Frederic, Lord Leighton, PRA (1830-1896)

Whispers

MB
Martin Beisly Fine Art



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MARTIN BEISLY FINE ART

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Whispers

Oil on canvas
124.5 x 76.3 cm. (49 x 30 in.) unframed
179 x 127 cm. (70½ x 50 in.) framed

Provenance

Mrs Clara Jessup Bloomfield Moore, probably acquired after 1884.
Her sale; Christie's, London, 5 May 1900, lot 44 (100 gns to Watney) and by descent to
Mrs Blanche Maria Georgiana Burrell Watney and by descent to
Hon. Mrs Charles Lyell, née Rosalind Margaret Watney, and by descent in the family until
Anonymous sale [Mrs M.L. Bullen], Christie's, London, 11 February 1949, lot 63 (100 gns to Newman).
with Newman and Co., London.
Private Collection, Sweden, circa 1950, where given in part exchange to another private collector; by descent in the family until 2014.

For information on previous owners, see p. 56 ff.



Exhibited

London, Royal Academy, 1881, no. 585.
London, Royal Academy, *Exhibition of Works by the Late Lord Leighton of Stretton, President of the Royal Academy*, Winter Exhibition, London, 1897, no. 66, lent by Mrs Bloomfield Moore.
On loan at Leighton House, London, 25 November 2016 – 28 November 2017 and 28 November 2018 – 6 June 2019.

Literature

Athenaeum, 20 April 1881, pp. 597-98.
Daily News, 30 April 1881, p. 3.
Illustrated London News, vol. 78, 30 April 1881, p. 426.
The Standard, 30 April 1881, p. 3.
John Bull, 7 May 1881, p. 299.
The Times, 27 June 1881, p. 12.
Art Journal, 1881, p. 229.
Magazine of Art, vol. 4, 1881, p. 302.
'The Picture Galleries', *Saturday Review*, 8 March 1884, p. 315.
F.G. Stephens, prefatory essay to E. Rhys, *Sir Frederic Lord Leighton, P.R.A. An illustrated chronicle of his life and work*, London, 1895, p. 37.
E. Rhys, *Frederic Lord Leighton, Late President of the Royal Academy of Arts; An illustrated record of his life and work*, London, 1898, p. 33.
A. Corkran, *Frederic Leighton*, London, 1904, pp. 99, 201.
Mrs Russell Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Baron Leighton of Stretton*, London, 1906, vol. 2, p. 388.
E. Staley, *Lord Leighton of Stretton, P.R.A.*, London, 1906, pp. 120, 242, 263.
L. and R. Ormond, *Lord Leighton*, New Haven and London, 1975, pp. 128, 166, no. 283 as untraced.

Engraved

Photogravure, 1893, Arthur Tooth and Sons, 26 ¾ x 17½ in. (68 x 44.5 cm.)

1. Introduction

The reappearance of one of Leighton's greatest masterpieces after an absence of over fifty years surely ranks among one of the most exciting rediscoveries of recent times. *Whispers,* exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1881, was previously only known from a photogravure published in 1893 (fig.1). It can arguably be considered among Leighton's most beautiful and successful compositions and, with its shared provenance with Leighton's *Flaming June,* it is tempting to speculate that had it not slipped into obscurity it could have been as famous as that picture. *Whispers* is a virtuoso example of Leighton's skill in suggesting mood and feeling through a sensual composition that uses both contrasting and complementary colours to create a timeless world of youthful beauty and lasting love. *Whispers* demonstrates Leighton's technical prowess and poetic imagination at its best.



Fig. 1 Photogravure, 1893.

2. Frederic Leighton and the Victorian Art World

Stephen Calloway

In the latter part of the long reign of Queen Victoria, in an era in which painters could achieve levels of fame, status and wealth unequalled since the days of the Renaissance in sixteenth-century Florence and Rome or the golden age of Rubens, Frederic Leighton seemed the very embodiment of success, both artistic and social. However, whilst to many he appeared to bestride the London art world like a modern-day colossus, his path to fame and its rewards had been a quite unconventional one and by no means straightforward. Prodigious talent coupled with a marked sense of ambition and force of personality had propelled him to become the greatest figure of the English art establishment. Nevertheless, in spite of the immense prominence to which he rose, his life in terms of inner character rather than outward, worldly achievement often perplexed those who knew him; that interior character, which he perhaps quite deliberately concealed, remains even today essentially enigmatic.

Although he became one of the most highly regarded of Victorian artists, it was only over time that Leighton won the respect of his fellow painters to add to the more easily achieved adulation of a wider public. He had grown up and been educated largely abroad and was therefore, initially at least, viewed by older members of the profession as something of an 'outsider'. Consciously cosmopolitan in temperament, he was even regarded by some with suspicion and hostility as a representative of an alien European artistic tradition. Unlike the majority of aspiring young painters in the 1840s and 50s, he had not come up through the cosy little world of the accepted preparatory teaching studios, such as Henry Sass's, and then applied for entry to the Royal Academy Schools. Neither the obvious fact that his artistic credo - and his distinctly foreign notions of painterly practice - had been formed as a result of peripatetic student years spent in Berlin, Florence and Frankfurt, nor the knowledge that he had chosen to set up his first studio in Paris did anything to ease his path. With the typical ungenerous insularity of the 'old men' among the Academicians, the surly Sir Francis Grant (elected RA 1851; later President, 1866-78), is even recorded to have expressed his active dislike, saying: 'That Leighton, I can't stand him'.[1]

In Frankfurt, at the Städel Institute, Leighton had established a close friendship and formative intellectual bond with the influential teacher Edward von Steinle (1810-1886), a pillar of what might be called the enlightened or even progressive Germanic artistic orthodoxy. Steinle instilled in his star pupil much that derived from the ethos of the German Nazarene painters, a group whose search for artistic purity inspired by early Italian (and also German) models, was not dissimilar to the aims of the protagonists of the first phase of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. In England, however, certainly much more than in Germany, such radical ideas were held to pose a direct challenge to the hegemony of the prevailing artistic establishment, a self-protecting and self-promoting group centred firmly on the Royal Academy and characterised, paradoxically, by both complacency and the ease with which its members could be roused to jealous defence of their professional privilege and status.

When in 1855 Leighton submitted his first, precocious major work, *Cimabue's Madonna is carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence* to the Royal Academy (Royal Collection; fig. 2), rather than sending it to the Paris Salon, it marked not only the culmination of his years of training, but also his decision to set his sights on success in England in preference to pursuing his chosen artistic career on the Continent. At the Academy's Summer Exhibition of that year, the spectacular, 17½-foot canvas was hung advantageously, by itself on a prominent wall, where it was immediately recognised as a remarkable debut by a twenty-five year old artist. In terms of sheer scale and novelty of subject it commanded attention, but at a more serious level the picture attracted notice for the ambition of its composition and the power of execution displayed in its multitude of well-drawn figures.



Fig. 2. Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Cimabue's Madonna is carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence*, 1853-55, 231.8 x 521.4 cm. (91 ¼ x 205 ¼ in.), The National Gallery, London.

Cimabue is, it might be argued, a quintessentially 'Pre-Raphaelite' subject. It depicts a triumphal procession, in which the great painter's celebrated altarpiece of the Madonna was paraded through the streets of the city to the church of Santa Maria Novella. Leighton took his subject from a story he found in the famous *Lives of the Artists* written by Giorgio Vasari and first published in 1550. This key text was held to be the first serious work of biographical art history and, at a time when relatively little primary research into original letters and documents had been carried out, it was a principal fount of knowledge of the early history of Italian art and its still shadowy practitioners. But Vasari's volumes were also highly readable as an entertaining compendium of tales and not surprisingly came to be mined by those in search of good subject matter and as a rich source of anecdotal detail and local colour. Vasari's detail was, however, not always entirely correct. In 1889 the art historian Franz Wickhoff successfully demonstrated that the easily recognisable altarpiece which Leighton included in his picture as Cimabue's masterpiece, the so-called Rucellai Madonna, is not in fact by Cimabue, but the work of the younger Sienese painter, Duccio.

In any consideration of the purely artistic merits of Leighton's painting, we might be justified in concluding that this otherwise momentous fact barely signifies. However, viewed as a document of cultural history and as a reflection of advanced artistic taste in the 1850s, Leighton's choice of subject for his great picture reflects tellingly the growing contemporary interest in, and almost quasi-religious reverence for the art and architecture of the 'primitive' phase of the Florentine Renaissance. Coming at a time when the first craze for collecting early 'gold-background' devotional images of Madonnas and saints was just beginning to be informed by wider scholarly understanding and informed appreciation, the painting played to a new and increasingly sophisticated audience in addition to the traditional exhibition-going public that simply enjoyed an impressive picture with a good story.

What also seems clear is that Vasari's story of the honours accorded to Cimabue had a more far-reaching significance for Leighton. In this triumphal procession of a colourful multitude representing church, state and the artistic community of Florence he saw a clear indication of the rising status of the artist. Here, surely, we can read a shift in emphasis from earlier notions of the painter as humble, often anonymous craftsman towards the idea of the artist as exceptional creator; a genius perhaps and a personality to be celebrated. Indeed, it is not upon the painted altarpiece that Leighton's complex composition centres, but rather on Cimabue, the artist himself, whom we see walking proudly, leading his young protégé Giotto by the hand. He is impressive: erect, richly and highly conspicuously dressed in white silks, bearded and crowned with a wreath of laurels. With hindsight, we are naturally tempted to speculate upon Leighton's sense of identity with the great artist of the past; perhaps inevitably – if anachronistically – in our own minds we make the visual connection between this splendid, heroic figure and Leighton's own commanding appearance in later life.

In the shorter term, the immediate reaction to Leighton's *Cimabue* was quite overwhelming. Though John Ruskin was one of few observers to voice reservations, almost all of the leading critical journals of the day carried extravagantly laudatory descriptions. Typical among these is one by an unknown writer in the *Art Journal* which declared that there 'had been no production of modern times more entirely excellent than this'.[2] Touching upon the important question of the status of the painter, he went on to suggest that the picture 'is faithful to a high purpose: the conception is worthy of the theme, and that theme is of the loftiest, for it elevates and honours and perpetuates the glory of the artist and the Art'.[3] On the advice, it was said, of Prince Albert - already by this date a noted connoisseur of and enthusiast for 'primitives' – the *Cimabue* canvas was purchased by Queen Victoria for the considerable sum of 600 guineas. This was a notable and enlightened act of royal patronage on a grand scale; for Leighton it must have appeared to be a timely sign of official approval and, as he hoped, a harbinger of successes to follow.

Such well-justified high hopes as Leighton may have cherished were effectively dashed the following year. Perhaps in peevish reaction to the extravagance of the praise he had garnered with *Cimabue*, both the Academicians and the press and public seem to have taken their revenge upon the outsider. He had not courted the RA's approval and, fatally, had shown little sign of being willing to enter upon the usual round of politicking that eased the path of a newcomer. It is likely that there was even a certain resentment among their ranks that this brilliant but, for their liking, too cosmopolitan young artist had chosen to settle in Paris rather than in London; this they viewed as a slight. Leighton's new picture *The Triumph of Music*, 1856 (now lost) was hung in a wretched position that rendered it barely visible and this time round the critics were near unanimous in condemning the work as a poor effort and a disappointment and so things continued for the ensuing few years, with Leighton's submissions either disadvantageously hung - a fate which the hopelessly overcrowded rooms of the Academy made all too likely for any painter not in favour with the hanging committee – or even rejected outright.

Things looked up only in 1859 when Leighton sent in a group of highly distinctive canvases, attractive bust-length studies of his favourite Roman model 'La Nanna' (Nanna Risi). Though novel and distinctly un-English looking, these works met with a surprising degree of approval. This was perhaps because, with their glamorous 'continental' flavour, they fitted sufficiently into a well-established pattern of decorative images of glossy-haired 'Beauties', a crowd-pleasing genre with which many Academicians, including C.R. Leslie, William Powell Frith, 'Spanish' Phillip and Augustus Egg, had all had success from time to time. No doubt gratified by even a modicum of favourable comment for his new pictures, Leighton must have been further encouraged when another from the group, *Nanna (Pavonia)* was seen in his studio and purchased by the Prince of Wales. This limited renewal of establishment recognition and patronage did not, however, signal a return to the heady praise that had attended the debut of *Cimabue*. Further disappointment ensued when, the following year, *Lieder ohne Worte,* 1860-61 (Tate, London; fig. 3) the picture Leighton considered one of his best so far and a crucial turning-point in his development as an artist, was again sidelined by the Academy and received coolly by the critics.



Fig. 3 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Lieder ohne Worte*, 1860-61, 101.6 x 62.9 cm. (40 x 24 ¾ in.), Tate, London.



Fig. 4 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Dante in Exile*, 1864, 152.5 x 254 cm. (60 x 100 in.), Private Collection.

It is a measure of Leighton's steely sense of his own worth – an inner strength bolstered by the loyalty of his friends and, in particular, by the continued unwavering support and wise counsel of his old master Edward von Steinle – that he sustained his determination to forge a career in London, to gain notice and in due course occupy a leading position in the art world of the capital. Towards that end, in 1862 he allowed his name to be put forward to the Academy for inclusion in the list of candidates for election as Associate members. From this point onwards things moved more rapidly to Leighton's advantage. In 1864 – generally seen as his breakthrough year – both his pictures at the Summer Show were favourably treated by the hanging committee and well received at large. *Dante in Exile,* 1864 (private collection; fig. 4) is a large-scale, richly costumed historical piece, a remarkably confident exercise in the grand manner of the exhibition 'machines' of French painters such as Thomas Couture and Paul Delaroche. The critic for the *Art Journal* observed that: 'The promise given and the success attained by the artist's first picture of *Cimabue,* here in his last work *Dante in Exile,* reach fruition'.[4] The Academicians, won over by the sophistication of composition, the qualities of drawing and the sheer painterly assurance of the work, elected the artist – now thirty-four years of age – as an Associate. Leighton had arrived.

The reception accorded to *Dante in Exile* and Leighton's election to the status of ARA can be seen to represent success of a traditional kind: the recognition of his attainment of mastery in the grand manner, which is to say in an essentially old tradition. The second picture that he exhibited in 1864 suggests something very different.



Fig. 5 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *The Painter's Honeymoon*, 1863-64, 83.8 x 76.8 cm. (33 x 30 ¼ in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Painter's Honeymoon, circa 1863-64 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; fig. 5) is a love scene. The costumes of the protagonists are generically modern, but with a distinctly romanticised flavour; whilst the setting is non-specific, though suggestive perhaps of Italy, if only by the presence of an orange tree in a terra-cotta pot. What matters here is atmosphere and the conveying, without actual narrative, of an intense connection and emotional charge between the figures. The picture is full of touching but not cloying sentiment. The almost soft-focus handling of the faces, the beauty of the painting of the silk draperies and the overall suffusing glow of light and colour all reveal the influence of Venetian painting and signal a new sensibility coming to the fore in Leighton's work.

