

A CHAT WITH SIR FREDERIC LEIGHTON, P.R.A.

BY THE BARONESS VON ZEDLITZ.



ENTRANCE HALL.

“**H**ARMONY, grace, and rhythm depend on the simplicity of a well-ordered mind, and if our youth are to do their work in life they must make this simplicity their perpetual aim. For all life is full of those qualities which are based on simplicity, and so is every creative and constructive art. . . .” Such is, in a few words, the advice offered by Sir Frederic Leighton, the President of the Royal Academy, to all would-be students of the fine arts.

That he is reticent when being “interviewed,” and that he particularly dislikes being asked questions as to his opinions on art generally, may be gathered from the following words, which I have extracted from his letter to me on the occasion when Sir Frederic was kind enough to permit me to call upon him for the purpose of this chat.

“I am the very worst person,” he wrote, “to come to on the subject of *myself*, and I have always declined to be interviewed on my general views about schools of art (I speak of tendencies, not institutions), their comparative merits, or their prospects; in other words, about those matters upon which my interviewers generally tend to cross-examine me. But if you think that some facts concerning my life and career will be of use to you, I shall be very happy to see you and tell you as much as I can. . . .”

Having thus far obtained Sir Frederic's consent to take a peep at him amid his home surroundings, I took my way to his remarkable house in Holland Park Road, and there the illustrious artist received me with the courtesy and consideration for which he is so justly renowned.

Sir Frederic himself conducted me over

the house, and showed me all its wondrous attractions, explaining that most of the ancient relics, the exquisite silken hangings and em-



SIR FREDERIC LEIGHTON, BART., P.R.A.
(From the bust by Thomas Brock, R.A.)

broideries, the rare Oriental tiles and pottery, the coloured Eastern glass and Cairene woodwork had been collected by himself during his many travels abroad.

On entering the President's house I was greatly struck by the harmony of design and general air of reposeful grandeur which pervade it. The famous Arab hall, for instance, does not look as if ordinary hands had built, decorated and embellished it; it rather impressed me with the idea that I stood on the threshold of some fairy realm of enchantment.

"I have collected and chosen all these tiles myself," said Sir Frederic, while I lingered in front of a recess which was elaborately studded with Persian tiles of gorgeous design and brilliant colour, "and these blue ones,

merging into green on one side, and into purple on the other, date from the seventeenth century."

The roof of the Arab hall is dome-shaped, and pierced by eight arched windows, each one of which is filled with lovely coloured glass imported from the far East. Immediately under the dome is a square basin, in the centre of which a fountain plays, and the President told me that he had sent to Japan for some rare specimens of fish for the basin, but, unfortunately, they were not to be reared in England, and quickly pined away and died.

On three sides of the hall there are arched recesses, each arch being supported by columns of white marble, the capitals of which were designed by Mr. George Aitchison, A.R.A., and ornamented by birds carved by Sir E. Boehm.

The alcove is enticingly fitted up with soft lounge cushions, covered with Oriental silks, and the window-shutters and screens are composed of rare Cairene woodwork.

Mr. Walter Crane designed the exquisite frieze, which is executed in mosaic, on a golden background running round the hall, and surmounting a set of ancient Persian tiles dating as far back as the tenth century. These represent a park filled with fishermen, and a river containing fish.

Rare palms, and Damascus, Rhodian, and Persian pottery adorn every available corner or niche, giving this lovely, restful spot an air



A CORNER OF THE STUDIO,

of true Oriental grace and artistic symmetry. But the Arab hall was only one of the many surprises which Sir Frederic's house held for me. Empanelled in a recess in the drawing-room I saw Delacroix's study for the ceiling in the Palais Royal, which is framed in a deep bordering of gold. The four famous panel-paintings by Corot, representing Night,

The studio is a very large room, and contains an almost unique collection of interesting things. The huge walls are covered with sketches by Sir Frederic, made during his many journeys in all parts of the world. Whether it be a wild spot in Scotland or a glimpse of an Italian sky, a market-place in Hungary or an orange-grove in Andalusia,



THE ARAB HALL.

