



Leighton House Museum

Leighton and the Middle East website: Leighton and Collecting Art

Leighton and collecting art

Why did Leighton collect art?

Being an artist of considerable private wealth and standing in the Victorian art world, it is not surprising that Leighton amassed a large collection of paintings, drawings, etchings, ceramics and other artefacts during his lifetime. His collection reflected not only his love of Western art but also his love of travel and the emerging fashion for all things 'Oriental'. His diverse collection reflected a respect for a wide range of artistic traditions, from Michelangelo drawings and Dürer engravings, to Japanese printmaking, Islamic ceramics, textiles and furniture, Indian painting and Chinese porcelain. His collection of books, and his many sketchbooks of architectural details, reflected his enduring interest in architecture.

He articulated this respect in an address he gave to an art society towards the end of his life, where he went as far as to define art as an impulse towards the beautiful - 'nations which love beauty and seek it in the humblest as well as the highest things'. The latter he saw as being evident in the arts of Japan, Persia (Iran) and solely France in Europe.

His collection also reflects his firm belief that 'the merit of a work of art did not lie in its category' i.e. whether it was a painting, piece of carved ivory or woven textile. This is a radical view for a nineteenth century artist who held such a traditional position as President of the Royal Academy. This view explains his respect for the Arts and Crafts movement, founded by William Morris and active from the 1860's. Although other British aristocrats and Orientalists were collecting, Leighton was an unusual collector as he appears to be not just following fashion. He fused his roles as traveller, collector, President of the Royal Academy and supporter of a wide variety of artists into a belief about the value and importance of art.

Between the 8th and 16th July 1896 Leighton's art collection was sold in London by auctioneers Christie, Manson and Woods. The objects that make up the Arab and Narcissus Halls at Leighton House are all that was left of his original collection.

Since then, an important element of the museum collection policy has been to try and retrieve those artefacts that left the house in this sale.



Embroidered Turkish 'Qibleh' cloth that was in Leighton's collection. The carpet decoration is a depiction of a qibleh in a mosque, the arched recess that indicates the direction of Mecca and therefore prayer. It would have been made to hang in a tent to indicate the correct direction of prayer.



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Leighton's collection of Western Art

Leighton's personal wealth meant that he combined a thorough classical training as an artist, studying at academies in both Berlin and Rome. He did first hand observation of great works of art both historic and contemporary throughout Europe, including in Brussels and Paris. These factors no doubt influenced his own collecting of European paintings, drawings and sculpture. He collected works by both historic artists and those that were his contemporaries. His collection included works by Italian Renaissance artists Michaelangelo (1475-1564) and Raphael (1483-1520), French neo-classical painters Jean Louis Gérôme (1824-1904), J.A.D. Ingres (1780-1867) and Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). He also owned engravings by Rembrandt (1606-1669) and Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). In addition, he admired and collected paintings of non-academic French painters, including innovative landscape painters J.B.C. Corot (1796-1875) and J.F. Millet (1814-1875). He also owned many paintings by his great English predecessors, including J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) and Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788). One of the most interesting facets of his artistic career was his ability to maintain positive artistic relations with the academic artists of the Royal Academy and those who had rejected it, namely the Pre-Raphaelites. He greatly respected both G.F. Watts (1817-1904) and Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) who were represented in his collection. Many of these works were on display throughout his home along with a diverse range of sculpture both historical and contemporary. There are several notes in his account books of payments made to art dealers in Paris and Rome, so it is likely that he obtained most, if not all, of his collection of Western art through well-established channels.

Leighton's collection of Islamic Art

It is likely that Leighton's first visit to Algeria in 1857 (aged twenty-seven) inspired him to start collecting Islamic artefacts. During the 1860s and early 1870s he amassed the bulk of his collection. Leighton's journeys to North Africa and the Middle East was part of a trend in the nineteenth century amongst artists to travel to use these regions as inspiration for the subject matter of their paintings depicting the 'exotic Orient'. Many French, British and German artists of the time were travelling to Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Turkey. As well as tiles from various periods and locations in the Islamic world, Leighton also avidly collected ceramic vases and tableware, wooden furniture, carpets (numbering nearly sixty), and other textiles.

Leighton's displaying of his collection

Over his lifetime, Leighton brought together a huge number of items, including individual tiles, tile panels (amounting to over 1000 tiles in total), vases and bowls (over eighty), costumes, embroidery and brocades (over sixty examples) and carpets (nearly fifty individual rugs). Photographs that survive of the House in Leighton's time show that he had many of these items on display around his house. He even built a special display case on the main staircase of his house for ceramics in his collection.



Iznik display, Leighton House Museum



Leighton House Museum

It is not known when Leighton first had the idea of creating the Arab Hall to form a permanent display, as well as practical solution to storing, of much of his collection of ceramics. The spaces contain over 600 individual tiles from Syria, mostly dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are around 230 tiles from Western Anatolia, present day Turkey, all thought also to be sixteenth and seventeenth century. In addition he collected a small number of individual tiles made in 13th and 17th century Persia (Iran), 15th century Syria or Egypt (see the Virtual Tour for more information).

How did he obtain his Islamic collection?

During his trip to Constantinople and Rhodes in 1868 he collected ceramics in earnest. In 1869 (three years after Leighton moved into his newly built house) he met the diplomat, explorer and linguist Richard Burton, who was about to leave for Damascus where he was taking up the post of British Consul. Burton offered to collect objects for Leighton, something that he took up, seemingly putting in quite specific requests: 'I will keep a sharp look out for you and buy up as many as we can find which seem to answer your description'.

Burton was not in Damascus for long, and a Rev. Dr William Wright, an Irish Presbyterian Missionary and amateur archaeologist based in Damascus, took over the role of collecting on Leighton's behalf. He guided and advised Leighton on his 1873 visit as he spoke fluent Arabic. A later letter from Burton, dated 1876 during a trip he made to India, tells us how he collected objects originating from further afield:

the tiles are packed, and will be sent by the first London steamer. Some are perfect, many are broken, but they will make a bit of a mosaic after a little trimming, and illustrate the difference between Syriac and Sind [a southern province of modern Pakistan]. They are taken from a tomb (Moslem) ... on the Indus.

From this letter it is clear that both men had an interest in tiles as an artform, not just purely as valuable collectible commodities. The tiles he refers to here are probably either those that form the large panel above the entrance to the Arab Hall, containing a verse from the Qur'an, or those on the left of the main staircase in the house. We also know that Leighton commissioned Casper Purdon Clark, one of the first curators at the Victorian and Albert Museum to collect artefacts for him.

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See also other article in this section:

- ***Collecting Art in the 19th Century***
- ***Islamic Art***