absolutely perfect every detail is designed and planned. One is far away from London. No discordant note of colour or proportion mars the illusion. The scene is thoroughly, realistically Eastern. And no wonder! Most of the exquisitely designed tiles are Persian of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The oldest are two star-shaped ones, dark brown in colour, let into the woodwork in the alcove on the west side facing the entrance. These belong to the far-away thirteenth century. Originally there were human faces on them, but the Mohammedan religion, or some sect thereof, considering it wrong to portray the human face divine, the physiognomies have been obliterated with cement. On either side of this alcove are two large and magnificent—quite unique—plaques bought by Sir Purdon Clarke for Leighton from a house in Asia Minor. These and two adjoining plaques, forming an angle with the others, are of marvellous brilliancy and exquisite tracery, and are the most perfect specimens known to exist of that particular period of the art of enamelling on pottery.

An ornamental bronze and iron electrolier lights the Arab Hall, and, as may be imagined, the effect is indescribably magical at night!

Passing through the wide corridor again, we pause to admire the terra-cotta statuette of “Wedded”—a replica of one of Leighton’s best-known paintings now in a gallery in New South Wales—and then enter the drawing-room, where one immediately notices that the windows can be occupied at night by mirrors when desired. As it was a glorious, warm June day, we proceeded at once through the open French doors into the large garden filled with flowering shrubs and plants of all description. Seated on the rustic seats we revelled in the sunshine, shaded by friendly palms and three stately magnolia trees whose fragrant blossoms, combined with

lilies of the valley, Solomon Seal, snow-balls and numerous red and white hawthorn bushes, made the air redolent with perfume. Re-entering the drawing-room, we turn with greater zest to the examination of copies of many of Leighton's pictures which adorn the walls, the most striking being a fine black and white engraving, as well as one in colour, of "Flaming June". This girlish figure, draped in that gorgeous orange robe, with her wonderful bronze hair streaming over the dark maroon cushions on a marble settee, makes an ineffaceable impression upon one's mind. Other notable pictures here include "A Summer Moon", in which two Greek girls in loose robes are sleeping on a marble bench in an Eastern landscape; several excellent drawings and fine pieces of tapestry, and a bronze replica of Leighton's famous statue "Athlete struggling with a Python", the original of which was purchased by the Chantrey Bequest Collection. Though Leighton executed only three statues in his life, yet his friends contend that he might have been more distinguished as a sculptor than he became as an artist.

The stair-case at Leighton House leading from the *patio* to the studio on the first floor is a perfect gem, for its walls, lined with beautiful blue tiles by William de Morgan surrounding Eastern tiles of the sixteenth century, give a wonderful colour-effect, and the artist used it as a background in some of his pictures. The first object to catch the eye on entering the studio is a splendid picture of "A Noble Lady of Venice," but one soon passes on to revel in "Clytemnestra", and also the many preliminary designs and studies which led up to the consummation of that masterpiece. When it was exhibited at the Royal Academy (1874), Mr. G. F. Watts R.A. asserted "Certainly a better example of Leighton at his happiest could not, I think, be found," and here is revealed at its best the extraordinary smoothness the painter attained in his surfaces, and which made him superior to the rank and file of his profession. "Clytemnestra" is a full-length picture of a richly dressed lady with pearls in her hair, standing near an old castle against a background of an Eastern blue sky studded with shining stars.

Other interesting features in this room include a handsomely carved mahogany chair, with its back and cushion beautifully worked in Florentine design by Queen Alexandra and presented to Leighton when she was Princess of Wales; a tapestry showing "Neptune with trident in his chariot"; a superb blue and green lustre plate given by Mrs. de Morgan; two large paintings by G. F. Watts, R.A., entitled, "A Study in fresco for Chaos"; "Humanity in the lap of earth"; a beautifully carved armoire and copper

vases filled with plants; and a fine portrait, over the doorway, of Leighton's sister, Mrs. Sutherland Orr, painted by him in 1861. Our close examination of Leighton's picture of "Michael Angelo nursing a sick domestic" caused the guide to add the interesting comment that G. F. Watts had nursed his eccentric old servant, Thompson, till his death at his home nearby. Here are also shown fine copies of "Work and Pleasure" and "The Industrial Arts of War and Peace", two decorative paintings in spirit fresco by Leighton for the walls of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Kensington, which has also his refined and spirited figure of "Cimabue" in mosaic.

Among the innumerable pencil sketches hanging on the walls and screens is a series for his picture "When the Sea gives up its Dead", now in the Tate Gallery, and another framed set for his last work, "The Four Seasons", which bore the following written directions: Infancy, tender colours; Hope, spring flowers; Dawn, birds awakening, etc. Another fascinating picture must here be noted, entitled "The Death of Brunelleschi", painted by Leighton at the age of twenty, and many years later presented to Leighton House by Dr. Von Steinle, a son of the artist's former teacher. It bears the following inscription:—"The architect of the Dome of the famous Cathedral in Florence was Brunelleschi, and the day on which the Cathedral was opened, when the city was en fête for the occasion, the great artist was dying. He asked to be taken to an opening in the stair-case of his house where he could see the Cathedral and where in sight of it he died." Additional interest is added to the painting from the fact that the dying architect portrays the features of Leighton's master, Prof. von Steinle, while the figure bending over him is a portrait of the artist's own father. Garlands of leaves and flowers decorate the stair-case on which children are carrying fruit on trays; a woman sits beside Brunelleschi, and a massive grey-hound gazes imploringly at his master, whose eyes are fixed on his immortal chef-d'oeuvre—the most perfect dome in the world—looming up in the distance.