It has been pointed out that *The Painter's Honeymoon* is in some ways closely related to the similarly Venetian-inspired and 'subject-less', but more overtly sensual depictions of women that Dante Gabriel Rossetti had lately begun to paint, such as *Bocca Bacciata*, 1862. However (as Christopher Newall has observed), Leighton's image and his intention differ strongly by presenting a view of two people engrossed in one another, in contrast to Rossetti's offering of a single desirable (female) figure to the implied desiring (male) gaze.[5] Much less overtly sexualised - and thus perhaps more 'comfortable' to a wider range of viewers, Leighton's exploration of this sort of intimate scene would become a recurrent theme in his art over the following decades, from *Golden Hours* (private collection; fig. 33) and *Acme and Septimius*, circa 1868 (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; fig. 13), in the 1860s, through to *The Music Lesson*, 1877 (Guildhall Art Gallery, London) and on, of course, to *Whispers* in the early 1880s.

In the years immediately following the success of *Dante in Exile*, Leighton continued to work hard and by 1868 had achieved the status of a full Academician. But in these years it is clear that he found the constraints imposed by the need to make depictions of historical costume accurate evermore irksome. Guided also by a renewed interest in and study of ancient sculpture, with some degree of relief he turned increasingly towards classical subjects, with a view to freeing his figures from all but the most generalised draperies. Moving also away from complex narratives and towards more abstracted conceptions of characters from myth and classical literature his main subject pictures took on a monumental and at times marmoreal quality.

Some observers considered Leighton's magisterial figures to have a certain 'coldness' about them in comparison with the work of other contemporary painters exploring similar classical themes. In this respect, it could be said that Leighton's 'Olympian' aspirations contrast with the 'warmer', indeed almost frivolous depictions of essentially anecdotal scenes set in the classical world by painters such as Alma-Tadema. The latter's maidens, whilst still placing their bare feet on beautifully figured marble pavements, seem vivacious, warmed by Mediterranean or Aegean sun, their wriggling draperies animated by human flesh. This 'coldness' perceived in Leighton in part derived from the artist's careful process of preparation, progressing from rapid sketches through to the many precise studies of form and drapery which preceded work on his canvases, but also, no doubt, as a result of the very perfection of execution which the finished works displayed.

On a notional sliding scale extending from coldness and impersonality to warmth and sensuousness, we might place much of Leighton's work at one extreme, with Albert Moore closer to a mid-point; whilst the more 'fleshly' pictures of Edward Poynter and William Blake Richmond and later works by Alma-Tadema should be situated towards the opposite pole. It is interesting to speculate to what extent such considerations may have influenced the trajectory of Leighton's career. Whilst maintaining always a strong sense of his own artistic ideals and an evident commitment to an overarching concept of High Art, Leighton does, nevertheless, seem to have shown some awareness of the demands that public taste made upon the successful painter. It may well be that it was some sense of the essential austerity of conception evident in many of his compositions that prompted Leighton from time to time to consider at least the possibility of creating 'warmer' effects. In the obvious case of a picture such as *Flaming June*, 1895 (Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico; fig. 39), this is



Fig. 6 'Coidé' [James Jacques Tissot], 'Men of the Day, No. 46', chromolithograph, "A sacrifice to the Graces", *Vanity Fair*, 29 June 1872, Private Collection, London.

achieved primarily through richness of colour and handling. In other cases, such as *Whispers,* it is tempting to speculate that, in addition to these 'Venetian' qualities, we see Leighton daring himself to come a little closer to the public taste for more human and sentimental themes.

Success and honours continued to come to him. In 1878, just ten years after becoming an RA, he was chosen by his fellow Academicians to be their President, in succession to the unpopular Francis Grant. In attempting to unite and lead a fractious institution composed of disparate and argumentative professionals and often riven by factions, Leighton seems to have possessed sufficient charm to make himself agreeable to all sides and to win trust. He worked tirelessly to bring people together, to further the Academy as an institution and, by judicious reforms (in particular of its teaching methods), to give it a resilience that helped it survive and even prosper at a time when rival organisations with new exhibition venues and fresh artistic ideas challenged its old authority from several quarters.

As President, Leighton occupied that key role with tact and diplomacy and a certain highly appropriate degree of theatricality, presiding over the annual ceremonies with finely honed social graces and an urbanity of manner matched by perfectly judged sartorial elegance. In his benign, but in fact devastatingly astute caricature of Leighton published in *Vanity Fair* in 1872 (fig. 6), six years before the start of Leighton's presidency, James Tissot precisely captures the studied languor of the man, a figure already sublimely assured of his own place in the scheme of things. By the time of William Powell Frith's celebrated painting *A Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881*, 1883 (private collection; fig. 7), Leighton had come to occupy a yet more formidable, centre-stage position at the very heart of London art world.

Whilst socially adept, sophisticated and cosmopolitan in background and outlook, and a noted linguist, it was generally held that in one respect alone Leighton did not rise to his role. Many felt that his *Discourses* (the annual exhortations delivered by Presidents to the students of the RA Schools) were somewhat lacking in originality of thought or verbal fireworks in their delivery. In short, they did not compare with those of the first President Sir Joshua Reynolds or indeed those of other less charismatic holders of the office. In all other respects Leighton was almost universally judged to be second only to Reynolds himself in importance as a great leader and promoter of the institution.

An unlikely accolade that came to Leighton was his appointment in 1869 as Captain of the Artists' Rifles, one of a number of small volunteer regiments of infantrymen raised a decade previously at a time of national insecurity and anxiety. Planned as a territorial unit and based in London, its training can never have been very arduous



Fig. 7 William Powell Frith, *The Private View at the Royal Academy 1881*, 1883, 102.9 x 195.6 cm. (40 ½ x 77 in.), Private Collection.

and the inclusion among its ranks of such highly unsuited figures as Dante Gabriel Rossetti suggests that its overall tenor may have been that of a pleasant recreational exercise group rather than a tough fighting force. That said, the 'Rifles' continued in existence for many years and later, though subsumed into other regular units, at the time of the Boer War and in World War I had a distinguished record of service. Leighton was promoted Lieutenant Colonel and Commanding Officer in 1875, and although he had resigned this dignity in 1883, at his funeral in 1896 his coffin was borne by a detachment of his old regiment. Amused by the incongruity of Leighton's position, James McNeill Whistler had teasingly referred to him as 'Colonel of the Royal Academy and President of the Artists' Rifles'.[6]

According to well-established custom, Leighton received a knighthood shortly following his election to the Presidency of the Academy. In that year, 1878, he was also awarded the accolade, somewhat more unusual for an Englishman, of the Légion d'Honneur. When in 1886 he was given a Baronetcy, it marked a still very recent departure from the usual rules of precedence, John Everett Millais having become, just the previous year, the first artist to be so dignified with an hereditary title. Such awards of a more purely personal kind can be seen as marks of recognition of the social and professional eminence to which artists could aspire in Victorian England. Over time, such honours would gradually be offered to a good many leading artists, including Edward Burne-Jones (Baronet, 1894) and Edward Poynter (Baronet, 1902), William Blake Richmond (KCB, 1897) and Hubert von Herkomer (KCVO, 1907), but the bestowal of a Barony on Leighton in 1896 was unique. His death, coming so soon after the issue of the actual Patent of Creation of his title means that it is likely that he held his rank as Lord Leighton of Stretton for the shortest recorded time in the annals of the peerage. It is an intriguing sidelight on the ways of fame that, since his death, Leighton has almost always been referred to, in both the literature of art history and more generally, by this late title. Indeed, his best-known pictures, such as the *Bath of Psyche*, 1890 (Tate, London) and *Flaming June* are still invariably described as by 'Lord Leighton'. His given name, Frederic – spelled in the continental manner, without a final 'k' – is very little used and remains perhaps unfamiliar even to many who know his paintings well.

This simple question of uncertainty of identity may serve to point us towards a paradox that perplexed even his contemporaries. This was the fact that, although he was one of the most prominent grandees of the London art world and one of the most recognisable figures of the day, so little was known of his life. In this respect Leighton, it seems, deliberately gave little away. Those who had the opportunity to visit his palatial residence in the leafy, 'artistic' suburb of Kensington became aware that this grand studio-house (one of the earliest, though not by any means the first, of this significant genre) was all about parade and display. Here the original 'show-studio' and the several other 'public' rooms added over the years - including, of course, the spectacular, tile-lined Arab Hall (fig. 25) – were barely integrated with actual living spaces. This was definitively not a family house; there were no guest bedrooms, for Leighton wanted no one to stay. Even had they been admitted, most people would have been profoundly shocked by the smallness and the austerity of Leighton's bedroom, with its uncomfortable-looking iron single bed and the rudimentary nature of other domestic arrangements.

Leighton entertained, of course, and on a lavish scale. But his entertaining – the 'Show-Sundays' and the famous musical soirées, at which musicians of the calibre of the celebrated violinist Joseph Joachim would play - were grand, formal and impersonal. Immediately following Leighton's death, a writer who concealed his identity behind the *nom-de-plume* 'Mercutio' made an astute observation: 'his acquaintances were legion; he was admired and respected by all; his charities were boundless; but who probed beneath that detached personality? He was always alone, and yet he was never solitary'.[7]

Further clues to Leighton's seemingly mysterious personality may be found coded in the remarkable self-portrait he painted in 1880 (fig. 8). Perhaps tellingly, he had not made a portrait of himself since the very early 1850s. Now, almost thirty years on, this one was painted at the behest of the Director of the Uffizi in Florence for inclusion in the gallery's celebrated sequence of artists' self-portraits. As one of a mere handful of contemporary artists and the only English one to be so dignified at that time, the commission was, in itself, a signal distinction. Leighton's reaction seems to have been one of pleasure at the honour tempered with a becoming degree of modesty. Typically also, he was keen to put forward one or two suggestions of other artist friends, including Millais and Watts, who he thought should be similarly represented. Leighton's portrait is a compelling image but also a highly telling document of character. In it he portrayed himself in the manner of bust of Zeus, a figure positively Olympian, serene and, we might note, in possession of an authority more unchallengeable than we read in depictions of him by other artists and sculptors.

Leighton chose to depict himself full-face with carefully arranged, Zeus-like grey curls. Over a conventional black coat he is enveloped in the splendidly voluminous red robes of a Doctor the University of Oxford and at his breast is looped the heavy gold chain and medal of the President of the Royal Academy. The background is filled with the depiction of a plaster cast of the Parthenon frieze, sections of which Leighton had placed around the walls of his studio. We are struck by the stillness and calm of the image and by the absolute lack of any of the agitation and compulsion to self-scrutiny and introspection that characterises so many self-portraits by nineteenth-century artists such Courbet. The choice of costume surely invites us to make a comparison with another famous self-portrait, that of Sir Joshua Reynolds in which he shows himself similarly attired in doctor's robes and also suggests a link to the classical world by the inclusion of a sculptural element. Leighton clearly identified with, or measured himself against, the first great President. Describing the picture to his friend, the painter Giovanni Costa, he wrote: 'It is like, very like', which on one level is true.[8] But he presents his image as a public figure; he tells us so little about himself.

As suggested earlier, many felt that it was almost impossible to know much about the man, not least because the public figure with such attainments and myriad achievements was always so obvious. Whistler (himself, in a very different way, a master at presenting an image and a carefully constructed persona) perhaps hinted at this in an amusing anecdote that has been recorded in several versions:



Fig. 8 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Self-portrait*, 1880, 76.5 x 64 cm. (30 x 25 in.), Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

A group of English and American artists were discussing their late chief's versatility:

> *'Exquisite musician. Played the violin like a professional', said one of them.*
> *'A brilliant speaker', said another.*
> *'Amazing linguist', said a third.*
> *'Superb essayist', said a fourth, and the rest chimed in:*
> *'Charming host.'*
> *'Danced divinely.'*
> *'Dressed to perfection.'*
> *Whistler had been silent during the anthem; but while the rest were pausing to recall further qualities he made a small contribution:*
> *'Painted, too, didn't he?'*[9]

Leighton's reputation stood high and for many his work represented the greatest achievement of contemporary ideals of 'High Art'. For Henry James, however, the question of what lay beyond the art and the carefully presented artist was a fascinating one. In one of his greatest short stories, *The Private Life*, in which the central character Lord Mellifont is widely held to be based on the figure of Leighton, he weaves a tale concerning a grandee of the cultural world who has no real inner existence behind his overwhelming public persona. Could this be Leighton's true epitaph?

> *When he was talked about I always had an odd impression that we were speaking of the dead - it was with that peculiar accumulation of relish. His reputation was a kind of gilded obelisk, as if he had been buried beneath it; the body of legend and reminiscence of which he was to be the subject had crystallized in advance.*[10]

3. Leighton and the Aesthetes

Stephen Calloway

Leighton's arrival on London's cultural scene in the last years of the 1850s came at a time when great changes were in the air. The old certainties were under siege from many quarters and novel ideas about the very nature of art added a new intensity to the perennial grumblings among younger artists concerning the undue influence of the Royal Academy and its dead hand on the art market. 1848 – the year of revolutions throughout Europe, it should be remembered – had seen the founding of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a radical group for whose aims Leighton had some sympathy. Their desire for a return to the purity of early or 'primitive' painters and their heartfelt call for a high seriousness in art chimed with his own essentially Nazarene principles. As previously suggested, his own debut picture, *Cimabue* (fig. 2), can certainly be seen in this light. Within only a few years however, Rossetti was already moving in an entirely new direction, away from 'Truth to Nature' and towards a more abstracted idea of poetic beauty based less on subject and more on feeling. At the same time, and in spite of the PRB's original, implacable disdain for 'Sir Sloshua Reynolds' and all that he stood for, Millais was seemingly enjoying being courted by the Academy.

Though by training and, equally importantly, by temperament an upholder of the Academic tradition and the established order of things, Leighton at first considered, rightly, that the Royal Academy was withholding its support and encouragement and keeping him at arm's length. As a result, not unnaturally, this led him to find the company of other, perhaps more instinctive 'outsiders' congenial. Thus, at a crucial time both for his own artistic development as well as for British art more widely, Leighton was on the best of terms with many of the leading figures of 'the new painting', a key aspect of what would come to be known as the Aesthetic Movement. This irregular circle – characterised by its cross currents of friendship, but also by friendly rivalry and some enmity – included Rossetti and Burne-Jones, Watts and Poynter, Whistler and Albert Moore. Though highly varied in their styles of work and drawing on disparate influences and ideas, these young men were all, in their own ways, exploring aspects of an 'alternative' ideal. In the 1860s, they, not the Academicians, would be the artists who shaped the development of British painting for the next twenty years and whose ideas would in a more general way continue to hold sway until the rise of modernism in the early years of the twentieth century.

