



Leighton House Museum

Leighton and the Middle East website: Leighton and Victorian Travel

Frederic Leighton's Travels

Where did he travel to?

Apart from regular trips to Europe, particularly Italy, which he tried to get to every year, Leighton also visited North Africa and the Middle East. His first trip outside of Europe was to Algeria in 1857. He wrote 'this visit made a deep impression on me. I have loved the East as it is called ever since'. In 1866 he was in Spain, a country he would revisit in 1877, visiting Madrid, Toledo, Seville, Cordoba and Granada. In a letter to his father he complained 'the Alhambra, is changed indeed, thanks to the restoring mania, and is now all but brand new'. In 1867 he took a steamship down the Danube from Vienna through the modern day states of Hungary, Serbia and Bulgaria ending up at the port of Varna on the Black Sea. From here he explored Turkey, the home country of the Ottoman Empire, staying in the cities of Constantinople (modern day Istanbul), Broussa (modern day Bursa) and Smyrna (modern day Izmir).

In 1868 he visited Egypt and was lent a steamboat by the Ottoman ruler of that country to explore the Nile. Queen Victoria's son Albert Edward (the future King Edward VII) had sent a letter to the Egyptian government requesting that Leighton be assisted during his stay in Cairo. This was the first of two visits by Leighton to Egypt. In 1873 he journeyed to Lebanon and Syria. In 1877 he was in Morocco. In 1893 he wrote to his sister Augusta stating 'I've had a tremendous tour through Germany – thirty towns in thirty days'. As Leighton got older he visited the remoter but yet geographically closer regions of Scotland and Ireland. In 1895, the year before his death, he paid his last visit to Algeria and the major cities of Italy.



A photograph of Tangiers, taken by Leighton during his visit of 1877. Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Friends of the Fogg Art Museum Fund

How did he arrange his travel

As was the norm with wealthy society at the end of the nineteenth century, Leighton usually did his overseas travel from September onwards. Late spring and summer was a busy time in London and he would have been preparing for the summer exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts. As with



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today, Leighton would have had access to travel literature, he mentions John Murray's (1808-92) guidebook in relation to sites in Spain. Descriptions of places from colleagues would also have been important. The pre-booking of accommodation was rare in the nineteenth century. Most travellers simply bargained for a good price with inn and hotel owners on arrival.

Travel documentation and costs

Leighton's Coutts bank account records show that he paid the steamship company P&O Liners (Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company) £18.10 for his ticket to Egypt in 1868. This would amount to £1,106.00 in currency today. Passports were just as important in Leighton's time and in April 1895 he paid 13 shillings and 6 pence for a passport and visa (today £51.92) for his final trip to Algeria and Italy. While on holiday he could access his money from the relevant national banks of the country he was visiting. Therefore in 1867 there are withdrawals from the Imperial Ottoman Bank in Turkey for amounts of £50.00 (£3,000 today). In 1868 similar withdrawals are recorded from the Bank of Egypt.



Leighton's passport

The practicalities of travel for Leighton

The first stage of Leighton's journey, depending on where he intended to go, was a carriage ride to one of London's train stations or port. Dover was the main port for trips to Paris and mainland Europe via Calais. Journeys to the Mediterranean and Middle East left from either London or Southampton, stopping at Lisbon, Gibraltar, Malta and finally Alexandria in Egypt. No mention is made in his letters of servants accompanying him on his trips to assist with luggage as was the norm in most households. It is probable that employees of carriage, rail and steamship companies carried out this work in the absence of personal servants.

Although steamship had revolutionised sea travel making it quicker, more comfortable and not dependent on weather conditions, as had been the case with sailboats, Leighton still wrote in 1867 'I am a poor sailor at best'. Sea-sickness was obviously a problem for him as was health in general for nineteenth-century travellers. Writing to his father from Granada in October 1877 he explained 'I have been rather seedy (am all right now), not very, but enough to poison my pleasure;

after two or three little amateur attempts (local apothecary, fellow-travellers, etc.) I thought it right (at Gibraltar) to see a doctor, not because I was ill but lest I should get worse and develop more serious symptoms, as internal disturbance occasionally does in hot countries. In a few days (and two large bottles of physic) I was much better, and am now, I repeat, quite 'myself' again'.



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Letters to his father in 1873 also gives insightful information on his eastern travels:

- ‘three tedious days on board a Russian boat which tossed and rolled like a cork over a sea on which a P&O would have been motionless, brought me to Beyrout (Beirut), a cheery, picturesque, sunny port at the foot of Lebanon. Being in a hurry to get to the end of my journey, I did not stay more than half a day, but started by diligence for Damascus, a journey of some thirteen hours’.
- Dear Papa, I find that I am not as completely cut off from the western world here as I would have been led to believe I was, and that boats leave Damascus for Alexandria (in Egypt) weekly, and not fortnightly.
- In describing Damascus he writes – ‘I can’t hope to convey to you in writing any idea of this loveliness, and it is not within the scope of sketching, but I am having three or four photographs made. Lemon and myrtle trees rising tall and slim out of the marble floors and bending over tanks of running water, the unceasing song of the bubbling fountains’.

Leighton’s reasons for travel

It is obvious from Leighton’s letters that he simply enjoyed the thrill of visiting new places. Not having any family commitments meant that he could travel almost every year of his life, going further afield and for long periods of time. Sketching was a constant occupation of these journeys and he painted over 250 landscape studies for his own personal enjoyment rather than for exhibition, ‘it is the most irresponsible restful thing I can do and fills time delightfully’. The collecting of objects was also of prime importance. However, it also seems that travel was intimately bound up with a sense of learning and discovery for Leighton. Travel was personally educational for him, but as his near neighbour and biographer Emilie Barrington wrote ‘he told me also that his chief object in making conscientious studies in colour when he travelled, was to endeavour to convey to students who were not able to go abroad some idea of the varieties in the aspects of nature found in different countries’. As he got older and his heart condition worsened, going abroad for health reasons began to dominate. In the last years of his life an onlooker described his departure ‘in search of the health which his intimates knew would never be restored...a lone figure on the huge vessel, with not even a servant to minister to his wants’.

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