



## Leighton House Museum

### Leighton and the Middle East website: Leighton and Collecting Art

#### Collecting art in the Nineteenth Century

##### Collecting art in the nineteenth century

Leighton was not alone in collecting art in the nineteenth century, and with the growing interest in the exotic 'Orient', neither was he alone in collecting art from the Middle and Far East. Assembling private collections of art and artefacts was not new. Wealthy people had been collecting art, as well as cultural artefacts for centuries, largely for their own personal pleasure. It was in the nineteenth century however that art collecting became a public as well as private activity. This institutional collecting mirrored the fashion for the exotic amongst private collectors but museums tried to create a survey of objects that could instruct instead of just collecting according to personal preference and taste.

##### The growth of public museums

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it became popular for European princes to assemble 'cabinets of curiosities', which they would show to guests. As well as the continuation of private collecting, the nineteenth century also saw the emergence and rapid expansion of 'national collections' in Europe, which were housed in public museums. These institutions had their roots in princely and aristocratic collecting, but also in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment had huge repercussions in the social, political and cultural landscape of Europe, particularly in France and Britain. At its core was the belief that true understanding of the world could and should only be achieved through empirical study of the things around us. It presented a radical challenge to societies that had up until that point been rooted in Christianity and the absolute belief in religious truth. In 1759 the British Museum opened to the public, consisting of a collection of specimens and books left to the nation as representing the 'sum of human knowledge'. When it opened it consisted of a variety of both manmade and natural objects, ordered according to type.

The nineteenth century increasingly saw the use of museum collections as tools to educate the populations of Europe. When in 1824 the National Gallery opened, housed in a building constructed specially for the purpose, it was a reflection of the fact that the British Government now believed that art should be available to all. Another crucial purpose of museums was to preserve and look after art 'in perpetuity'. It also perhaps reflected this confidence in Western culture and Britain's part in it.

##### Fine art v. decorative art

Museums in the nineteenth century were a means of ordering culture, presenting it to the public and 'telling a story' of the development of civilisation (British Museum) and art (National Gallery). The British Museum concerned itself with presenting artefacts from civilisations around the world, specifically not labelling them as art. The National Gallery was purely dedicated to surveying Western art, in particular the tradition of easel painting that so characterised its development from the Renaissance onwards. So where did the collecting and presentation of art from different cultural



## Leighton House Museum

traditions fit in? The academies of Western Europe had begun to define painting as 'Fine Art', an art form that was particularly concerned with representing the human figure. Due to the use of the human figure, fine art was seen as more elevated than decorative art. How then should art from other cultures that did not involve oil painting or figural representation be categorised and understood? It was considered to be of ethnographic interest. In such a definition, artistic value and importance was rarely considered. It soon became clear that this was not satisfactory and that a different museum was needed.

In 1851 Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, and a civil servant Henry Cole, organised the Great Exhibition, which was staged in Crystal Palace in London and attended by a staggering six million people over the course of six months. The aim was to celebrate the industrial age and Britain's leading role in it. On display were art objects, other produce and manufactured goods. There was also an international element to it, with the recreation of a Turkish Bazaar and furnished Tunisian nomad's tent. The proceeds of the exhibition were used to set up many national educational institutions in London, including the Royal College of Art and the Museum of Ornamental Art, which is now the Victoria and Albert Museum.

### How were artefacts obtained?

Both the British Museum and the Museum of Ornamental Art (later the V&A) expanded their 'Oriental' collections by commissioning people to collect on their behalf. Carpets, textiles and ceramics had long been commodities, traded by merchants, who in the nineteenth century probably sold both old and new examples to local people as well as foreign travellers. In 1873 Leighton visited Dr Rev. William Wright, an Irish Presbyterian Missionary and amateur archaeologist, based in Damascus in Syria. Of this trip Wright writes that: 'One of our recreations was searching for Oriental draperies, and we have many rich finds', probably bought from local dealers and merchants. Over a few weeks they bought 'tiles and plates and long-necked jars with blue ground and white flowers.'

However, tiles were not necessarily as straightforward to come by. While they were still being produced in the Middle East, examples from the golden age of Iznik and Syrian tile production (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries) tended to be part of the fabric of large traditional houses. The diplomat, explorer and linguist Richard Burton, who collected objects for Leighton while he was in Damascus, gives a useful insight into how tiles were obtained in some cases.