Other fine paintings here include "Corinna of Tanagra", as well as "The Burial of Titian at Venice"—also handed over by Dr. Alpheus von Steinle—which shows the funeral procession of gondolas on the Grand Canal, while the marble balconies of the palaces stand out against a background of flowering pink chestnuts. This particularly long and well-lighted studio is used by Leighton-House Committee not only for exhibitions of pictures, but for occasional lectures and concerts, as it possesses exceptional acoustic properties.

Entering the adjoining chamber, known as the Silk Room—as its walls are lined with yellow silk—one finds splendid engravings of “The Return of Proserpina” (Leeds Gallery); Hercules wrestling with Death for the body of Alcestis” (1871); “The Captive Andromache” (Manchester Art Gallery); “Hero Watching for Leander to swim across the Hellespont”; and then passing into the upper hall we see a fine photograph of “Clytie”, the artist’s last picture, exhibited after his death, and the original of which is in a private gallery. This work of great accomplishment in its draughtsmanship, dramatic expressiveness and harmonious colour depicts the nymph, with agonized face, entreating the Sun-god not to forsake her as, gleaming through an opening in a heavy cloud before setting below the western horizon, her beloved passes for the time from her sight; and in the quiet studio where the master lay in January, 1896—silent and at rest—the goddess kept sorrowful watch over his remains.

The anti-chamber, in dim half-light from the Arab Hall, has a trellised, narrow “postigo” of Cairo lattice work, through which we take one long last look at the romantic beauty of the fountain and picturesque charms of the Oriental room below.

The personality of Leighton was revealed in the choice of his subjects, for he was one of the real classicists in English art; but if Greek sculpture and early Italian and mediaeval art and handicraft appealed to him particularly, none more rejoiced in the Venetian masters, Rembrandt and Velasquez, and he was among the first to recognize the genius of Puvis de Chavannes, Whistler and Burne-Jones. This generosity and cosmopolitanism of spirit was plainly shown throughout his notable career, which was one of the most brilliant in modern painting, and can be compared only with that of Van Dyck. At the first banquet of the Royal Academy at which “noble of mien, with gracious speech to all” he presided—while bearing the honour of his new knighthood, Chief Justice Cockburn said: “In Sir Frederic Leighton are united all the qualifications which can best fit any man for the distinguished post—painter, sculptor, poet, scholar, finished orator—for such he has shown himself this evening, speaking the languages of half of Europe as if each were his own, possessing the presence and accomplishments which give a charm to social life. It would have been difficult to find any man possessing in so remarkable a degree the combined qualities which so eminently fit him for the office of President of the Academy”. During his long régime (1879-96)—certainly the most popular Presidency since that of its promoter, Sir Joshua Reynolds—Leighton was most punctilious in the discharge of

his duties, ever ready to give help and encouragement to artists young or old, and his tenure of office was marked by many liberal reforms.

This "many-sided man", whose fine presence and admirable graces of mind and body made him welcome in all societies from the palace to the studio, was yet marked by a keen capacity for hard work, as evidenced by the innumerable preliminary pencil drawings and clay and wax models he employed for his pictures—many of which are carefully treasured by the Royal Academy. His methodical attention to detail prevented him from drawing outward adornment for his figures from imagination, and he would spend hours elaborately arranging the drapery on a model before finally copying it on canvas; thus verifying his own assertion that he was primarily a "workman". In spite of his frequent visits to Italy, Spain and Egypt—where in 1868 he went up the Nile with Ferdinand de Lesseps in a steamer lent by the Khedive—Leighton's high sense of a citizen's duty made him one of the earliest members of the Artists' Volunteer Rifle Corps in which he later became Colonel, and he even acted as a special constable during the London riots.

Sculptors declare that Leighton's finest work was in their branch of art. This dictum is again disputed by illustrators, who maintain that he excelled all previous work in other lines by such masterpieces as his designs of "Cain and Abel", "Moses views the Promised Land", and "Samson with the Gates of Gaza" executed for Dalziel's Bible; while his illustrations for George Eliot's "Romola" are full of the spirit of Florence and reveal a keen sense of humor. The most beautiful of his few sacred paintings is "David musing on the Housetop" (1865), which shows the Psalmist gazing at two doves soaring over a wide expanse towards the distant cloud-capped hills. The flowing robes of "The Sweet Singer of Israel" are marvellously rendered, and the whole composition is grandly conceived.