Morning, Noon, and Evening, are hung in pairs on each side of the recess, while a landscape by Constable, and a David Cox hang on the opposite wall. Beside these, the drawing-room contains a remarkable Daubigny, another Corot, the first picture George Mason ever painted after he settled in England, and several other priceless mementoes of celebrated painters.

"Will you come and see my studio now?" said Sir Frederic, and as we slowly ascended the stairs, I noticed an unfinished picture by Sir Joshua Reynolds, representing Lord Rockingham, when Prime Minister, seated at a table and giving instructions to Burke, his secretary, which hangs just outside the studio. On the opposite side of the staircase a new room was being built, which Sir Frederic explained was to be devoted to pictures.

each picture stands out lifelike and true to Nature.

A recess formed by the huge window facing the door has been largely devoted to the display of many interesting statuettes, modelled in clay by the President. The studio proper communicates with an adjoining and smaller studio, where there is such a wonderful manipulation of light that even on particularly dull days Sir Frederic has command over the very last moments of the day. Here the President showed me his brush-and-paint table, where he keeps every possible requirement for his work in apple-pie order, and where (blindfold if necessary) he can lay his hand on each particular colour or brush that he may require.

In the studio, with some hesitation, I approached the subject of my visit.

"Tell me something about your training and your early career, Sir Frederic," I began, "a detail or two about the circumstances of your education."

"Curiously enough," said the President, "to-day is my birthday, for I was born on the 3rd of December, 1830. As far back in my boyhood as I can remember I was determined to become an artist. My father was, at first, averse to the idea of my adopting a profession which, in those days, appeared to his strict notions synonymous with the life of an idler: but a visit to Hiram Power, one of the best sculptors of the day, and whose quick eye probably detected in the youthful aspirant some symptoms of artistic possibility—he told my father I could be 'as eminent as I pleased'—persuaded my father to allow me to begin my artistic education in real earnest. This occurred in Florence in 1844-45, when I was fourteen years old. Previously to this I had visited Frankfort in 1844; Rome 1842-43, where I learnt drawing under Meli;



SIR FREDERIC LEIGHTON, BART., P.R.A.

(From a photograph by the London Stereoscopic Company, taken February 22nd, 1868.)

Dresden and Berlin 1841-42, where, at the age of twelve, I had attended classes at the Academy of Arts."

"Under whose direction did you study in Florence?"

"I studied at the 'Accademia delle Belle

Arti,' Bezzuoli and Servolini being my masters during the time of my scholarship."

Sir Frederic did not remain for any considerable period in Florence, but returned to Frankfort, which town he quitted in 1848, going thence to Brussels, where his work made a great impression on the celebrated painters Wiertz and Gallait.

It must be said with truth that Sir Frederic's early life was a roving one, for we learn that he visited Paris in 1849, where he made several studies after Titian; but he did not stay long in the French capital, and returned once more to Frankfort, where he remained until 1852.

Here the student persevered with great ardour and tenacity under the tuition of Steinle, whose admirable method of teaching soon eradicated the faulty mannerisms into which study in the Florentine Academy had led Mr. Leighton.

"Steinle was decidedly the master to whom I owe the most unbounded gratitude," said Sir Frederic. "Under his guidance I painted several pictures, the subjects of which afforded me scope for plenty of free dramatic treatment. Looking back to those days of hard work and study, I recollect, with deep pleasure, the fact that Steinle's patience and devotion to me are among the pleasantest and most enduring memories of my past life."

In 1852 the painter went to Rome, where he pursued his artistic studies while enjoying the companionship of such delightful and eminent men as Thackeray, Robert Browning, Hébert, and many others, who unanimously tendered him their friendship.