If one clear and revolutionary aim emerged from the confusion of styles and cacophony of conflicting theories that beset the mid-Victorian worlds of art and poetry, architecture and design, it was a desire to escape the ugliness, banality and increasingly vulgar materialism of the age and create a new ideal of beauty. The Aesthetic Movement sought nothing less than the elevation of this new beauty as the guiding principle of life and touchstone of all the arts. Antithetical alike to the precepts of the old art establishment (as embodied by the Academy) and to social convention, the adherents of the emerging movement aspired above all to live 'artistically' and, through the worship of beauty, to create new kinds of art set free from stale patterns of thought, outworn establishment ideas and confining Victorian rules of propriety and bourgeois morality. These Aesthetes aimed in their various ways to write 'pure' poetry; to paint beautiful pictures that had no need to tell stories, preach sermons, or rely upon sentimental cliché; and to create sculptures that simply offered visual and tactile delight and dared to hint at sensuous pleasures. Theirs was to be (in the phrase first coined by Théophile Gautier) 'Art for Art's sake' – an art self-consciously absorbed in itself, aware of the past but created for the present age, and existing only in order to be beautiful.

From its origins in the very disparate ideas and essentially recherché enthusiasms of a number of artists (and architects and designers), by the 1870s the Aesthetic Movement had gained ground and was enjoying a new



Fig. 9 West Gallery of the Grosvenor Gallery, wood-engraving, *Illustrated London News*, 5 May 1877.

phase of recognition. Wealthy collectors now sought out paintings. Patrons from the more illustrious ranks of society commissioned portraits and created 'artistic' interiors in which to hang them. Some even began to build houses in the curiously eclectic Aesthetic style that blended (ingeniously, if not always successfully) Pre-Raphaelite medievalism, Queen Anne rational principles and Japonisme.

It was nevertheless still a bold move when Sir Coutts Lindsay (1824-1913) formulated a plan to create a gallery in which the leading Aesthetic painters would be invited to show their work in a spacious, purpose-built and sympathetically decorated environment. Created specifically to show the new art isolated, as it were, from the teeming, ill-hung mass of populist and often embarrassingly bad work that assailed the visitor at the Academy's annual summer exhibition, the Grosvenor Gallery (fig. 9) opened for its first season in 1877 and caused an immediate sensation. In that show, groups of pictures by Watts and Burne-Jones were deemed especially impressive, seen hanging against richly coloured silks and spaciously arranged. Whatever his anxieties about conflict of interest, Leighton, too, exhibited at the Grosvenor shows, naturally taking his place with his friends, though also tactfully reserving other important pictures for the Academy.

As Leighton had become, over time, increasingly a pillar of the Royal Academy and especially following his election as President in 1878, he seems to have come to the



Fig. 10 Sir Max Beerbohm, 'The Man from Hymettus. Mr Frederic Leighton', *Rossetti and His Circle*, 1916–17, 43.8 x 31.8 cm. (17 ¼ x 12 ½ in.). The caption beneath the image is transcribed opposite on p. 23.

realisation that he was in a unique position to attempt some form of reconciliation between the institution and its opponents among the 'independents'. He worked tirelessly to try to win over his friends, such as Burne-Jones and Watts, entreating them to apply for associateships or membership and to submit their works for inclusion in the Academy's annual shows. Neither found a congenial home in the institution: Burne-Jones, having reluctantly accepted election, resigned his associateship relatively quickly; Watts, perhaps simply for friendship's sake, continued until Leighton's death in 1896, but resigned almost immediately after that.

When Max Beerbohm made the delightful series of caricatures *Rossetti and his Circle,* published in book form in 1922, in one of the cleverest of the sequence, 'A Man from Hymettus' (fig. 10), he imagines a scene in which Leighton, grand, debonair and immaculately dressed, pays a visit to an enervated Rossetti (of whom we see merely the legs, recumbent on a sofa, in crumpled trousers and soft slippers). Beerbohm's title, by naming the paradisal

mountain, a dwelling-place of Zeus and a place famed for its fragrant honey, makes a clever double allusion to Leighton's Olympian persona and to the honeyed words with which he attempts to woo Rossetti to abandon his antipathy towards the Royal Academy. The caption is a masterpiece of Beerbohm's ventriloquising and worth quoting in full:

> Mr. Frederic Leighton: *"Think not for a moment, my dear Mr. Rossetti, that I am insensible to the charm of a life recluded, as yours is, from the dust of the arena, from the mire of the market-place. Ah no! - I envy you your ivory tower. How often at some Council Meeting of the R.A. have I echoed within me that phrase of Wordsworth's, 'The world is too much with us.' But alas! in all of us there is a duality of nature. You, O felix nimium, are singer as well as painter. I, separated from my easel, am but a citizen. And the civistic passion – yes, passion, dear Mr. Rossetti – restrains the impetus of the artist in me towards solitude, and curbs the panting of the hart in me for the water-brooks. I feel that I have, in conjunction with my colleagues, a duty to the nation. To improve the taste of the Sovereign, the taste of her ever-genial first-born and of his sweet and gracious consort, of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal and of the faithful Commons, of the Judicial Bench, of those who direct the Army and Navy and Reserve Forces, of our merchant princes in Threadneedle Street and of our squires in the Shires, and through all these to bring light and improvement to those toiling millions on whom ultimately the glory of Great Britain rests - all this is in me an ambition not [to] be stifled and an aspiration not to be foregone. You smile, Mr. Rossetti, yet I am not disemboldened to say now, as I have often wished to say to you, in the words of the Apostle Paul, 'Come over and help us' Our President – I grant you in confidence - is not of all men the most enlightened, but I, in virtue of what is left to me of youth and ardour, conjoined with the paltry gift of tact, have some little influence in Burlington House. Come now! – let me put your name down in our Candidates' Book."*

Leighton's continuing wish to build bridges can also be seen in a number of episodes from a later period in his life. He had for many years been accustomed to acquiring not only old pictures and drawings, but also works by friends and other contemporary artists that he admired. In the final decade or so of his life he had, however, systematically extended his previously desultory collecting habits by offering commissions to younger artists. Intended by way of encouragement, these offers were as generous as they were astute.

In 1882, the year in which he made the original clay model of his own celebrated figure *The Sluggard* and at a time when his mind was much on the creation of idealised figures in sculpture, Leighton commissioned a bronze piece from Alfred Gilbert, offering £100 and leaving the choice of subject to the rising young sculptor. Gilbert described *Icarus* (fig. 11), the one-metre-high figure that

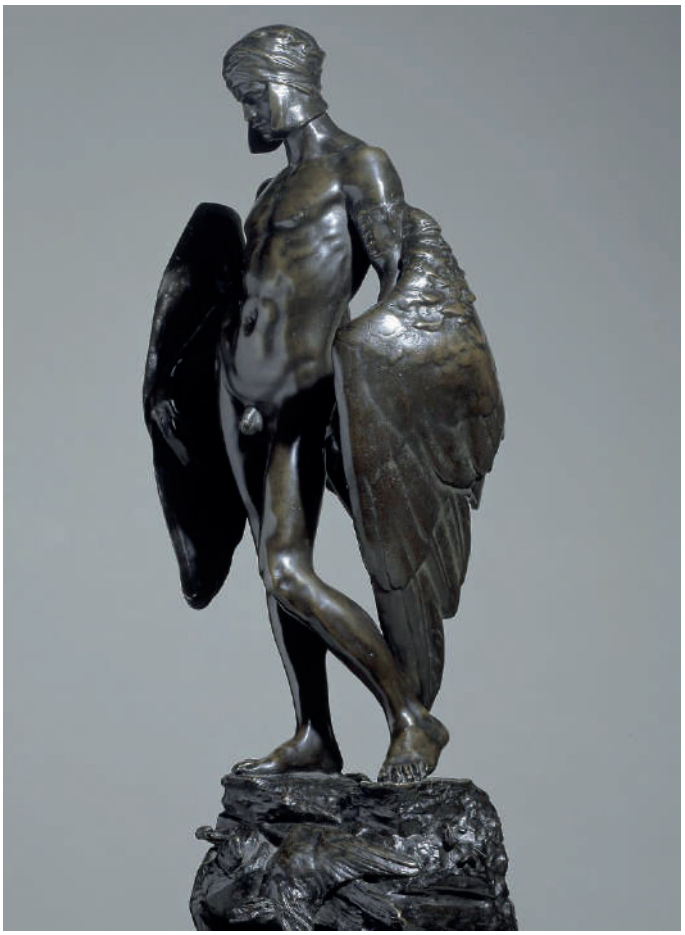


Fig. 11 Sir Albert Gilbert, *Icarus*, 1882-84, 49.5 x 21 x 15.9 cm. (19 ½ x 8 ¼ x 6 ¼ in.), Tate, London.

he created and had cast at a foundry in Naples, as a symbol of his own vaunting youthful ambition. Leighton, delighted with the piece, displayed it prominently in his house. But he also allowed the unique cast to be shown at the Royal Academy, where it was widely acclaimed as a milestone in the development of the 'New Sculpture' movement. In later years Gilbert declared that it remained his favourite of all his works.

It is a measure of the quality of Leighton's 'eye' and the perhaps somewhat surprising breadth of his artistic sympathies that among his last commissions, two were given to young artists closely associated with the final decadent phase of the Aesthetic Movement in the 1890s: Aubrey Beardsley and Charles Ricketts. Both are documented by mentions in letters that reveal Leighton's evident interest and admirable lack of condescension. Beardsley, writing to his friend the bookseller Frederick Evans, tells him: 'I have just had a charming note from Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton expressing his admiration for my little efforts, and the interest with which he looks forward to a sight of my *Tannhäuser'*.[1]

Leighton had written to Ricketts offering him £5 for a drawing 'of the same imaginative and fanciful character as those I have seen' and again, as with Gilbert's bronze, leaving the choice of subject to the artist.[2] In return, the august President of the Academy received *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, (Tullie House, Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle), one of the very finest of Ricketts's early drawings. In the design the influence of Ingres's earlier treatment of the subject is readily apparent, but so too is Ricketts's admiration for Leighton's own treatment of classical themes. Ricketts regarded this little masterpiece of his youth with such affection that five years later he bought it back at the sale of the contents of Leighton's house held following his death. He later recalled Leighton's charming self-deprecating phrase when they had first met: 'I'm afraid you won't care for my work, but I am interested in yours'.[3]

4. 'Whispers' and its Sources

Richard Ormond

The title of Lord Leighton's painting *Whispers* suggests an innocent flirtation that is at odds with the passionate intensity of the two lovers seated on a low wall before a blazing sunset. The all but naked youth leans amorously towards his swain, encircling her body with his own, resting his head on hers and clasping her arm while pouring honeyed words into her ear. This is a full-blown seduction scene. Though she looks demurely down, her agitation and excitement are evident in the way that she both leans towards him and holds him off, shoulder hunched, arm taut, hands nervously clasped. The pink and golden glow of the sunset, back-lighting the figures, underscores the erotic charge between them, and as if that were not enough, the artist includes blood-red flowers at the feet of the young woman.

The lovers are exceptionally beautiful. The young man, modelled by one of the handsome Italians who were such a feature of the London art scene (see pp. 39-40), has a superb physique and sensual good looks. The bag, or perhaps a water container, he carries strapped across his torso, suggests his calling as a shepherd. The young woman has the features and flawless complexion of an English beauty. Her pinkish dress with complicated folds and rucks is Greek in inspiration, while her lower body and legs are covered with a wrap of dark maroon. The lovers are seated on a further drape, blue-black in colour. The suffused colours of these textiles are carefully orchestrated in a rich, dark key to suggest the coming night while the sun sinks away in majestic glory. The abrupt dividing line between light and dark, day and night, comes nearly half-way up the picture space, silhouetting the upper bodies of the couple while leaving their lower limbs in shadow. Their shoulders and outstretched arms form a compressed rectangle expressive of suppressed desire and emotion.

The theme of lovers was not new in Leighton's work by the time he came to paint *Whispers*. In the liberated aesthetic art of the late 1850s and early 1860s, love and beauty were frequent themes. In Leighton's picture of *The Fisherman and the Syren*, circa 1856-58 (Bristol Museum and Art Gallery; fig. 12), inspired by Goethe's poem of the same title, a seductive mermaid wraps her arms around the neck of the supine fisherman, while coiling her tail around his leg, before drawing him down to the deeps. Like his counterpart in *Whispers*, the fisherman is a beautiful Italian naked except for an identical loin-cloth. Here it is the woman who is the active agent, the man unable to resist or save himself from his enchantress.

The Painter's Honeymoon, circa 1864 (fig. 5), has the heads of the lovers in almost the same position as those in *Whispers*, but the scene is one of connubial bliss rather



Fig. 12 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *The Fisherman and the Syren: From a Ballad by Goethe*, circa 1856-58, 66.4 x 48.9 cm. (26 ⅛ x 19 ¼ in.), Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. Photo: Bridgeman Images.



Fig. 13 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Acme and Septimius*, c. 1868, 99 x 99 cm. (39 x 39 in.), Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Photo: Bridgeman Images.

than seduction. The setting seems to be contemporary although the painter's breeches, stockinged legs and flowing locks may point to an earlier time. The young woman's dress is of indeterminate date but could pass for aesthetic costume. He is drawing on the board propped up on his knees, the epitome of creative genius, while she leans close to him to admire what he is doing, handmaiden and inspiration for his art. It is her energetic pose and coruscating drapery that enliven the scene and demonstrate the urgency of her youthful passion and devotion.

Only four years separates *The Painter's Honeymoon* (fig. 5) from the picture of *Acme and Septimius* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; fig. 13), but in the interval Leighton had become a signed-up classicist. Inspired by a poem from the Roman Catullus, the lovers express undying love for one



Fig. 14 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Bianca*, c. 1881, 46 x 33.3 cm. (18 ⅛ x 12 ⅛ in.), Leighton House Museum, Kensington & Chelsea, London.

another, a never-ending source of joy and happiness. Their heads are close together but not apparently touching, while their bodies form a pyramid enclosed by the curved bench on which they sit and by the circular shape of the canvas. He leans against her, one arm placed behind her back, legs stretched out, a picture of devoted attendance. Though she holds his hand, she sits up and looks away, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. Like the young bride in *The Painter's Honeymoon*, she is the dominant figure, alight in her semi-transparent yellow garment, one leg crossed under the other, radiantly supple and beautiful. The lovers are framed by the deep green drape on which they are seated and by the clump of dark trees behind. Roses underscore the theme of love, while the distant landscape, derived from Leighton's Greek and Italian sketches, evokes the timeless world of the Mediterranean.

Seeing such poignant and sensual images of lovers in Leighton's work it is difficult not to speculate on his own love life. Did the passionate longing for union with another reflect his own experience and desires or was it all in the imagination? Of the women whose names are linked to his romantically one was much older and the other much younger. Adelaide Sartoris (1815-1879), the former opera singer Adelaide Kemble, was the intimate friend of his youth, who championed and encouraged him and to whom he remained devoted. It is unlikely, however, that their liaison went beyond passionate friendship. The model Dorothy Dene (1859-1899), who lights up so many of the artist's late works, was just twenty when she first met him and less than half his age. The picture of her as *Bianca* (Leighton House; fig. 14), exhibited in the same 1881 Royal Academy exhibition as *Whispers*, confirms her as the model in the latter painting. Another picture of this time, for which she must also have posed, is *Crenaia (the Nymph of the Dargle)* (private collection), where her bowed head and bewitching expression are almost identical (Sotheby's, New York, 21 June 1989). Dorothy certainly got under Leighton's skin, and she became his confidant as well as his muse. His extensive efforts to promote her career in the theatre led to wagging tongues and talk of scandal, but that was later in the decade. He was from the start mesmerised by her beauty.