An absorbing love of beauty is discerned in all Leighton's work, and in draughtsmanship, strength and nobility of line, refinement of sentiment, distinction of manner, choice and effective colour, and dignity of composition he wins our unbounded admiration. That he drew his youthful inspiration from classic myth and history is seen by his pictures "Daedalus and Icarus"; "Orpheus and Eurydice"; "Paolo e Francesco"; "Phryne"—a nude figure standing in the sun; "The Garden of the Hesperides"; "The Syracusan Bride leading the wild beasts in procession to the Temple of Diana"; "Helen of Troy"; "Venus disrobing for her bath"; "Perseus and Andromeda"; "Cymon and Iphigenia"; "Electra at the Tomb

of Agamemnon;" "Helios and Rhodos"; "Nausicaa"; "The Reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets"; "Tybalt and Romeo"; "Dante in Exile"—the greatest of his Italian works—"A Girl feeding a Peacock"; "The Odalisque", etc.—all of which are marked by a rhythmic love of the Orient, as well as his peculiar power of infusing a modern feeling into the most classical studies.

In 1876 "Daphnephoria" was exhibited, of which the *Art Journal* wrote:—"To project such a scene upon canvas presupposes a man of high poetic imagination, and when it is accompanied by such delicacy and yet precision of drawing, and such sincerity of modelling, the poet is merged in the painter and we speak of such a one as a master." This picture was sold in 1913 for £2,625 and illustrates "a triumphal procession held every ninth year at Thebes in honour of Apollo and to commemorate a victory of the Thebans over the Aeolians" . . . "The procession is led by a youthful priest called the Daphnephoros or 'laurel-bearer'".

The noble intensity of feeling, rich elegance and almost fastidious selection of beautiful forms, combined with his colour sense of joy and movement of life, love of art and nature at their purest and most spontaneous, make the splendid pageant of "Daphnephoria" the most perfect expression of his individual genius, and it stands without a rival of its kind in the British school.

Leighton also painted several fine portraits, the most masterly being that of Sir Richard Burton, the traveller and Eastern scholar, which is now treasured in the National Portrait Gallery; while Lyndhurst church possesses his mural decorations illustrating "The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins", and on executing "Phoenicians trading with the early Britons on the coast of Cornwall" he presented it to the Royal Exchange of London in 1895. Not so easily to be classed, but among the loveliest of his pictures, are such aesthetic subjects as "The Music Lesson" in which a tiny little girl is seated on her charming young mother's lap learning to play the lute; "Summer Slumber"—a beautiful maiden, overpowered with sleep in the after-glow of a midsummer day, and vested in salmon colour and maroon with a wealth of golden hair hanging over the wide flower-decked marble balustrade surrounding an immense pool;—"Twixt Hope and Fear"; "The Spirit of the Summits"—a stately female figure robed in white and seated in solitude on the top-most pinnacle of an ice-bound mountain height; "Whispers"; "Lachrymae"; "The Bracelet"—a Greek beauty with blue head-dress on flame-coloured hair, examining a golden armlet; "Fatidica"—in a harmony of greenish white and umber tones the soothsayer reclines in a silver chair, while sacred

fire flickers on the richly-chased tripod, and a spray of golden laurel lies at her feet; "Winding the Skein"; and the artist's other picture of a mythological triptych, illustrating Music for Mr. Marquand's house in New York.

Probably those most popular with the general public are "The Bath of Psyche" (Tate Gallery) and "Wedded" of which Robert Browning said "I see poetry in that man's work I fail to see in any other." Leighton's individuality pervaded all his work; for, to use his own words, "every emotion that reaches us through the channels of an artist's temperament comes to us coloured and determined by the idiosyncrasy of that temperament, and we get the man added to the thing." His cult was beauty of his own particular style, and he delighted in painting women of the statuesque Greco-Italian type and with that bronze red hair so loved by artists.

In gloss and hue the chestnut
When the husk
Divides three-fold to show the fruit within.

It was when in the full tide of his popularity and apparent personal vigour that Sir Frederic Leighton was suddenly stricken with angina pectoris, against which he bravely struggled, never omitting his official duties except during a brief visit abroad, which failed to restore his health. Queen Victoria conferred a peerage upon him shortly before his death on January 25th, 1896; but as he was unmarried and his sisters had no children, the title of a day immediately lapsed. He held honorary degrees at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin, Edinburgh and Durham, was an associate of the Institute of France, a Commander of the Legion of Honour and of the Order of Leopold, and a member of at least ten foreign Academies. As a sculptor he was awarded a medal of the first class, and won the Grand Prix in 1889. As a tribute to his worth as a man we have the following words of his friend of forty-five years standing, G. F. Watts, R. A., who said he regarded Leighton's character as the most beautiful he had ever known, and felt that a great light had been extinguished in his death; he then added "Leighton had a magnificent intellectual capacity, an unerring and instantaneous spring upon the point to unravel, a generosity, a sympathy, a tact. . . . a lovable and sweet reasonableness, yet no weakness."