

REVIEWS

Frederic Leighton 1830-1896. Royal Academy of Arts Exhibition, London, 15 February – 21 April 1996.

Frederic, Lord Leighton: Eminent Victorian Artist by Richard Ormond, et al. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1996. New York: Abrams, 1996. 256 pp. ISBN 0-8109-3578-3, \$49.50.

The Royal Academy's Frederic Leighton centenary exhibition was the first major retrospective held of this artist's work since the year following his death. One of the Academy's greatest presidents (1878-96), he was appropriately recognized by the RA which assembled such a splendid exhibition. I nevertheless entered the show with a certain sense of apprehension, for while I have long admired several of Lord Leighton's creations, exhibitions resurrecting the careers of once famous academic artists are sometimes disappointing, revealing as many weaknesses as strengths. Such concerns were unwarranted in this case, however, for the exhibition was a most satisfying and interesting retrospective, with Leighton emerging as a more gifted artist than most Victorian or contemporary critics have previously acknowledged.

The exhibition was in large part so successful because the 125 paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints assembled allowed the visitor to grasp and evaluate the full range of Leighton's talents. Particularly exciting was the visual delight of being able to view most of his finest works, from *The Painter's Honeymoon* (c. 1863-4) to *Captain Sir Richard Burton* (1875) and *Flaming June* (1895). The one major painting absent was *Rizpah* (1893).

Such work quickly disclosed Leighton's considerable talents as a craftsman. Figures, landscapes, and still-life elements were all rendered with obvious skill and enthusiasm. Time and again isolated details such as peacock feathers, baskets, jewelry, vegetation, and the curve of a wrist were accessible for a renewed appreciation of their exquisiteness. Gorgeous frames custom designed by Leighton abounded, emphasizing the sense of each painting as a beautiful, precious, and expensive object, while reinforcing the illusion that we are looking through a window into a lost classical world.

Virtually every British critic who reviewed the retrospective found Leighton the artist to be a "cold fish," totally devoid of emotion. I strongly disagree with this reading of his persona; to the contrary the exhibition fully brought to light his passionate side. This aspect of his nature was most often manifested in his earlier and late work. Such paintings as *The Painter's Honeymoon*, *Golden Hours* (1864), and *David* (1865) reveal a young man fervently exploring issues of love, romance, sexual attraction, the sources of creativity, or the poetical aspects of nature. Works