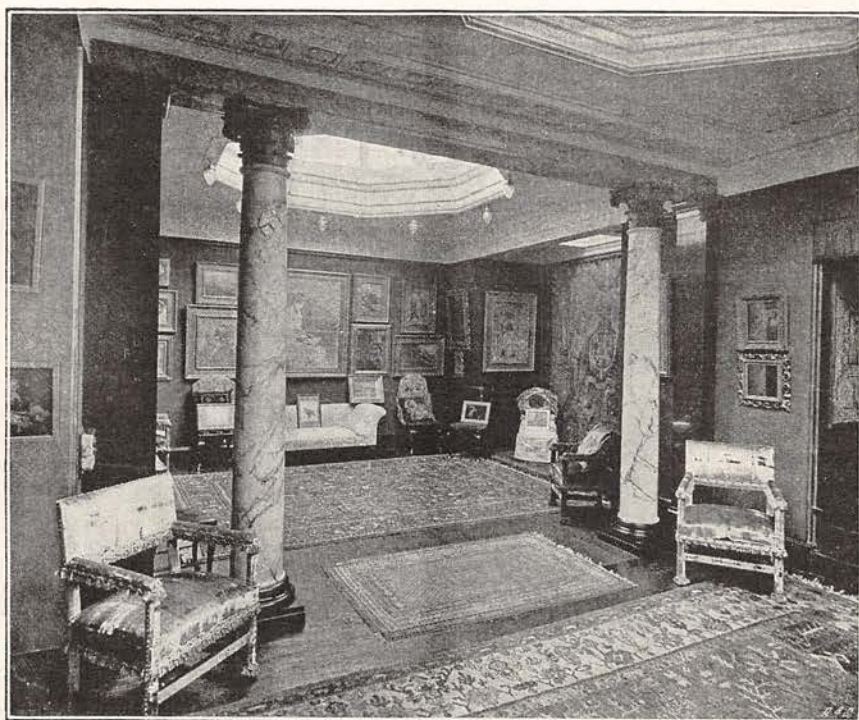
"What is the name of the first picture which brought you into notice, Sir Frederic?" I asked later.

"It is one I painted in Rome called 'Cimabue's Madonna carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence,'" was the President's answer. "I worked on that painting for two years, and it was the first of my works exhibited in London—in 1855."

In 1858 Sir Frederic came to London again and became intimately acquainted with the pre-Raphaelite school of art. In London he produced many paintings, all of which were remarkable for the varied and contrasting styles in which they were executed.

After Sir Frederic had taken up his residence permanently in London, he began to show a marked predilection towards classical subjects for his pictures. His ardour for ancient and mediæval art, his love for all things Greek, inspired him with those suggestions which aroused all the painter's innermost feeling.

"Yes," said Sir Frederic, "I have certainly



THE NEW MUSIC ROOM.

travelled a great deal, as you may gather from the varying scenes which I have committed to canvas. I made it a rule to go abroad in the autumn in order to study Nature's glorious tints and shades in different countries. Damascus is a very favourite spot of mine. I think I prefer it to any other Eastern city."

Sir Frederic has spent considerable time in Spain, where he added some of his most beautiful sketches to the rare collection he had already accumulated.

It was in 1869, I learn, that he was elected a full Academician, and in November, 1878, that he was nominated President of the Royal Academy, soon after which he was knighted by the Queen. The Baronetcy was conferred about six years later. The President's advice to beginners is somewhat to the following effect:—

The fundamental stone upon which to build up a thorough artistic nature should be by necessity an all-round and sound education. The student must accumulate knowledge in every direction in order that his mind may be in a receptive condition, ready to understand all that art will teach him.

A student cannot be forced to learn the exigencies of painting: they must come to him unbidden. Beyond giving wholesome

advice and showing a beginner where his faults lie, there is not much that can be done for him—his efforts alone will tell. Sir Frederic is often agreeably or painfully surprised by the progress, or its reverse, achieved by would-be artists who bring him their efforts and ask for his advice. In some cases a great artistic faculty will suddenly develop in a quite unexpected quarter, whereas he has entertained great hopes for the future of certain people who in their early youth have shown signs of budding talent, signs which, alas! have faded away after the accomplishment of one or two promising efforts, leaving a void in the student's mind which can never be filled up.

Sir Frederic has never given lessons, although he has very often given advice to the young, nor does he allow students to work on his pictures. I asked the President his reason for this.

"I cannot endure," he explained, "that a strange hand should touch my works. On two occasions some accessories were added to two large frescoes of mine, but I have not permitted this on any of my other works, for I am never really satisfied unless I have personally applied every stroke of the brush to the picture."