Fig. 16 Paris Bordone, *Athena Scorning the Advances of Hephaestus*, c. 1555–1560, 139.4 x 127.7 cm. (54 ⅞ x 50 ¼ in.) Photo: Museum of Art & Archaeology, University of Missouri.



Fig. 15 Paris Bordone, *A Pair of Lovers*, 1555-60, 139.1 x 122 cm. (54 ¾ x 48 in.), The National Gallery, London.

Leighton's picture could be described as a vision of ideal love for which there is no shortage of precedents. In 1860 the National Gallery acquired a painting of lovers by the Venetian artist Paris Bordone (1500-1571), a work much admired at the time (fig. 15). It mirrors the subject and composition of *Whispers*. The chief difference is that it is the woman who clasps the man's arm, rather than vice-versa, and it is he who looks away, not she. Various titles have been suggested for the painting, including *Daphnis and Chloe*, but the subject remains elusive. Leighton, in common with Rossetti, Watts and Burne-Jones, was infatuated with Venetian art and had in his own collection a number of sixteenth-century examples. These included a second Bordone, traditionally entitled *Athena Scorning the Advances of Hephaestus* (Museum of Art & Archeology, University of Missouri; fig. 16) but open to other interpretations, and a picture of *Jupiter and Semele* attributed to Tintoretto (National Gallery, London).



Fig. 17 Friedrich Overbeck, *Italia und Germania*, 1811-28, 94.4 × 104.7 cm. (37 ⅛ x 41 ¼ in.) Neue Pinakothek, Munich.

On assessing the iconography of *Whispers* one should not overlook the artist's German antecedents. He had been trained at the Städel Institute in Frankfurt in an idealistic and academic style deeply indebted to Nazarene art. Friedrich Overbeck's (1789-1869) famous picture of *Italia and Germania* (Neue Pinakothek, Munich; fig. 17) captured the moral earnestness of the early nineteenth-century German Nazarene artists which went hand-in-hand with their love of the south and admiration for the purity of early Italian art. The young garlanded women in Overbeck's painting, dressed in Renaissance costume, heads touching, hands clasped, are in their yearning for each other strangely akin to Leighton's lovers. While the smooth, sharp facture of Overbeck's painting, its limpid light and archaic character are quite distinct from Leighton's naturalism, the underlying emotion unites them. A second more obvious parallel is the Nazarene-inspired picture of *Paolo and Francesca,* 1837 (Scottish National Galleries; fig. 18), by William Dyce (1806-1864), illustrating the story of the two lovers destined to be murdered by a jealous husband. Paolo leans forward to clasp a half-reluctant Francesca in an embrace that echoes the one in *Whispers*, urgent male to passive, agitated female.



Fig. 18 William Dyce, *Francesca Da Rimini*, 1837, 142 x 176 cm. (55 ⅞ x 69 ⅞ in.), Scottish National Galleries, Edinburgh.



Fig. 19 Giovanni Bellini, *Agony in the Garden*, c. 1458-60, 81 x 127 cm. (31 ⅞ × 50 in.), National Gallery, London.

So much for the lovers, but what of the landscape that sets the emotional tone of the painting? Is it too far-fetched to see in the sky behind the lovers an allusion to the mystical sunset in Bellini's *Agony in the Garden* (fig. 19), a famous work in the National Gallery that Leighton would have known well? Or in a high romantic key the young woman with arms spread, silhouetted against a transcendent sky all golden orange and pink, in a painting of *Woman at Sunset or Sunrise,* 1818-20 (Folkwang Museum, Essen, fig. 20) by the great nineteenth-century German painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840)? Nor should we forget the artist's involvement with the so-called Etruscan school of poetic landscapists centred on Giovanni Costa (1826-1903), George Heming Mason (1818-1872) and William Blake Richmond (1842-1921). Mason's *Harvest Moon,* exhibited in 1872 (Tate, London; fig. 21), depicting a group of harvesters returning home at sunset, is a pastoral scene visionary in its intensity of light and colour. Leighton's ultimate engagement with the theme of sunset can be seen in his two late works of *Clytie* (fig. 32), the woman deserted by her lover Apollo. In the first of these, the despairing Clytie raises her arms in supplication to the departing God, while spiralling clouds sweep across a sky glowing with ethereal fire above a darkening hillside.



Fig. 20 Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman at Sunset or Sunrise*, c. 1818, 22 x 30 cm. (8 ⅝ x 11 ⅞ in.), Folkwang Museum, Essen.

Whispers is an impossibly beautiful picture set in an antique past. The lovers are idealised figures from another realm, and the picture is steeped in artistic references. Leighton drew on many sources to create his subject, Greek, Renaissance, Romantic and Victorian-Aesthetic. The painting was born of elaborate preliminary studies and a painstaking method of painting. Yet it would be wrong to think of it as drily academic or overly researched. The lovers are flesh and blood, their emotions carry conviction, the sunset landscape records something the artist had observed.[1] A reconstructed past perhaps but one anchored in the present. That is what comes across most strongly – the human and emotional appeal of the painting.



Fig. 21 George Mason, *Harvest Moon*, 1872, 86.4. x 231.1 cm. (34 x 91 in.), Tate, London. Photo: © Tate, London 2019.



Fig. 22 G.F. Watts, *Portrait of Frederic Leighton*, 1888, 115 x 88 cm. (45 ¼ x 34 ⅝ in.). Photo © Royal Academy of Arts, London; photographer: John Hammond.

5. The Year of 'Whispers': Sir Frederic Leighton in 1881

Daniel Robbins

As *Whispers* hung on the walls of the Royal Academy in 1881, elsewhere in the exhibition no less than five portrait images of Sir Frederic Leighton, its creator and the Academy's President, could be found. His self-portrait, commissioned by the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (fig. 8), 'a kind of diploma of European distinction' as one newspaper described it, depicted the artist wearing his Presidential Medal and Doctor of Civil Law robes awarded by the University of Oxford, against a backdrop of the Parthenon frieze. A second portrait, with Leighton in the same attire, was the work of his great friend and neighbour George Frederic Watts (1817-1904); (Royal Academy, London; fig. 22). This showed Leighton's elegant profile, while an engraving after Henry Tanworth Wells (1828-1903) and a bust by the sculptor Thomas Brock (1847-1922; Royal Academy) completed the set. Leighton's election as President had come just three years earlier and yet, as these images suggest, he was firmly established as an ideal figurehead for the Academy, his attractive appearance and particular range of gifts and accomplishments embodying a new prestige and confidence in the institution.

This was the year that William Powell Frith, RA (1819-1909) would famously capture the Academy's Private View in oil, showing Leighton at the centre of a fashionable crowd, dressed in an apparently modest brown suit (private collection; fig. 23, detail). The same outfit had been worn at the opening of the Academy's Old Master exhibition a few months earlier in January 1881. Something of the emerging cult of personality that surrounded Leighton is reflected in the gushing reporting of his appearance in the press: 'Sir Frederick's brown coat, waistcoat and overcoat met with universal appreciation, and ladies unanimously pronounced the President, as he always is, perfection, as gentleman, artist and President of the Royal Academy'.[1] Perfect or otherwise, such praise was not won without enormous commitment and discipline on Leighton's part. As Leighton's position at the summit of his profession was confirmed, he juggled the requirements of his new



Fig. 23 Detail of Frederic, Lord Leighton in William Powell Frith's, *The Private View at the Royal Academy 1881*, 1883. Private Collection.

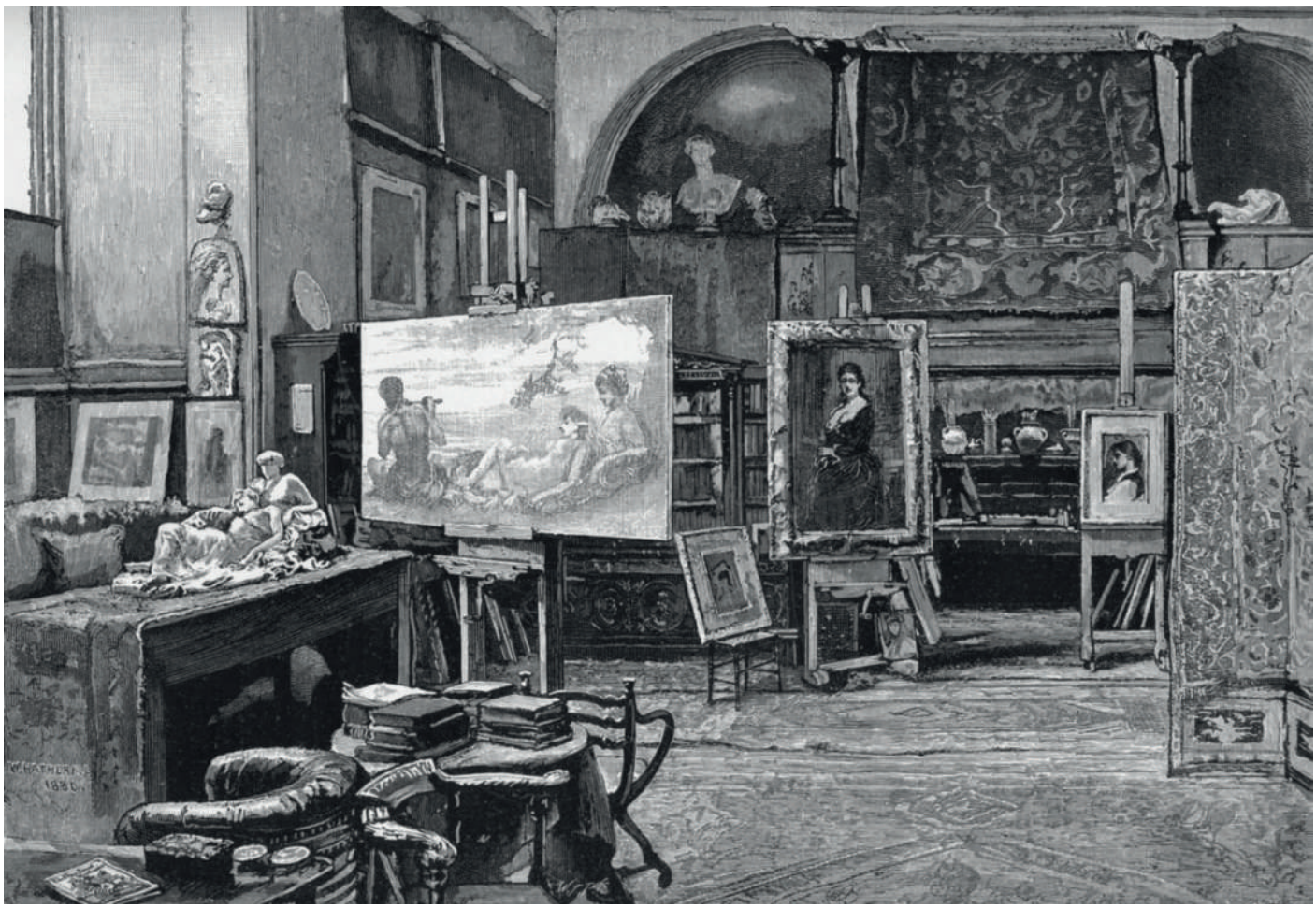


Fig. 24 William Hatherell, *The Studio*, 1896. Photo: The Print Collector / Alamy Stock Photo.

office with undiminished productivity in the studio, despite the disruption of extensive building works taking place at his home. This essay places the production of *Whispers* and his other pictures of 1881 into context, identifying the competing demands of a period that saw significant developments in his domestic circumstances and his private and professional life.

The spring submission date for the Academy remained the culmination of an annual cycle of endeavour. Works exhibited in a given year were not necessarily the product of the previous twelve months alone but, depending on their scale and complexity, could have been in progress over a longer period of time. Leighton retained virtually all his drawn studies, using them as a repository of ideas to which he could turn as he contemplated his next set of pictures. In 1881, in addition to his self-portrait, six works were exhibited: *Idyll* (private collection; fig. 29); *Whispers*; a biblical subject, *Elisha Raising the Son of the Shunamite* (Leighton House Museum); a portrait of *Mrs Stephen Ralli* (private collection) and two smaller, self-confessed 'pot-boiler' subjects: *Viola* (untraced) and *Bianca* (Leighton House Museum; fig. 14). The evidence of the drawn studies relating to these works, held at Leighton House Museum and elsewhere, suggests that that this group of paintings was conceived and executed within a relatively tight timescale over the preceding twelve months or so. In 1877-78 Leighton changed the colour of paper on which his studies were made from blue to a thicker, warm brown paper. All the studies relating to his 1881 pictures are on this later paper and do not have obvious antecedents in earlier sketches and compositions. The exception to this is *Whispers,* which clearly relates to *Wedded* (Art Gallery of New South Wales; fig. 34) for which studies were made in the late 1870s on the blue paper (see p. 51). *Wedded* was not exhibited at the Academy until 1882. Once working on the canvases themselves, Leighton developed his pictures in parallel, preferring to move from one to the other as they were each taken forward. An illustration of his studio was published in the *Magazine of Art* in February 1881 (fig. 24). Leighton's portrait of *Mrs Stephen Ralli* and *Viola* are shown framed and virtually complete. *Idyll* remains unframed and positioned in front of the large north-facing window, a plaster model of the two reclining female figures in the composition placed close by for reference by the artist as it was brought to completion. In addition to the seven works he would send to the Academy, a portrait of *Hannah, Countess of Rosebery* (private collection) and possibly that of her mother *Baroness Meyer de Rothschild* (private collection) were also completed in 1881. A further portrait of *Mrs Algernon Sartoris* (untraced) was exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in the same year.

As President, Leighton now played a central role in hosting the Private View and the Academy Banquet and Soiree. Once these and other events of the summer season were over, he would spend August working in his studio, getting ahead with the pictures that were to be exhibited in the following year; six works were shown at the Academy in 1882. At some point in September he would depart for an extended break, leaving London to travel abroad and typically not returning until the end of October. The full extent of his itinerary in 1881 is not known. Two separate trips appear to have been made. He left London at the end of August, returning on 26 September. Almost immediately he set out again for Italy and by 4 October he was in Venice, where he called on Lady Layard (1843-1912) at her home on the Grand Canal, before going on to the Hotel Brufani in Perugia. Over subsequent years this would become a favourite destination, 'a halting-place for some weeks during his autumn travels, while he wrote his biennial discourses for the students'[2]. Leighton was typically punctilious in his preparations, writing and then committing his address to memory. The second of these addresses, on the subject of the 'Relation of Art to Morals and Religion' was duly delivered on Saturday 10 December 1881 as part of the annual prize-giving at the Academy schools. From Perugia Leighton travelled to Florence, arriving on 27 October in the company of his great 'chum', the Italian landscape painter Giovanni Costa. It was their intention to call at the studio of Charles Fairfax Murray (1849-1919) the following day, their only day in the city. Murray had spent much of the preceding decade in Italy and had been living in the city with his Italian wife since 1878. At least one significant work in Leighton's collection, a fine portrait by Jacopo Tintoretto, was supplied by Murray,



Fig. 25 *The Arab Hall, east wall*, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

and it is possible that the proposed meeting was to discuss further acquisitions. Time was short and on Leighton's return to London, work in the studio resumed in earnest, taking him through the winter months and towards the submission of his canvases in early April.

