



## FREDERIC LORD LEIGHTON (1830-1896)

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James Tissot. *A sacrifice to the Graces*.  
Chromolithograph, June 29, 1872, *Vanity Fair*.

Frederic Leighton contributed only two figure studies to *The Yellow Book*, in the very first issue, which appeared less than two years before his death in January 1896. A static, heavily draped female figure, seen in profile and from the front, serves as the frontispiece, while half way through the volume a study of nude dancing Maenads provides a lively and rhythmical counterpoint. The contributions from one of the leading figures on the English art scene granted *The Yellow Book* a prominent status from the outset, while also suggesting the duplicities and ambiguities so characteristic of Leighton the man and his art.

Throughout his 40-year career as painter, sculptor, illustrator and Royal Academician, Frederic Leighton frequently took a mediating position between establishment and avant-garde, tradition and modernity. His status as President of the Royal Academy did not prevent him from supporting such sexually daring artists as Alfred Gilbert and Aubrey Beardsley. While firmly rooted in Continental neo-classical and neo-renaissance traditions, he was also keenly promoting developments in art education and criticism tending towards modernism. His sexual orientation and the eroticism conveyed in his art have frequently been commented upon as ambiguous: effeminate male

figures and masculine women people his canvases alongside feminine women and depictions of muscular masculinity. Many of them reveal considerable erotic engagement, as do indeed his depictions of children. As a consequence, the nature of Leighton's sexuality has been the subject of much commentary and few conclusions, from his own time till the present.

Leighton was one of the most international of Victorian artists. Born in 1830 to English parents in Scarborough, he had his artistic training on the Continent. His travels with his family through Italy, France, and Germany in the 1840s and 1850s allowed him to study at such institutions as the Academy of Art in Berlin (1842), the Accademia di Belle Arti, Florence (1845) and the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt (1846-1848), where his encounter with the historicism of Edward von Steinle had a formative influence. His first important painting, *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1855, revealed this influence. An immediate success, the painting was purchased by Queen Victoria, thereby granting the young Leighton a prominent status very early in his career. From 1855 to 1858 he took a studio in Paris and became well acquainted with both establishment figures such as Ingres and the French avant-garde. The smooth modeling and polished finish which characterize Leighton's paintings was often criticized for being far more Continental than English. Due to his international upbringing, he was fluent in French, German, and Italian, while also mastering the Classical languages.

In 1858 Leighton moved to London and established contact with the Pre-Raphaelites. His illustrations to George Eliot's *Romola*, serialized in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1862, marked a brief phase as illustrator, and the beginning of friendships and acquaintances with literary figures such as Robert Browning, Richard Burton, George Eliot, Edmund Gosse, Henry James, G.H. Lewes, Walter Pater, A.C. Swinburne, William Thackeray and Oscar Wilde.

The main genres in which Leighton excelled were paintings — of biblical, classical, and historical scenes — together with portraiture, paintings of male

and female nudes, and more informal landscape sketches. His election as an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1864 was followed by the full status as Royal Academician in 1868 and President from 1878 until his death. Leighton was deeply involved with transforming art education in England, first through major reforms of the Royal Academy schools in the 1870s, and subsequently with teaching at the state-funded South Kensington art schools, mainly aimed at working-class students. Leighton gave his first Academy Address to the students at the Royal Academy in 1879 and would continue these addresses every second year until his death. He introduced a professorship in sculpture at the Royal Academy schools and promoted several of the young sculptors, such as Alfred Gilbert and Hamo Thornycroft, who would be celebrated as defining Edmund Gosse's "New Sculpture" in his 1894 articles in *The Art Journal*. Leighton himself turned to sculpture in the 1870s, partly through small three-dimensional models for his complex compositions in painting, and partly through such striking full-size bronze sculptures as his *Athlete Wrestling with a Python* (1877) and *The Sluggard* (1885). Both nationally and internationally Leighton's *Athlete* was heralded as setting new standards for the modernity of an art form which had been declared dead in much nineteenth-century criticism.

As artist and aesthete, Leighton kept a careful balance between his Royal Academy affiliation and avant-garde venues. Thus he exhibited at the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, and moved with great ease in the circles of Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Edward Burne-Jones, John Everett Millais, Albert Moore, Edward Poynter, Val Prinsep, G.F. Watts and J.A.M. Whistler. His extraordinary artistic professionalism enabled him to rise above the polarization that characterized the Victorian art world. A careful manipulator of his own public image through celebrity interviews, Leighton was also a popular target for parody and caricature. Benjamin Disraeli parodied him as Mr. Phoebus in his novel *Lothair* (1870) and James Tissot caricatured him as a dandy and aesthete in *Vanity Fair* in 1872. Leighton also frequently appeared as the prototype of the effeminate aesthete in the pages of *Punch*. Vernon Lee's description of him as "a mixture of the Olympian Jove and a

head waiter” in a letter to her mother of 1883 perhaps sums up some of the quintessential ambiguity of Leighton.

Leighton’s friendship with the Keeper of Antiquities at the British Museum, Charles Thomas Newton, reflected his keen interest in classics and modern archaeology. A Fellow of the Society of Dilettanti and a founding member of the Hellenic Society, Leighton moved in the circles of collectors, classicists and archaeologists and was in touch with the latest developments in the field. He became unofficial advisor to the British Museum in the 1870s, Trustee there from 1881 and member of multiple committees. The masterly painted draperies in Leighton’s art reveal what a profound source of inspiration he found in Greek sculpture, but it is important to bear in mind the creative rather than reconstructive aspect of Leighton’s dialogue with Antiquity. Leighton’s aestheticizing archaeology bears little resemblance to the recreation of Antiquity one finds in Lawrence Alma-Tadema, although both painters showed a similar interest in aesthetic interior design.

In 1866, Leighton moved into Leighton House in Holland Park, designed for him by George Aitchison. With its Moorish tiles and combination of Orientalism and Classicism, Leighton House became the purpose-built framework for Leighton’s cult of the artist as educated aesthete. An eclectic edifice, Leighton House contained the artist’s studio and art collection, opening its doors to friends and acquaintances with studio days and musical soirées. The latter included performances by international friends and leading musicians—such as the singer Adelaide Sartoris, the violinist Joseph Joachim, the composer Charles Stanford, and the pianists Charles Hallé and Clara Schumann. The synaesthetic universe of Leighton’s paintings, where music features prominently, was recreated regularly in Leighton House, erasing the boundaries between creation and appreciation.

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### **Selected Works by Leighton**

*Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna is Carried through the Streets of Florence* (1855)  
*May Sartoris* (1860)  
*Lieder Ohne Worte* (1860-1861)  
*Mrs James Guthrie* (1864-1865)  
*The Syracusan Bride Leading Wild Beasts in Procession to the Temple of Diana* (1865-1866)  
*Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon* (1868-1869)  
*Daedalus and Icarus* (1869)  
*Greek Girls Picking up Pebbles by the Beach* (1871)  
*Captain Sir Richard Burton* (1875)  
*The Daphnephoria* (Mid 1870s)  
*Athlete Wrestling with a Python* (1877)  
*Elijah in the Wilderness* (1877-1878)  
*Self-portrait* (1880)  
*The Sluggard* (1885)  
*Captive Andromache* (1886-1888)  
*The Bath of Psyche* (1889-1890)  
*The Garden of the Hesperides* (1892)  
*Flaming June* (1895)

### **Selected Publications by Leighton**

*Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy*. London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1896.

### **Selected Publications about Leighton**

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