The President is a very early riser, for his daily duties are manifold. At a very early hour in the morning his letters are brought to him, and every one he opens and reads himself, while his secretary merely answers them for him at his dictation. "No letter ever leaves the house in my name unless I have read and signed it myself," says the President. "In this matter I am particularly strict."

It may be easily imagined that Sir Frederic's correspondence is enormous, but his courtesy and promptitude in replying to his many correspondents are equally great. We have all heard of his kindness and beneficence to struggling artists and to those who are in distress, or poor, lonely, and afflicted. He never thinks it a trouble or an inconvenience to do a generous action, or to visit a sick friend, or to write a few encouraging or sympathetic lines to someone in need of advice or consolation. Benevolence, uprightness, and kindness are written in every characteristic line of his face.

I should think that Sir Frederic carries his love of method into everything he does, and that he lives by rule, as though life belonged to time rather than to life. Even now he is always hard at work, and never happier than when seated before his easel with palette and brush in hand.

From the long catalogue of great works by Sir Frederic it would be impossible to enumerate more than a few. As I said before, the picture of "The Madonna being carried through the Streets of Florence," was the first of his pictures which called the attention of the British public to his genius, and was also the

work upon which his career greatly depended. The success it met with on all sides is historical, and the fact that the Queen bought it and had it transferred to Buckingham Palace is yet another proof of distinguished appreciation.

Great works were accomplished in Rome as well as in London, and among his many fine pictures of later years are conspicuous, "The Syracusan Woman leading Wild Beasts

to the Temple of Diana," "Helen of Troy," "Dante going forth into Exile," "The Spanish Dancing-girl," and "Phryne at Eleusis."

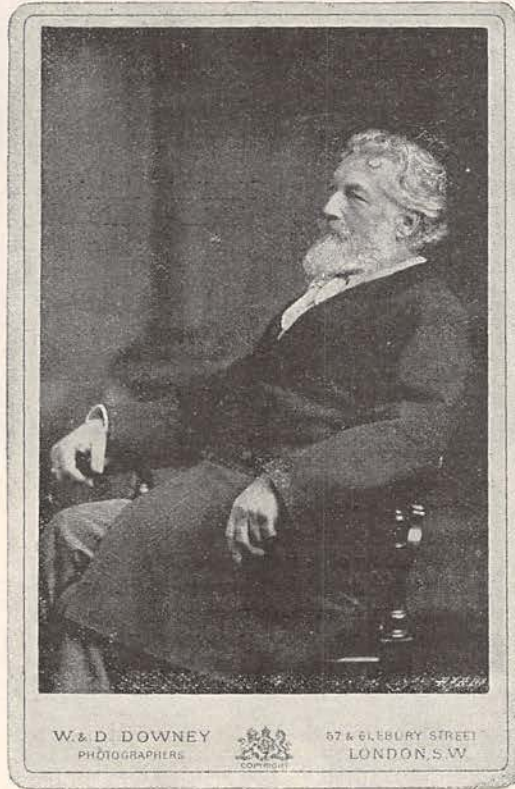
To "Dædalus and Icarus," painted in 1869, Sir Frederic in some measure owes his election as R.A. Another great favourite among Sir Frederic's works is "The Summer Moon" (1872), which represents two young girls asleep on a balcony overpowered by the warmth of a summer's eve.

"The Music Lesson" is a picture dating from 1877, and "Elijah in the Wilderness" has been set down as being one of the most forcible of all Sir Frederic's scriptural renderings.

In decorative art the President's

works are many and various. He has especially devoted a considerable time to fresco painting, "The Arts of Peace" and the "Arts of War" being among the priceless collection of works contained in the South Kensington Museum.

As a sculptor he takes a foremost place among workers in this particular branch of art, and a hurried glance round the statuettes and bronzes in Sir Frederic's studio shows that also in this he has worked hard and zealously to achieve such perfection of workmanship as has been attainable to his brilliant and masterful capacity.



SIR FREDERIC LEIGHTON, BART., P.R.A.

(From a photograph by W. & D. Downey, Ebury Street, S.W.)