News of the pictures that were destined for the Academy began to be trailed in the press from February 1881. As was customary, the works were unveiled for the first time, not at the opening of the exhibition at Burlington House, but within Leighton's studio during the eagerly anticipated 'Show Days'. In 1881, these took place over the weekend of 27 and 28 March. All over London studios were opened to visitors eager to get a first look at the pictures that were about to emerge for exhibition. This was one of the occasions when Leighton's remarkable studio-house in Holland Park Road came into its own, as a memorable setting for the launch of his pictures and prompting additional lines of commentary in the press. One journalist touring the studios reported that the street outside Leighton's house was lined with carriages and that having entered and reached the top of the staircase he was 'borne on with the crowd into the studio'.[3] This year the number of callers may have been greater than usual. As the journalist put it, there was a 'new attraction' to be seen. For the first time, Leighton's recently completed and spectacular Arab Hall was on display (fig. 25).

Construction of the original house had been completed in the mid-1860s, but a series of additions and embellishments would preoccupy Leighton over the next thirty years. The Arab Hall was the most ambitious and expensive of these additions. Designed by Leighton's friend and collaborator George Aitchison (1825-1910), work on its construction had started some three years before. Based on an interior at the twelfth-century Sicilia-Romanesque palace of La Zisa in Palermo, Sicily, the principal purpose of the interior was to create an atmospheric and evocative setting for the display of the exceptional collection of Islamic tiles Leighton had accumulated over the preceding decade. The extensive use of marbles, mosaics, gold leaf and the tiles themselves, together with the involvement of a number of fellow artists – Walter Crane (1845-1915), William De Morgan (1839-1917), Edgar Boehm (1834-1890) and Randolph Caldecott (1846-1886) – all added up to a complex and costly undertaking. While for Leighton aesthetic considerations were paramount, it remains equally true that the completion of this new space further enhanced the prestige and artistic reputation of his home. Coverage of the house in both the national and international press accelerated markedly following the completion of the Arab Hall. Leighton's house would increasingly be entwined with his identity as a 'great artist' and seen as an extension of his creative achievements. In 1881, the experience of stepping into the house from the chill of a London spring day and encountering, for the first time, the exotic, shimmering surfaces and intense combination of pattern and colour of the Arab Hall must indeed have been breath-taking and an entrancing stimulus for the eye. This was perhaps part of its purpose; to heighten aesthetic awareness and inspire a sense of beauty and wonderment in the visitor, which was carried with them as they mounted the stairs to view the pictures, lined up on easels in the first-floor studio. Here Leighton was on hand to receive his callers who 'were by no means allowed to pass to the pictures without a special word of friendly welcome and a kindly hand-shake from the painter'.[4] The combination must have been irresistible; a carefully choreographed presentation that could not help but imbue the works with added prestige and value.

With the 'Show Days' over, *Whispers* and the other works were packed up and taken to the Academy to be installed, joining what must have been a stream of wagons collecting works from Leighton's neighbouring artists in Holland Park Road and Melbury Road. Extensive press reviews accompanied the opening of the exhibition. As was frequently the case, Leighton's notices were mixed, his position not exempting him from qualified and occasionally caustic comment. While his technical mastery was not in dispute, his submission of 1881 generated a familiar debate around the 'artificiality' of his compositions, an absence of the 'warmth of breathing flesh' made manifest, as critics saw it, in the excessive 'waxiness' of his skin tones. As the regional press reported of his submission, 'nothing could possibly exceed the technical finish and exquisite beauty of these pictures, the wondrous perspective, and the poetic suggestiveness throughout; but unfortunately it is all too beautiful to be real'.[5] The *Illustrated London News* came to a similar conclusion, praising *Whispers* for the 'delicious shadow tone' that enveloped the couple, 'foiled by a golden glory of evening sky', but asking, '… does not the sense of beauty and grace here become too arbitrarily paramount: does not ideality pass into artificiality . . . ?'.[6] The exhibition of Leighton's self-portrait and his portrait of *Mrs Stephen Ralli* seemed to exacerbate the critics' frustration, allowing them to point out that he was clearly *capable* of a more 'robust' and life-like treatment. Such commentary would continue over subsequent years and Leighton must have become inured to it. There would certainly be no deviation on his part from a method that he had developed over the course of his career and which he adhered to with an almost obsessive discipline. Perhaps only at the very end of his life did the perfect surfaces of his pictures begin to slip as a more expressive and immediate approach took hold. So while the ambition, integrity and fundamental quality of Leighton's work was not questioned, for contemporary critics there was much that seemed to frustrate and even bemuse as they struggled to make full sense of his intentions. Amongst these qualified notices, the Sunday newspaper *John Bull* alone seems to have picked up the similar appearance of the female model in both *Whispers*



Fig. 26 *Dorothy Dene* c. 1880. Photo: Historic Images / Alamy Stock Photo.

and *Bianca* (fig. 14).[7] Although then dismissed as having 'hardly sufficient charm of countenance', over the coming years, the sitter, who in fact had also posed for *Idyll* (fig. 29), would be recognised widely for her exceptional beauty and her presence in a great many of Leighton's pictures.

Ada Alice Pullan (fig. 26) was born in 1859, the daughter of an engineer who abandoned the family when she was nineteen. She had first posed for Leighton in 1879 and modelled for three of his works shown at the Academy in 1880, including appearing semi-nude in the sensuous *Crenaia* (private collection) whose downward gaze prefigures that of the girl in *Whispers*. In February 1881, Ada's mother died leaving her largely responsible for five younger siblings, the youngest of whom, Samuel, was just four years old. As she posed for *Whispers* in Leighton's studio during 1880 and into 1881, Ada's life was therefore at a particularly challenging and uncertain moment, with a pressing need to earn an income to help support the family. Leighton clearly felt considerable sympathy for Ada's plight and that of her siblings and his early patronage of the family was a means of supporting them at this uncertain period. His employment of her as a model was also extended to her siblings, bringing additional income to the family. Lena, not yet ten years old, posed with her sister for *Sister's Kiss,* circa 1880 (private collection), *The Light of the Harem*, circa 1880 (private collection), and *Kittens*, circa 1883 (private collection). Two further sisters, Kathleen and Edith, would also sit for him (fig. 27). In the two large friezes *Music* and *The Dance,* painted in the early 1880s for the Mayfair drawing-room of his friend James Stewart Hodgson (1826-1899), Leighton seems to have called on all four of the sisters. His bank account also reveals significant payments being made to her elder brother Thomas, as the head of the household, including sufficient sums to purchase a house for the family in Clapham. He helped Ada too in her ambitions to be an



Fig. 27 *The Misses Dene*, 1893, W. & D. Downey, 14 x 9.3 cm. (5 ½ x 3 ⅝ in.), National Portrait Gallery, London.

actress, supporting her through a period of training and encouraging his fellow artists not to ask her to work for them so that she could concentrate exclusively on her studies. As she moved towards a theatrical career, she adopted the stage name Dorothy Dene and for a period Dorothy enjoyed some considerable success and clearly had ability and presence on the stage. Her dramatic capabilities fed back into her work with Leighton. By the mid-1880s, she was firmly established as his principal model, able not only to respond to his ideas for poses and compositions but to infuse them with an added drama and potentially suggesting and improvising ideas of her own. The growing celebrity and familiarity of her features was not lost on the critics, who identified her as 'the original of many of Sir [Frederic] Leighton's beautiful creations' and understood the closeness of her relationship with him.

Dorothy's male counterpart both in *Whispers* and Leighton's work through the 1880s and 1890s was the model Gaetano Valvona. Valvona was one of a number of Italians who came to London in the latter part of the nineteenth century and found employment and a good income in artists' studios. Remarkably, Valvona wrote his memoirs, which remain unpublished, but which include an account of his first meeting with Leighton: 'I undressed and he began examining my figure trying to grasp all the beauty,



Fig. 28 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *The Sluggard*, 1885.

elegance and freshness and simplicity which nature gave to any youth, to preserve it in his strong memory, to paint pictures to be preserved for the coming generation of Great Britain'.[8] It was Valvona who spontaneously adopted the pose Leighton captured in his sculpture *The Sluggard* (fig. 28), when he stretched at the end of a long session posing in the studio and who was probably the model for the swarthy shepherd seen from behind in *Idyll*, 1881 (private collection; fig. 29) along with Dorothy Dene and Lillie Langtry (1853-1929). Conventional studio practice would suggest that combining male and female nude sittings was avoided, with females substituting for males as was necessary. However, Leighton's drawings clearly indicate that he did work from both, as the composition demanded. For example, his studies for both *Whispers* and *Wedded*, 1882 (Art Gallery of New South Wales) clearly show a nude female combined with a nude or modestly draped male. Certainly, the frequency with which these two principal models were coming and going from Leighton's studio over this period meant that Valvona and Dorothy certainly knew each other. However, whereas Valvona was a professional model very much on the circuit, Leighton's relationship with Dorothy was clearly more than this. She would remain a very real presence in his life up until Leighton's death in January 1896 and was amongst those admitted to his bedroom during his final illness to say her farewells. Once her career as an actress was established, she and Leighton were present together at social events and occasions, including the 'Show Days' at his studio. Emilie Barrington, Leighton's neighbour and biographer, suggested that together they became almost surrogate parents to the Denes (the family all used Dorothy's adopted surname), this group of beautiful, deserving 'orphans'. However, there remains the difficulty of explaining Leighton's continued use of Dorothy as a nude model, not just in her immediate hour of need when they first met, but throughout the following fifteen years. She appeared nude or semi-nude on the walls of the Academy in a number of works when her position as an actress and celebrity were established. To continue using her in this way was to continue to cast her in an uncertain compromised position that sits uncomfortably with the assumed 'parental' interest that Leighton took in her. The press certainly thought they understood a romantic relationship, openly speculating that their engagement was imminent. That it remains difficult to be definitive about the nature of the relationship between Leighton and Dorothy is largely due to the clear separation Leighton maintained between his private life and his public self. As press reporting through 1881 underlines, he was in great demand, representing the Academy at numerous formal dinners and social gatherings. An accomplished linguist, widely travelled and with refined courtly manners, he was a welcome addition to any dinner party; yet he lived alone, travelled alone and while his correspondence is extensive, remarkably little is disclosed that allows insight or understanding of this elusive personality.



Fig. 29 Frederic Lord Leighton, *Idyll*, c. 1880–81, 104.1 x 212.1 cm. (50 x 83 ½ in.), Private Collection.

His position as President brought him into regular and close contact with members of the royal family. His royal connections dated back to the acquisition of his *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna is Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence* (fig. 2) by Queen Victoria in 1855. Leighton later developed a friendship with the Prince of Wales, who lobbied his mother to support Leighton's appointment as President. The friendship endured and on 11 July 1881 the Prince and Princess of Wales were amongst the guests at a party at Leighton's home. This would have been the couple's first encounter with the Arab Hall. Queen Victoria herself had made a private visit to the house in 1859 and it was now incumbent on Leighton, together with Sir Frederick Eaton (1838-1913), the secretary of the Academy, to brief Victoria on the Academy's affairs. In August, Leighton and Eaton travelled together to the Isle of Wight for an audience at Osborne House and they were at Windsor Castle in early December to present their annual report.

Leighton was also a sought after as a social guest and effective committee member. In January 1881 he was present at the inaugural meeting of the Kyrle Society, chaired by Prince Leopold, the Queen's youngest son.[9] February saw him at a banquet to celebrate the opening of the buildings at University College and on the 26th of the month, as Lieutenant Colonel Leighton, he was officiating at the annual prize-giving of the Artists' Rifles Volunteers held at the Criterion Restaurant. The extent to which Leighton's life was planned out before him, with almost every hour of every day accounted for weeks in advance, was frequently commented on. His reluctance to admit the unexpected into his painting, as G.F. Watts had noted, and the lack of spontaneity that characterised his set piece speeches all testify to the same need for order and control.

If a limiting factor in some aspects of his creative output, this same discipline allowed Leighton to contribute in an extraordinary way to the vibrant cultural life of his time. In this year of 1881, his prestige as the head of the Royal Academy was reaching new heights, his own 'private palace of art' was being realised, and a young woman was moving centre stage in his life who, whatever their relationship entailed, would remain a constant preoccupation until the time of his death. All the components that would define the greatest years of Leighton's life had just fallen into place.

6. Leighton's Classical Subjects: Suggestions and 'Whispers'

Rosie Jarvie

Leighton's long career as a painter spanned an era when the prevailing thinking on the subject matter of pictures changed dramatically. In the early part of Leighton's career the choice of a historical or traditional literary subject was the approved modus operandi, but by the 1890s a seismic shift in approach had occurred, an indication of which is found in *The Times* review of Leighton's *Return of Persephone,* 1891 (Leeds Art Gallery). The critic declared that a picture 'which needs a literary interpretation is a subject inadmissible in art'.[1]

Leighton was the son of a doctor and amateur philosopher, who took particular care in his son's education and encouraged him to read widely, including the classics. Mrs Russell Barrington noted: 'We hear of his elder sister and Leighton learning Latin together from a young priest . . . Leighton received, to say the least, a stern upbringing from his father, mitigated, however, by the greatest tenderness from his mother. The boy's will respecting his future career proved sufficient for the occasion, and he had reason to be thankful that the general knowledge, which Dr Leighton insisted on his acquiring, was instilled at so early an age. From the time he was ten years old he was made to study the classics, and at twelve he spoke French and Italian as fluently as English . . . It was not till Leighton reached the age of seventeen that he was allowed to give his time uninterruptedly to the study of art. At that age he had acquired sufficient knowledge of the classics and of general lines of knowledge even to satisfy his father'.[2] It seems probable that Leighton's grasp of Latin was stronger than his Ancient Greek; in a remark made to Emilia Pattison,[3] Leighton revealed that he read Homer's works in German or Latin and then referred back to the text in the Greek, hoping to appreciate by this method the superiority of the original verses. His classical subjects seem to have been drawn from a limited number of sources, possibly the books he had read as a youth.



Fig. 30 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *The Death of Brunelleschi*, 1852, 256.5 x 188 cm. (101 x 74 in.), Leighton House Museum, London.

