

EDMUND BLAIR LEIGHTON (1852-1922)

Elaine

Signed and dated `E. BLAIR LEIGHTON. 1899' (lower right, on the boat)
Oil on canvas
55 x 74 ¼ in. (140 x 188.6 cm.)

Engraved
Photogravure, L.Wolff and Co.

Provenance
Capt. Mendoza, by whom given to;
G. Singer, Coventry;
Miss C. E. Yardley; Christie's, London, 3 August 1933, lot 22 (sold 28 gns to L. Wolff);
S. Berkeley-Owen; Sotheby's, London, 20 May 1970, lot 77, (sold £200 to J. Pleydell);

Exhibited
London, Royal Academy, 1899, no. 544.

Literature
Documented in EBL's personal records, put together from documents and letters from his estate.
Royal Academy Pictures, 1899, London, 1899, illustrated p. 48.
A.C.R. Carter, *The Art Journal*, 1899, p. 172, illustrated p. 167.
Academy Notes, May 1899, p. 23, sketch p. 114.
F. Miller, `The Work of E. Blair Leighton', *The Art Journal*, 1900, p. 134.
A. Yockney, `The Art of Edmund Blair Leighton', Art Annual, London, Christmas 1913, illustrated p. 27.
A. Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904*, London, 1905-6, vol. 5, p. 29.

The present recently rediscovered painting by Edmund Blair Leighton, can surely be ranked amongst the artist's greatest works. *Elaine* was painted at the peak of the artist's career, when he was becoming the consummate master of the mediaeval genre painting: his two successive submissions to the Royal Academy were the *Godspeed* (1900), which sold for the record breaking price of £707, 750 in 2000 and *The Accolade* (1901), two of the artist's best known works.

Despite nowadays being a somewhat obscure figure, Blair Leighton was, in his time, a successful artist and well known amongst the art establishment. He contributed sixty-six pictures over forty-two successive years to the Royal Academy summer exhibitions. These were generally large and very decorative works, popular with the public and widely reproduced. The present painting entered the collection of Louis Wolff, who published a number of Leighton's paintings as photogravures, including the present one and the celebrated God Speed. The Art Journal devoted an article to him in 1900 and the Art Annual at Christmas 1913 and it is worth noting that both the Times and Art Journal carried an obituary.

Blair Leighton entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1874, where he remained for 5 years, winning the prize for the best life drawing in 1878. He submitted his first painting for exhibition to the Society of British Artists in 1874 and in 1878 he had two works accepted by the Royal Academy, which were well received. *A Flaw in the Title* was bought by the cotton manufacturer Thomas Taylor and subsequently entered the collection of Royal Holloway College.

For his 1899 Royal Academy submission Blair Leighton has taken as his subject one of the most tragic tales of unrequited love, the Arthurian character Elaine or as she is more often referred to in Victorian Art, the Lady of Shalott. This story was a favourite amongst the Victorians and the powerful emotions felt by the protagonists was explored by numerous artists including Sophie Anderson, Alfred Corbould, William Holman Hunt, Walter Crane, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John William Waterhouse.

A version of the story appeared in the early 13th Century as Mort Artu, in which the Demoiselle d'Escalot dies of her unrequited love for Lancelot and drifts down the river in a boat to Camelot. In Thomas Malory's 15th Century Le Morte d'Arthur, Elaine's father, Bernard of Astolat, organizes a jousting tournament, attended by King Arthur and his knights. Lancelot is persuaded to enter and visits Bernard and his two sons before the tournament. Elaine becomes enamoured of Lancelot and begs him to wear her token at the coming tournament. He reluctantly consents, but states that he will have to fight in disguise, on account of Guinevere (with whom he is still in love) being present. Therefore Lancelot borrows the plain-white shield of Sir Torre, Elaine's brother.

Lancelot wins the jousting tournament, but sustains an injury from Bors' lance, and is carried off the field to the hermit Sir Baudwin's cave. Elaine urges her father to bring the wounded Lancelot to her chambers and nurses him. Lancelot, restored to health, makes ready to leave and offers to pay Elaine for her care, a

hollow gesture which leaves Elaine broken-hearted. Lancelot leaves the castle never to return. The lovelorn Elaine dies of heartbreak ten days later and following her wishes, her body is placed in a boat, a lily in one hand, and in the other a letter with her final testimony. The boat floats down to Camelot, where she is discovered by King Arthur's court and Lancelot's role in the tragedy revealed. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's influential poems of 1832 and 1842, both entitled The Lady of Shalott were based on the story.

Blair Leighton's picture was well received amongst critics. Carter, op.cit. discusses the painting in appreciative tones, `Mr Blair Leighton is a painter who may be relied upon to show skill and care in the accurate rendering of the difficult accessories which he chooses to help the themes of his pictures. His `Elaine' seems to teem with a knowledge of mediaeval pattern and circumstance. The corpse of the ill-fated damosel lies upon the quaintest-fashioned bier, and the yellow shroud is painted with remarkable power. Pale flowers hang in mournful balance at the head and feet of her, and at the bow of the boar stands the gloomy oarsman in an attitude of grief, as he exposes to King Arthur and his Queen the body of the wronged maiden. Behind, down the darkened entrance leading to the river, knights and ladies troop, hushed by the solemnity of the spectacle before them. One touch of dramatic effect is added in the expression on the face of the conscious-stricken knight, who gazes in awe at the dead Elaine. The river frontage of the castle is rendered with due regard to the architectural demands… and repeats the success of `The Fugitives' [In time of Peril], seen on the Academy walls two years ago, in chosen mediaeval appurtenances, such as rare coffrets and ornaments, and of studies of Croyland Abbey.' Blair Leighton owned an eclectic collection of objects, formed partly to aid his historical reconstruction. It was described in the Art Journal, 1900, as `quite a collection of old furniture, arms, metal-work, pottery, and other unique relics of the past.' The boat on which the body of Elaine lies is the same as that painted in Blair Leighton's 1897 submission, *In time of Peril.*

It is clear though that Blair Leighton's skill was not just in painting a highly finished, decorative version of the subject, delighting in the ornate fabrics and period detail, but in tailoring his historical and literary pictures to reflect the contemporary mood. Like Alma-Tadema, whose classical figures would have resonated with his audience, Blair Leighton's audience could themselves relate to the characters in his works and the emotions and aspirations they were embodying. As the Art Annual notes `as often as not he has painted contemporary life, but it has always been under the guise of the past'.

Elaine, was followed in 1900 by God Speed, which shows a young woman binding an embroidered sleeve on the arm of her knight as he departs. In *The Accolade*, 1901, a princess rewards a knight for his actions performed in the service of his country. In *Alain Chartier*, 1903, Princess Margaret, eldest daughter of King James I of Scotland, kisses the poet Alain Chartier's lips in recognition of all the beautiful things they had said. Although Alain Chartier is not an Arthurian subject, such themes illustrate the revival of interest in the legends of King Arthur. This revival was heralded by Tennyson's popular Idyll's of the King, which itself also allowed the contemporary reader to relate to the historical characters. Certainly *God Speed* must be viewed against the backdrop of the Boer War with soldiers leaving sweethearts behind as they depart for the war.

This key work in Blair Leighton's oeuvre typifies his approach to the genre. Arguably, by the popular reproductions of his work, Blair Leighton was, for a large part, responsible for defining the iconography we now readily associate with mediaeval legends. Yet his paintings also served as a mirror for the s own preoccupations. In the words of one obituary writer `he… played a distinguished part in aiding the public mind to an appreciation of the romance attaching to antiquity, and to a realisation of the fellowship of mankind throughout the ages.'.