*Frederic Leighton, Sir Richard Francis Burton c.1872-5  
(National Portrait Gallery, London)*

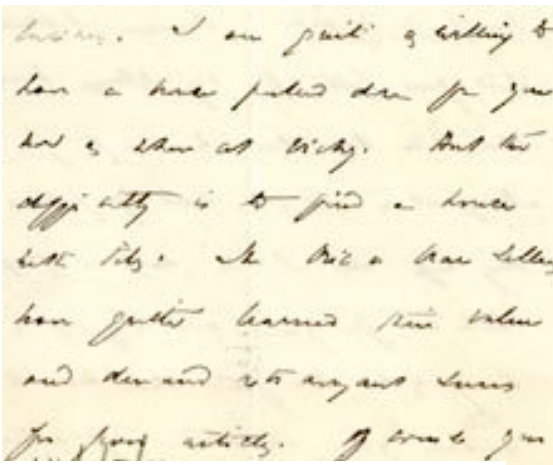


## Leighton House Museum

He wrote to the artist in 1871 saying:

*I am quite as willing to have a house pulled down for you now ... but the difficulty is to find a house with tiles. The bric-a-brac sellers have quite learned their value and demand extravagant sums for poor articles. Of course you want good specimens and these wax very rare.*

Burton also refers to the likeliness of some tiles becoming available during the ‘clearing away of rubbish’ (presumably traditional houses) in Damascus. It seems that the activities of these Western collectors was creating a market in the Middle East. Similar things were happening across the Middle East with other types of Islamic art such as metalwares.



Detail of a letter to Leighton from Richard Burton

As well as these more legitimate means of obtaining ceramics and other objects from sellers, many objects were obtained by Western collectors through unofficial, or even underhand, means. Burton talks of two friends of his who managed to ‘nobble a score or so’ (of tiles) from the ‘so-called Mosque of Omar’ in Jerusalem, despite it being ‘unhappily under the charge of a Wakif [guardian]’ The mosque he refers to is the Dome of the Rock, which has been continually used religious site for millennia. If this is an accurate account it would seem quite shocking that it happened at all, with or without the knowledge of the Ottoman guardians of the site.

Manuscripts, particularly historical ones, were never traded as commodities. As they were so expensive to create, they were largely courtly commissions (including Qur’ans). Madrasas and mosques had extensive libraries. There is evidence that Western scholars/collectors/hobbyists secretly cut desirable pages from Qur’ans and other manuscripts in Mosque libraries in the Middle East, knowing their increased value in the West.

While many of these collectors and brokers were not in the service of the British Empire, their encounters with cultures and objects can certainly be seen in the context of an expanding Empire. And while the institutions that presented objects from around the world were not necessarily doing so explicitly in order to promote the ‘greatness’ of the British Empire, there was a self confidence about choosing to display and represent objects from cultures neatly parcelled up into different categories that can be understood as part of the larger Imperial enterprise.

### Ownership and collecting in the Middle East

Who owned what within the Islamic world in the nineteenth century was fundamentally different to European practices. The sacred place that copies of the Qur’an have always held in Muslim cultures continued under the Ottoman Empire. Lavish non-religious manuscripts were still largely



## Leighton House Museum

commissioned by wealthy patrons, usually rulers, due to enormous cost. While most works of art and architecture were predominantly courtly commissions, more everyday items such as tableware was produced for speculative sale as in the ninth and tenth centuries in Iran (Samarquand). Likewise the production of tiles in Turkey and Syria, intended for use as decoration in homes, was done speculatively in large-scale workshops. But the type of collecting that Leighton undertook of Islamic art is in keeping with historic Western traditions.

The business of collecting itself raises issues of changed meaning for objects.

For instance, a religious artefact removed from its intended location and displayed in a museum context will possibly illicit different responses from a person of faith than it would for other visitors. The irony of collecting in the twenty first century is that while British museums struggle to acquire objects for their collections, a series of dazzlingly well-resourced new museums in sections of the Muslim world (Qatar, United Arab Emirates) are now collecting on a huge scale.

~

*See also other article in this section:*

- ***Leighton and Collecting Art***
- ***Islamic Art***