Early in Leighton's career he embraced traditional literary subjects such as *The Death of Brunelleschi*, 1852 (Leighton House; fig. 30), painted for exhibition at the Städel Institute, and *Romeo and Juliet: The Reconciliation of the Montagues and the Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet,* 1853-55 (Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia), exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1855. However, he found the necessity of finding an appropriate subject restrictive and limiting and so abandoned this type of literary subject in the early 1860s. He wrote to Edward von Steinle, professor of historical painting at the Städel Art Institute of Frankfurt, that 'in literature only the subjects lend themselves to pictorial representation which stand in the written word more as suggestion'.[4] Over a



Fig. 31 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Captive Andromache*, c. 1888, 197 x 407 cm. (77 ½ x 160 ¼ in.), Manchester Art Gallery, UK. Photo: Bridgeman Images.

decade later, in a letter of 1873 to Joseph Comyns Carr, Leighton explained that he gradually found subjects from classical myth more congenial than those from Renaissance history because 'as vehicles . . . of abstract form, which is a thing not of one time, but of all time, these subjects can never be obsolete, and though to many they are a dead letter, they can never be an anachronism'.[5]

Leighton increasingly turned to classical and biblical themes during the middle phase of his career, and although his output was dominated by classical works it was the aesthetic possibilities of the subject, rather than any narrative potential, that guided his choice of subject matter. His subjects from Greek myth such as *Orpheus and Eurydice,* 1864 (Leighton House), *Ariadne abandoned by Theseus*; *Ariadne watches for his return*; *Artemis releases her by death,* 1868 (Salar Jang Museum, Hyderabad and later on, *The Last Watch of-Hero,* circa 1887-88 (Manchester Art Gallery) and *Perseus and Andromeda,* 1891 (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool) featured characters who had suffered loss or who were wronged by men or the gods. Classical protagonists, both heroes and anti-heroes, provided a source of inspiration, but Leighton did not want to narrate an episode, but rather capture a snapshot and instil it with emotion and atmosphere. These pictures are abstracts taken from a story with few narrative mechanisms, static moments imbued with mood and feeling, their literary or mythological title little more than an appendage.[6]

Leighton explored the Homeric canon and the Greek tragedies for ideas: *Helen of Troy*, 1865 (private collection), from Book III of Homer's *Iliad*, was exhibited with an accompanying verse translation, *Nausicaa,* 1878 (private collection) was a subject from Book VI of the *Odyssey,* and *Captive Andromache*, circa 1888 (Manchester Art Gallery; fig. 31) was a subject suggested by the speech of Hector



Fig. 32 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Clytie*, c. 1890-92, 85.1 x 137.8 cm. (33 ½ x 54 ¼ in.), Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, UK. Photo: Bridgeman Images.

to Andromache in Book VI of the *Iliad*. *Clytemnestra from the Battlements of Argos Watches for the Beacon Fires which are to Announce the Return of Agamemnon*, 1874 (Leighton House Museum), although a story from the Trojan War, follows more closely the opening scene of the tragedy *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus. F. G. Stephens, art critic and friend of Leighton, reported that the subject of *Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon,* 1868-69 (Ferens Art Gallery, Hull) was suggested by a scene from Aeschylus' tragedy *The Oresteia*, and *Hercules wrestling with death for the body of Alcestis*, 1869-71 (Wadworth Atheneum, Hartford) is a scene from Euripides' *Alcestis*. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provided an important trove of subjects too. His powerful two late works of Clytie (fig. 32) depict the heroine of Book IV, the most famous retelling of the story of *Daedalus and Icarus* appears in Book VIII of the *Metamorphoses* and the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice is treated in Book X.

Whispers was painted in the early 1880s, a key period in the Leighton's artistic development, when he had not yet fully devoted himself to a purely aesthetic style of painting, but was moving away from subjects explicitly taken from classical myths to themes that employed association, decorative arrangement and colour 'to evoke a golden age, a distilled world of harmony, beauty and love'.[7]

Leighton's later paintings often have an oblique relationship to their titular subject, being chosen primarily for their compositional potential. His emancipation from narrative subjects reached a climax in *Flaming June,* 1895 (fig. 39) where the vaguest of classical references was introduced, not as part of a story but as an element of the overall design.

Although Leighton was inclined to provide information about the subject of his works in either the title or in an accompanying line quoted in the catalogue, *Whispers* was not exhibited at the Royal Academy with any accompanying verse or reference. However, the artist's inspirations were on occasion revealed by others close to him. It was the contemporary writer Edgcumbe Staley who noted that the inspiration for *Whispers* was the line 'lenesque sub noctem susurri' (soft whispers at nightfall) from Horace's *IX Soracte Ode.* The poem, like the painting, is brimming with suggestion and like Leighton's imagery it is also preoccupied with colour, mood and form. It advises taking pleasure in the fleeting, simple joys of life, including youthful lovemaking: an appropriate allusion for Leighton's *Whispers.* Ernest Rhys, writing in 1898, remarked, 'we ought not to overlook another idyllic picture in the same exhibition *Whispers*, an illustration of Horace's well-known line "lenesque sub noctem susurri". In this charming work, amid masses of crimson flowers and green leaves, two lovers are seen seated upon a marble bench, while he whispers tenderly in her ear, and she listens with dreamy eyes and maidenly mien'.[8] The literary reference was well established by the time of the artist's death.

A further piece of circumstantial evidence to support this association may be provided by the contents of Leighton's library, which was sold on 15 and 16 July 1896 and contained over 300 items. Classical texts included five volumes of Plato's *Dialogues* translated by Benjamin Jowett, 1875, a folio size edition of Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*, Virgil's *Eclogue*s, translated and illustrated by Samuel Palmer, 1883, and lot 56 'Horace, Poems translated by various Persons, with autograph of Sir Joshua Reynolds 1660'. Although Leighton did not own a large number of classical texts, the inclusion in his library of a copy of Horace's *Works* that once belonged to Sir Joshua Reynolds, PRA (1723-1792) is noteworthy.

Horace, one of the finest lyric poets, was one of the most popular Latin authors of the Victorian age. His works were considered graceful and astute and perceived as representing Victorian values. Horace lived between 65 and 68 BC during the reign of Augustus, and his *Odes* consisted of more than a hundred short poems adapted from the lyric verse of Greek poets such as Pindar and Sappho. Their subjects varied, but many dealt with the themes of love and friendship, patriotism and religion, often with a strong moral vein. Tennyson described them as:

> *. . . jewels five-words-long*
> *That on the stretch'd forefinger of all Time*
> *Sparkle for ever . . .*[9]

The popularity of Horace was reflected in the numerous translations of his work, including versions by Dryden and Milton, liberal Prime Minister Sir William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898) and others, published during the Victorian period. A translation of Horace's *Odes* by John Conington (1825-1869)[10] published in 1863 is frequently said to be one of the best renditions of Horace. It would therefore seem surprising if Leighton had not pondered upon one of Horace's most beautiful *Odes* and found it a source of inspiration for one of his most beautiful works.

7 . Horace's IX Ode, The Soracte Ode

Rosie Jarvie

A detailed look at the text of Horace's *IX Ode* and the context of the lines quoted by Edgcumbe Staley reveal a closer association between the picture and the text than just that of two young lovers meeting and provides an insight into why the lines may have suggested themselves to Leighton as an appropriate subject. This translation is from *The Odes and Carmen Saeculare of Horace* by John Conington, 1863:

See, how it stands, one pile of snow,
Soracte! 'neath the pressure yield
Its groaning woods; the torrents' flow
With clear sharp ice is all congeal'd.

Heap high the logs, and melt the cold,
Good Thaliarch; draw the wine we ask,
That mellower vintage, four-year-old,
From out the cellar'd Sabine cask.

The future trust with Jove; when he
Has still'd the warring tempests' roar
On the vex'd deep, the cypress-tree
And aged ash are rock'd no more.

O, ask not what the morn will bring,
But count as gain each day that chance
May give you; sport in life's young spring,
Nor scorn sweet love, nor merry dance,

While years are green, while sullen eld [old age]
Is distant. Now the walk, the game,
The whisper'd talk at sunset held,
Each in its hour, prefer their claim.

Sweet too the laugh, whose feign'd alarm
The hiding-place of beauty tells,
The token, ravish'd from the arm
Or finger, that but ill rebels.

The *Soracte* or *IX Ode* is six stanzas long, and in the first two stanzas the language is highly symbolic. The first stanza is set outdoors and conjures up images of the mountain standing alone, covered in freezing snow. It is an impersonal winter scene with ideas of remoteness, solitude and a static stillness. Horace's subject of the mountain, Soracte, gives the Ode an eternal aspect. The second stanza, in contrast to the first, is more joyful in tone, it is set indoors and the language conveys activity and convivial warmth. The Sabine wine, one of the main symbols in verse two, stands for the enjoyment of the pleasures of life, and its warmth is perceived as fleeting and momentary, in contrast to the symbol of the eternal mountain in verse one.

Horace's third and fourth stanzas depart from symbolic sentiment and are more direct in expression. In these lines we are presented with the moral Horace is conveying and the meaning of his previously symbolic language. In lines 9-18 Horace advises us to enjoy life while we can and to leave everything else to destiny; we must not fret over the future, but enjoy each day as it comes, to love and dance while we are young before the miseries of old age and eventual death overtake us. This is the theme of 'carpe diem' that resonates throughout Horace's writings. The symbolism of stanzas one and two are explained. The mountain represents age and death, the wine life and youth.

In verse four Horace emphatically turns to the present with its joys and pleasures and we see expounded the sentiment underlying Leighton's picture:

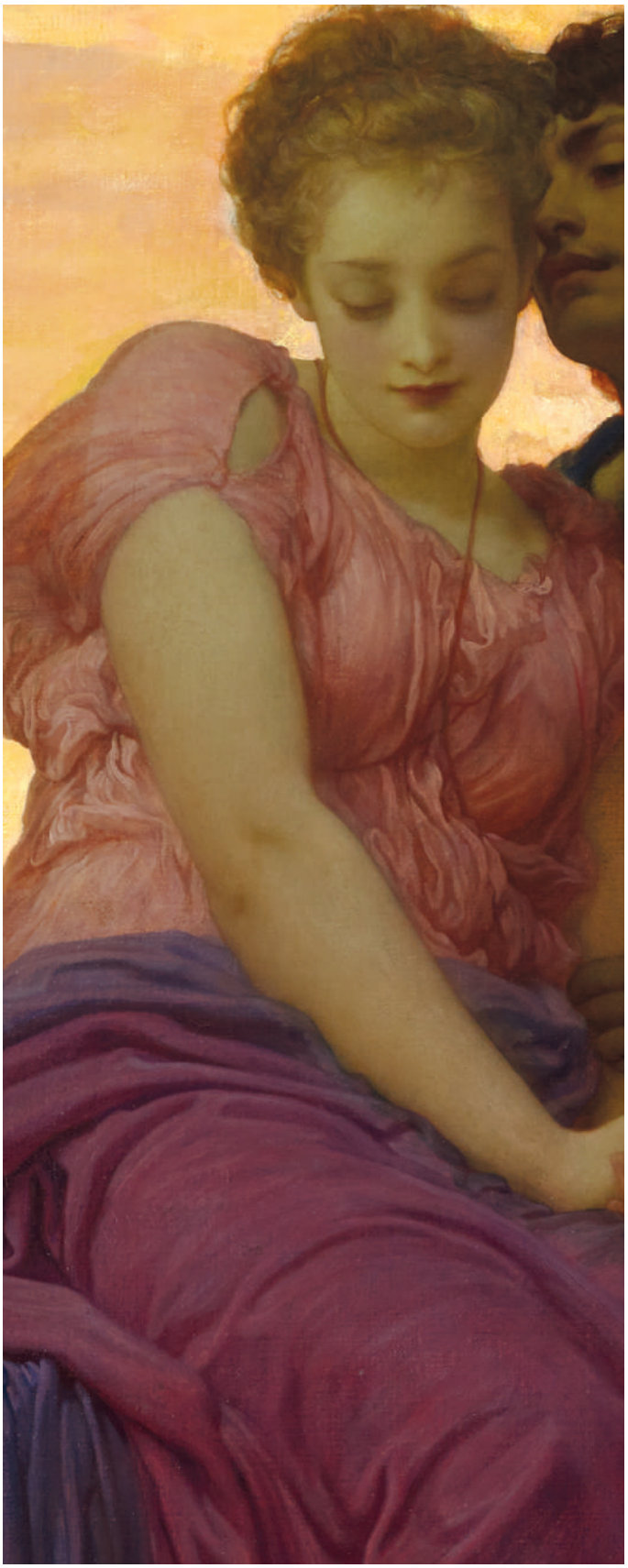
But count as gain each day that chance
May give you; sport in life's young spring,
Nor scorn sweet love, nor merry dance.[1]

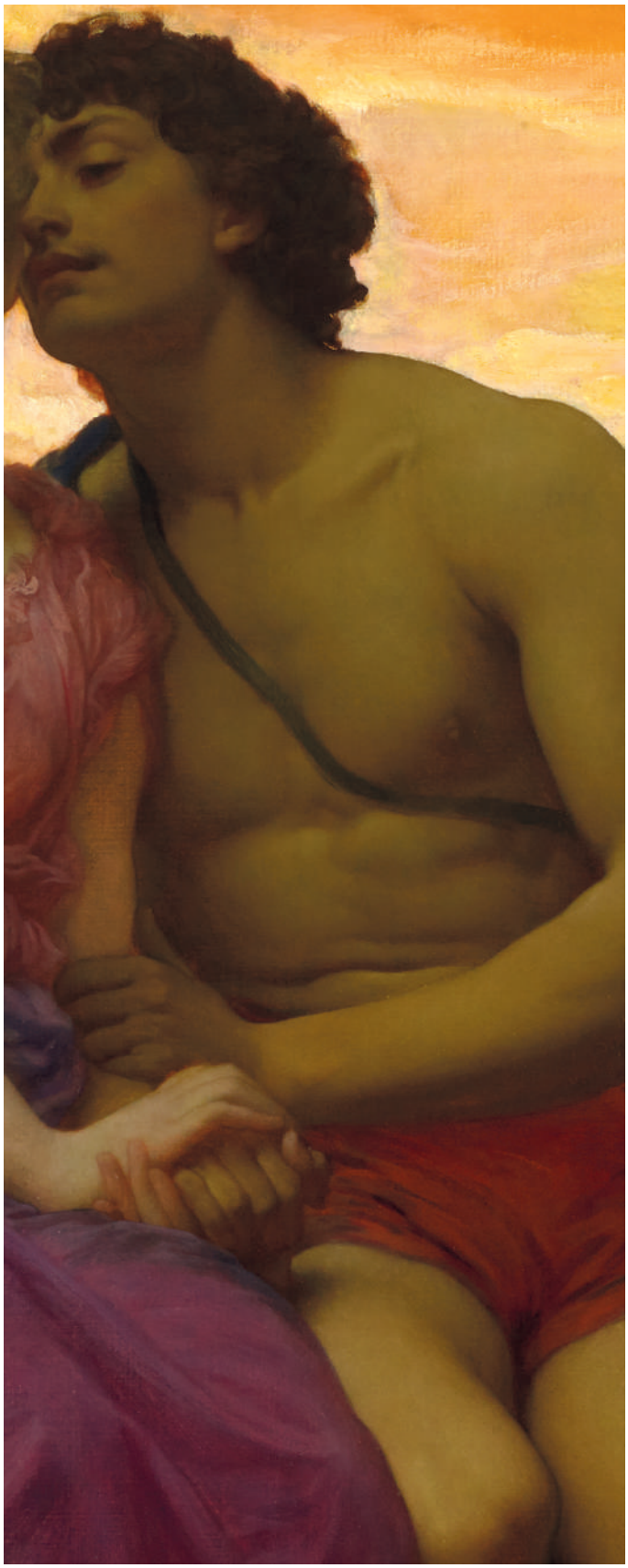
Horace's Ode has two main symbolic themes running through it, the imagery of old age and death in contrast to the transient warmth of youth and life. It is the last one and a half stanzas that give us the setting for the snatched whispers in Leighton's picture, translated here by the poet John Dryden:

The pointed hour of promis'd bliss,
The pleasing whisper in the dark,
The half unwilling willing kiss,
The laugh that guides thee to the mark,
When the kind Nymph wou'd coyness feign
And hides but to be found again,
These, these are joys the Gods for Youth ordain.[2]

The companionship of young love is one of the joys of youth, which Horace refers to as 'lenesque sub noctem susurri' – line 19 (soft whispers at nightfall). Horace continues that these should happen at the 'composita hora' – line 20 (the right hour). Yet time is fleeting and 'hora' like the 'susurri' (whispers) are both placed at the end of the sentence, to emphasise the briefness of time and the unsubstantial nature of it all. Horace tells us that youth and its pleasures are fleeting and it is old age, moving gradually towards death that, like the mountain Soracte in the first stanza, is eternal and permanent.

In our mind's eye we see a young man and woman seated together in a secluded place, secretly courting, the man bold, the girl coy and demure. Their hands are entwined, his lips just brushing her ear – as Dryden writes, 'the half unwilling willing kiss', a phrase which seems to sum up the interaction between the couple in Leighton's masterpiece. In choosing to focus on this moment of pleasure, Leighton has set the picture at sunset giving it a warm tonality; like Horace's symbolic second stanza, we almost feel the warmth of a summer's evening.





As Horace's poem concludes he tells us that their youthful joy is transient, a moment to be snatched, taken. Their youthful happiness will ultimately give way to old age and eventual death. The beauty and the heady atmosphere of fleeting, perhaps illicit love that Leighton has captured is even more powerful and moving if read with the knowledge of the underlying sentiment of Horace's poignant Ode. The future is inherent in the present, age and death are entwined with youth and life. Horace has portrayed in richly symbolic language his thoughts and feelings about youth, mortality and ageing, rendering them representative of man's state.

Leighton's *Whispers*, like Horace's Ode, celebrates the precious moments in life despite or even because of their fleeting nature. Leighton, with his harmonious palette and carefully worked composition, has created a mood and highly charged atmosphere that emphasises the secretive and thrilling aspect of youthful love. Alice Corkran, discussing the picture a few years after Leighton's death, remarks on the implied contrast which a reading of Horace's text elucidates: 'In "The Idyll" (1881), in "Whispers" (1881), in "Day Dreams" (1882), is the same chastened sensuous feeling expressed, with the same passing refinement. It is all a world of beauty, in which lovely shapes, clad in draperies the folds of which fall on the eye like music on the ear, play their part of loving, of dreaming, and of wistful longing. We almost feel inclined to wish for the rigors of everyday life, for the wholesomeness of a touch of winter in the midst of so much sweetness'.[3]

Whispers is on one level a simple and universally understandable picture: the tenderness of the couple's exchange is entirely believable and their subtle gestures are ready symbols of youthful love that were both acceptable and easily understood by contemporary audiences. Yet there is a poignancy, an underlying air of secretiveness and vulnerability which is elucidated by a full reading of Horace's *IX Ode*. The fleeting nature of life and the omnipresence of death were familiar concepts to the Victorians obsessed as they were with death and its customs and rituals.

8. *The Development of the Composition*

Rosie Jarvie



Fig. 33 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Golden Hours*, c. 1864, 80 x 124.5 cm. (31 ½ x 49 in.), Private Collection.

A first impression of the composition in *Whispers* is that the pose of the couple is straightforward, obvious even: a couple seated side by side and holding hands. However, Leighton was meticulous in his preparation and the composition was one that Leighton evolved over several years being carefully honed and finessed in its later stages.

The girl's seated pose and the carefully arranged folds of her garments hark back to Leighton's *Lieder ohne Worte*, painted over twenty years earlier in 1860 (Tate, London; fig. 3), around the same time as Leighton painted his first picture of embracing lovers *Paolo and Francesca,* circa 1860-61 (Salar Jang Museum, Hyderabad). It was not until the mid-1860s that Leighton depicted the tenderness of love with whole-hearted, believable conviction, with his masterly *The Painter's Honeymoon*, circa 1864 (Museum of Fine Art, Boston; fig. 5), and the contemporaneous *Golden Hours* (private collection; fig. 33). In *The Painter's Honeymoon* as in *Whispers*, the couple's heads and knees touch and they hold hands; a mood of sympathetic intimacy is succinctly conveyed. In *Golden Hours* like in *Whispers* an emotional narrative is implicit and the light and dark shades of the two protagonists are used to evoke mood and enhance the aesthetic effect. In these two earlier paintings Leighton has achieved his aim of capturing the romantic pathos between two ardent young lovers, the sentiment that is even more intensified fifteen years later in *Whispers*.



Fig. 34 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Wedded*, 1882, 145.4 x 81.3 cm. (57 ¼ x 32 in.).
Photo: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

In 1868 Leighton painted *Acme and Septimius* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; fig. 13), which depicts the classical lovers in the Catullus poem of that name. The young lovers are a paragon of perfect felicity, confident in their mutual affection and entranced by the thrill of being in each other's presence. Leighton has posed the couple with their knees touching and their hands clasped while she kisses his forehead.

Whispers was painted around the same time as *Wedded* (Art Gallery of New South Wales; fig. 34), which was exhibited at the Royal Academy Summer exhibition in 1882. Here a Greek bride and bridegroom stand together under an archway at the top of a stair; her head leans back on his shoulder as he lifts her hand to his lips. The setting is the Greek Amphitheatre at Taormina, Sicily. The picture was one of the artist's most popular works and the poet Robert Browning on inspecting it is said to have remarked: 'I find a poetry in that man's work that I can find in no other'[1]. Although both the pictures depicting lovers embracing are similar, the mood of the two pictures is very different; in *Wedded* their love is displayed openly, in *Whispers* there is a clandestine air to their tryst.

Drawing was a key factor for Leighton in the development of a composition and it is clear that he worked on a number of ideas concurrently. He would then return to these drawings and develop particular themes from them, which could be worked up into a picture or referred to at a later date, even after a long interval. Leighton valued his studies highly and examples would be displayed with pride on the platform beneath his studio window. He never found his drawings dispensable once they had played a particular function and considered his sketchbooks the most important of his records.



Fig. 35 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Cimon and Iphigenia*, *with many smaller subjects*, c. 1880- 81, 31.1 x 23.8 cm. (12 ¼ x 9 ⅜ in.), Tate, London.

The careful evolution of the composition can be seen from a sheet of chalk studies for *Wedded,* on blue paper, in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This shows a variation of the pose of the standing couple and studies of their hands in addition to a sketch of a seated couple, but seen from behind, the girl placing her weight on her right arm, the boy with his left arm reaching down to her waist. As Leighton changed the colour of the paper he used for his drawings from blue to brown in 1877-78; this sheet was probably executed shortly before that change occurred. It seems likely that the design of *Wedded* was already sufficiently developed for him to be working on the details of the hands, but the possibility of a *Whispers*-style composition was only just emerging at that date.

Several preparatory drawings for *Whispers* exist that demonstrate the stages of Leighton's working practice. A sheet of studies on brown paper (Tate, London; fig. 35 [T09061]) includes two small studies for *Whispers,* along with sketches for *Idyll* and *Cymon and Iphigenia,* and for the Fitzwilliam's version of *Clytie* (fig. 32). *Whispers* and *Idyll* were painted in 1880-81, the other two paintings being completed in 1884 and 1890 respectively. This sheet, along with another sketch in the Clark Art Institute (fig. 36 1955.16.84), shows the composition of *Whispers* already fully conceived, but the inscription 'Betrothed' suggests an earlier title for the painting and a possible thematic connection with *Wedded*. Once he had settled upon a composition Leighton then made drawings of the figures from life, both draped and nude. On the sheet in the Tate, Leighton has drawn the female figure draped, whereas the sheet in the Clark Institute shows a nude study of the female figure with the male model partly draped, as he is in the finished work. A further elegant study of the couple, circa 1881 (whereabouts unknown),[2] shows the female figure



Fig. 36 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Study for Whispers*, c. 1880-81, 33.1 x 23.4 cm (13 x 23.4 ⅛ in.), Clark Art Institute, Massachusetts.

clothed in characteristic flowing drapery and a tentative hat and chin-strap drawn on the male figure. The latter two drawings show Leighton refining his composition; in the finished work he has changed the final angle of the girl's head, so that more of her face is visible to us and he adjusts the angle of her arm across her body.

Next a drawing would be squared up so the composition could be transferred to the canvas. Two squared up drawings for *Whispers* exist, one in the collection of the Royal Academy (fig. 37), 14.1 x 9 cm., executed on tracing paper, drawn with great economy of line and squared for transfer to canvas. This drawing, and another highly finished drawing that was offered on the art market in 2012,[3] are close to the finished composition. The latter drawing is perhaps one of his last chalk sketches for *Whispers*: executed on brown paper, it is in black chalk with the highlights picked out in white. It is lightly squared in pencil and has a classical arch sketched in the background, which does not appear in the finished oil. The angle of the girl's arms and her head is now fairly settled, but both of these two later works show the male sitter with a hat on his head rather than slung against his back as it does in the finished painting. The background landscape is shaded in and the flowers in the lower left corner are delineated; however, it seems that Leighton was still finessing the composition even at a late stage. Once the composition was transferred to canvas the next step would be a colour sketch, though none is known for *Whispers*.

When a composition was sufficiently settled, Leighton would then draw an enlarged grid on the prepared canvas to the desired dimensions and transfer the drawing on to it square by square. After the transfer to canvas, Leighton's process in oil followed the preparatory drawing stage, with models again painted in monochrome from the nude with clothing later added. Using a sheet of brown paper, he copied the nude monochrome figures from the canvas back on to a drawing, which he regarded as vital to establishing an exact correspondence between the figure and its draperies. The sketch on brown paper would then be used as the form on to which the draperies could be drawn from life. The drawn draperies were then transferred to the canvas, again



Fig. 37 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Squared up tracing for 'Whispers'*, probably c. 1881, 14.1 x 9 cm (5 ½ x 3 ½ in.), Royal Academy of the Arts, London.

in monochrome.[4] This elaborate and painstaking procedure was integral to Leighton's realisation of his vision. We would have expected Leighton to have executed some subsidiary sketches of the lovers' joined hands, which are in a complex pose, but none has currently been identified.

Even though there are relatively few preparatory drawings for *Whispers*, we can see that the pose of the couple gradually evolves and the relative dearth of drawings may suggest that Leighton settled on the pose of the couple and the composition with relative ease; yet this did not prevent him reviewing his work and carefully revising costumes and background details.



9. The Wheel of Colour in 'Whispers'

Rosie Jarvie

'The purest and most thoughtful minds are those which love colour the most'
John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 1853, vol. III

From the 1850s onwards discussion and theories on colour permeated Victorian society and remained a huge preoccupation, not only amongst artistic circles but in areas of design and fashion. Exhibited in 1881, *Whispers* is a virtuoso exercise in colour harmony and contrast and can be viewed as the embodiment of Leighton's own ideas on colour.

The robes of the two young lovers are painted in chromatic colours: each piece of cloth is comprised of some of the pigment of its bordering drape, enough to make the clothes visually harmonious as if on an imaginary colour wheel. The eye moves seamlessly downwards from the simple pink tunic, buttoned twice at the shoulders and tied across the bust, to the purple silk drape across the girl's lap, which is overlaid by a cloak of mauve silk that outlines her legs. The mauve and purple drapes which lie across her lap lead the eye to the nearly primary-coloured dark blue cloak, on which the boy sits. Diagonally opposite and balancing each other are two modestly sized accents of deep red colour, the youth's scant shorts and the pelargonium flowers, which provide the other primary colour needed to create the delicious intermediate shades. The robes and garments in the picture can be seen as abstract elements of the composition and their purpose as clothing for the sitters is secondary. As Ruskin wrote, 'Everything that you can see in the world around you presents itself to your eyes only as an arrangement of patches of different colours'.[1]

The idea of using chromatic colours as part of the composition was foreshadowed by Leighton's *Greek Girls Picking up Pebbles*, 1871 (private collection; fig. 38) in which the four windswept girls are dressed in tunics of differing harmonious shades of pink with perhaps the same blue cloak used in *Whispers* billowing behind.



Fig. 38 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Greek Girls Picking up Pebbles by the Sea*, 1871, 84 x 129.5 cm. (33 x 50 ¾ in.), Private Collection.



Fig. 39 Frederic, Lord Leighton, *Flaming June*, 1895, 120 × 120 cm. (47 × 47 in.), Museo de Arte de Ponce, Ponce, Puerto Rico.

Leighton was known to have an extensive collection of fabrics and textiles which he used in his paintings, and it is possible that the deeper purple drape in *Whispers* is the same one used in his early aesthetic work, *Lieder ohne Worte,* 1860-61 (Tate, London; fig. 3), whilst the blue cloak again appears in *Daedalus and Icarus,* circa 1869 (The Faringdon Collection), where it is also used to set off the flesh tones.

The flesh tones of the girl and her lover are not just a happy accident of Leighton's favourite models, but a careful compositional choice, emphasised by the clasped hands in the centre of the composition. The four hands are joined in a complex pose, which is accentuated by the contrasting skin tones of cool cream and dark olive. The contrast of light and dark can also be seen with the young man's upper arm, set in shadow and juxtaposed against the bright sky.

Further colour interplays can be found in the background of *Whispers*. Leighton's dramatic sky bursts with fiery shades of orange and yellow, colours that are opposite to the sitters' blue and purple draperies, providing a vivid contrast. *Whispers,* as an exercise in colour theory, foreshadows Leighton's late masterpiece *Flaming June,* 1895 (fig. 39), his greatest exploration in colour. In *Flaming June* Leighton has inverted the warm tones of the sky and the cool tones of the shaded draperies that he deployed in *Whispers*. There the warm orange tones of the sleeping girl's dress and hair are set against the cool blue tones of the marble, sea and sky. The background hues of *Whispers* have become the foreground tones of *Flaming June*. In *Whispers* Leighton is approaching the peak of his exploration of colour, which finds its zenith in *Flaming June*. In *Whispers* Leighton explores not only the harmony of colour, but also the drama of light and shade, pale and dark tones.

10. Past Owners

Rosie Jarvie



Fig. 40 Clara Jessup Bloomfield Moore, c. 1860.

The first owner of *Whispers* was Clara Jessup Bloomfield Moore (1824-1899), a philanthropist and writer from Philadelphia (fig. 40). Her father, Augustus Edward Jessup, was a distinguished mineralogist whilst her mother Lydia neé Moseley came from an old English family with branches in America. Clara Jessup married Bloomfield Haines Moore, a Quaker from Philadelphia, in 1842. Moore had made his fortune manufacturing paper near Wilmington, Delaware in partnership with Clara's father. By the time of his death in 1878, he had amassed a fortune of several million dollars.

Moore's wealth and status enabled her to play a prominent role in Philadelphian society and she was instrumental in several philanthropic and charitable schemes, notably during the Civil War. In addition to her philanthropic work she was a prolific writer. Soon after her marriage she began writing stories and poems that were published in magazines and local newspapers. Her stories were commercially successful and she donated the money to charitable causes. Moore's most popular genre was her writings on etiquette, the most famous of which, *Sensible Etiquette of the Best Society*, first published in 1878, under the pseudonym Mrs. H. O. Ward, was a compilation of rules for social manners including anecdotes and examples. The overall tone was unapologetically moralistic: Mothers, had a duty to train their children and their husbands, who, like men in general, are in need of the "beneficial corrective influences of refined and pure-minded women."[1] It went through twenty revised editions, becoming one of the most popular etiquette books of the time.

After her husband died in 1878, Moore spent many years travelling and living in Europe. Her later years were spent at her home, 12 Great Stanhope Street, Mayfair, London, which became a salon for artists, musicians, writers and actors, including Henry Longfellow (1807-1882) and the poet Robert Browning (1812-1889) whose eulogy she wrote. A notable society figure, she was presented at Court.

Mrs Bloomfield Moore was a patron of the arts and an important collector. Her generosity enriched several institutions, including the Franklin Institute, the University of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Museum and the School of Industrial Art at Philadelphia to which she bequeathed a considerable art collection in memory of her husband. After her death in 1899, the contents of her Mayfair house were sold over three days at Christie's in May 1900 and her estate was valued at $5,000,000. Her obituary in *The New York Times* described her as both 'eccentric' and an 'intelligent, shrewd, and liberal collector of art objects . . . Her house . . . contained an uncommonly large and valuable collection of oil paintings'.[2] *Whispers* remained in the collection of this notable woman until her death in 1899 when it was included in the sale at Christie's, where it was

purchased by Blanche Watney, another affluent widow. Mrs Blanche Maria Georgiana Burrell Watney (1837-1915); (fig. 41) the widow of the brewing magnate and Liberal MP James Watney (1832-1886), had purchased the magnificent Kensington mansion of the shipping baron and art collector Frederick Leyland (1831-1892) at 49 Prince's Gate, London, in 1894. She began to redesign the interior, which included one of the most celebrated examples of Aesthetic interior decoration, Whistler's *Harmony in Blue and Gold (The Peacock Room)* (fig. 42), painted for Leyland in the 1870s. Although she was a connoisseur of art and a close friend of her former neighbour John Everett Millais, the Peacock Room was evidently not to her taste and she planned to remove and redesign it. However, she was persuaded by Leyland's son-in-law the artist Valentine Prinsep (1838-1904), the American architect Stanford White (1853-1906) and John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) to retain the decoration despite the fact that she considered it 'hideous'. Whistler himself felt that it would be advisable for the interior to be dismantled and sold to a museum in America and his friend Walford Graham Robertson (1866-1948) advised Mrs Watney that it was possible to remove the decoration piece by piece and that it would sell for a high figure.

For a while Mrs Watney retained *The Peacock Room* and redecorated other rooms to house her substantial art collection. Leighton appears to have been Mrs Watney's favourite artist and she owned several important examples of his work including *Flaming June* (fig. 39), bought in 1895, *The Fisherman and the Syren* (fig. 12), bought in 1896, and it is likely that by that time she already owned *Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon* and *Idyll* (fig. 29). In 1918 A.G. Temple recalled that Mrs Watney hung all her paintings by Leighton, including *Whispers*, in one room adjoining the Peacock Room, where they remained for a decade until she could no longer bear to live with Whistler's decoration. In 1904, a year after Whistler's death, Mrs Watney had the Peacock Room dismantled and sold for 10,000 guineas so that she could install a library.

On her death, *The Globe* reported that Mrs Watney left property of the value of £197,347[3] and that Leighton's



Fig. 41 Blanche Maria Georgiana Watney (*née* Burrell) with Vernon James Watney and Florence Blanche Watney, Camille Silvy, 24 June 1861, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Helios and Rhodes (Tate, London) was to be offered to the nation. *Whispers*, *Idyll, Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon* and *Flaming June* descended through the Watney family to Rosalind Margaret Watney, the Hon. Mrs Charles Henry Lyell, MBE, JP (d. 1957). In 1938 Mrs Lyell gave *Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon* to the Ferens Art Gallery, Hull and *The Fisherman and the Syren* to Bristol City Art Gallery. Her father had lent *Flaming June* to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, but it was returned to her in the 1930s and she possibly sold it privately soon afterwards. She kept *Idyll* and *Whispers* until 1949 when they were sold at Christie's.[4]

Whispers was bought at the 1949 Christie's sale by the dealer Newman of Duke Street (who notably handled



Fig. 42 James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *The Peacock Room*, 1876-77, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* in 1950 and 1960).[5] Newman sold *Whispers* to a private collector in Sweden. The picture then suffered an ignominious fate, common to many high Victorian works in the post-war years, when it was traded in part exchange for a Mercedes Benz car in Sweden in either the late 1950s or early 1960s. Subsequently, along with two other paintings, it was used as capital to settle an outstanding debt and descended in the Kristensson family, unrecognised until it was rediscovered in 2014.

11. Conclusion



Whispers is an important example of Leighton's classical aestheticism. It exemplifies his talent for encapsulating the lure of the ideal and for creating an atmosphere through costume and colour. Above all, it is an exquisitely painted composition in which Leighton boldly displays his technical skills. Just as the viewer is entranced by *Whispers*, the lovers themselves are absorbed in the moment. The recent reappearance from obscurity of this picture is cause for celebration and an opportunity to reappraise its position amongst the artist's oeuvre. It also provides collectors with a rare opportunity to purchase one of Leighton's iconic masterpieces.

12. ENDNOTES

2. FREDERIC LEIGHTON AND THE VICTORIAN ART WORLD

1 Quoted in A.G. Temple, *Guildhall Memories,* London, 1918, p. 119.

2 *Art Journal*, 1 June 1855, pp. 169-70.

3 Ibid.

4 *Art Journal*, 1 June 1864, p. 157.

5 See C. Newall, 'The Painter's Honeymoon', catalogue entry in *Frederic, Lord Leighton,* exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy, 1996, p. 136.

6 Quoted in Christopher Wood, *Olympian Dreamers,* London, 1983, p. 41.

7 'Mercutio', 'Observations' in *The St James's Budget*, no. 814, 31 January 1896.

8 Quoted in O.R. Agresti, *Giovanni Costa: His Life, Work, and Times,* London, 1904, p. 257.

9 H. Pearson, *The Man Whistler,* London, 1952, p. 167.

10 'The Private Life' [1892] in L. Edel (ed.), *The Complete Tales of Henry James,* London, 1963, vol. 8: 1891-1892, p. 196.

3. LEIGHTON AND THE AESTHETES

1 Letter to Frederick Evans, 20 August 1894, in H. Maas, J.L. Duncan and W.G. Good, (eds.), *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, London, 1971, p. 73. This refers possibly to a drawing for Beardsley's own novella, later published as *Under the Hill*. Earlier in the year, Leighton had allowed one of his figure studies to be reproduced in the first volume of *The Yellow Book,* of which Beardsley was the art editor.

2 Letter to Ricketts, 16 February 1891, quoted in J.P.G. Delaney, *Charles Ricketts; A Biography,* Oxford, 1990, p. 46.

3 C.J. Holmes, *Self & Partners (Mostly Self),* London, 1936, p. 164.

4. 'WHISPERS' and its Sources

1 The golden sunset in *Whispers* is very similar to that in *Clytie* and may be based on sketches painted by Leighton in 1874 while he was staying in Donegal, Ireland. A sketchbook in the collection of the Royal Academy contains a pencil drawing of a sky annotated with colours which relates to the sky in Clytie and a painting described as 'Study of Sky, Donegal' was included in the sale after Leighton's death. It is possible that *Whispers* is Leighton's first use of this sunset he sketched in 1874.

5. THE YEAR OF 'WHISPERS': SIR FREDERIC LEIGHTON IN 1881

1 *Belfast News-Letter*, 8 January 1881, p. 6

2 Mrs Russell Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Baron Leighton of Stretton*, London, 1906, vol. 1, p. 19. Hereafter 'Barrington, 1906'.

3 *Liverpool Daily Post*, Saturday 10 April 1881. n.p.

4 Ibid.

5 *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 30 April 1881, p. 5, *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 6 May 1881, p. 3 inter alia

6 *Illustrated London News*, 30 April 1881, p. 426.

7 *John Bull*, 7 May 1881, p. 299.

8 Unpublished manuscript, quoted in *The Guardian*, 5 November 2001.

9 A forerunner of the National Trust, with the slogan 'Bring Beauty Home to the Poor'.

6. LEIGHTON'S CLASSICAL SUBJECTS: SUGGESTIONS AND 'WHISPERS'

1 *The Times*, 1 May 1891, p. 14.

2 Barrington, 1906, pp. 37-38, 42.

3 L. Ormond, 'Leighton and the subject picture', *Frederic Leighton, 1830-1896*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy, London, 1996, p. 75. Hereafter 'Ormond, *Leighton*, 1996'.

4 Writing to decline an offer to collaborate with Steinle on an illustrated Shakespeare, see Ormond, *Leighton*, 1996, p. 74.

5 Ormond, *Leighton*, 1996, p. 69.

6 As Leonée Ormond notes, 'many of the Classical paintings take their subjects from specific works of literature, and catalogue entries and titles remain part of a strategy to clarify the narrative content', Ormond, *Leighton*, 1996, p. 77.

7 Ormond, *Leighton*, 1996, p. 32.

8 E. Rhys, *Frederic Lord Leighton, Late President of the Royal Academy of Arts; An illustrated record of his life and work,* London, 1898, p. 43.

9 A. Tennyson, *The Princess*, 1847, iii. 853-55.

10 Corpus Professor of Latin, Oxford.

7. HORACE'S IX ODE, THE SORACTE ODE

1 *The Odes and Carmen Saeculare of Horace*, translated by John Conington, London, 1863.

2 John Dryden, *Sylvae: or, The Second Part of Poetical Miscellanies*, London, 1692, p. 130.

3 A. Corkran, *Frederic Leighton*, 1904, p. 99.

8. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMPOSITION

1 Barrington, 1906, vol. 2 p. 29, n. 1.

2 Illustrated in *Drawings and Studies*, *a facsimile copy of Leighton's drawings* printed by The Fine Art Society, 1898.

3 This drawing was sold Bloomsbury, London, 15 November 2012, lot 611, 13 x 8 cm.

4 See Ormond, *Leighton*, 1996, pp. 65-66 for an account of Leighton's working methods.

9. THE WHEEL OF COLOUR IN 'WHISPERS'

1 John Ruskin, *Elements of Drawing*, Exercise 1.

10. PAST OWNERS

1 Quoted in Bloomfield-Moore's entry in *American National Biography*, online edition, February 2000.

2 *The New York Times*, 6 January 1899.

3 *The Globe*, 8 March 1915, p. 5.

4 Although the sale at Christie's was anonymous, the vendor was noted as M.L. Bullen. It is possible that this is a mistranscription or alias for her daughter Margaret Laetitia Lyell who married twice, Major the Honourable Francis Alan Stewart-Mackenzie of Seaforth in 1937 and Charles Henry Pearson Gifford in 1944.

5 The gallery merged with Cooling Galleries to become Newman & Cooling and eventually closed in the late 1980s.



Philip Alexius de László, M.V.O., P.R.B.A. (British, 1869-1937))
Anny Ahlers as Madame Dubarry
Oil on canvas
Signed and dated 'de László / 1933 - ' (lower left)
172.7 x 116.9 cm. (68 x 46 in.)



Frederic, Lord Leighton, P.R.A. (British, 1830-1896)
Candida
Oil on canvas
53.3 x 36.2 cm. (21 x 14 ¼ in.)
c. 1894-5

Martin Beisly

Martin Beisly launched his art dealership in 2015 after over thirty years' experience in the auction world. As International Director of Victorian & 19th Century Pictures at Christie's, he established an impressive reputation for expertise, a keen understanding of the art market and a wealth of contacts with international collectors and curators. Under his leadership the Victorian department became market leader in the field. Martin was instrumental in restoring Farringford, Tennyson's home on the Isle of Wight and was a trustee of Juliet Margaret Cameron's house Dimbola. He is a trustee and also a member of Collections Committee of the Watts Gallery, Compton. Martin's gallery in St James's specialises in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite painting and sculpture and holds a representative stock of Victorian art both owned outright and sold on behalf of collectors throughout the world.

Stephen Calloway

Stephen Calloway was a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1974-2013 and has written widely on English art and the history of taste, collecting and interior decoration. He has curated exhibitions on Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon; Horace Walpole; Aubrey Beardsley; Rex Whistler; the Aesthetic Movement and The Beggarstaff Brothers (William Nicholson and James Pryde). His books include *Aubrey Beardsley; Twentieth Century Decoration* and *Baroque Baroque: The Culture of Excess.*

Daniel Robbins

Daniel Robbins is Senior Curator, Museums with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and is responsible for two of London's most significant house museums: Leighton House Museum and 18 Stafford Terrace. Formerly with Glasgow Museums, he has organised many exhibitions and contributed to numerous catalogues and publications around nineteenth-century art, architecture and design, including the authorship of the companion guide to Leighton House Museum published in 2011. He was responsible for leading the award-winning project to restore the historic interiors of the house completed between 2008 and 2010 and is now leading an £8 million refurbishment project addressing the additions made to the building in the twentieth century.

Richard Ormond

Richard Ormond CBE is the former Director of the National Maritime Museum (1986–2000) and prior to that 19th century Curator and Deputy Director of the National Portrait Gallery (1975-1983). He is currently the Chairman of the Trustees of the Watts Gallery and also the Chairman of the Friends of Leighton House, he also acts as a trustee of the Mariners Museum in Newport News, Virginia. He co-curated the Royal Academy's seminal exhibition on Leighton in 1996 and has recently published the final volume of the nine volume John Singer Sargent Catalogue Raisonné.

Rosie Jarvie

Rosie Jarvie worked at Christie's as a specialist and Associate Director in the British Drawings and Watercolours Department for 20 years, before becoming a freelance art consultant. She writes, lectures and advises on many aspects of British art and the British art market for museums, auction houses and galleries.



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