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April 10, 2018

"So Noble a Failure is Better than a Trifling Success": Frederic Leighton's *Reconciliation of the Montagues and the Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet* (1855)

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An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
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## Abstract

"So Noble a Failure is Better than a Trifling Success": Frederic Leighton's *Reconciliation of the Montagues and the Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet* (1855)

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In 1855, Frederic Leighton completed two paintings while studying in Rome: *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna is Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence* and *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and the Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet*. At the time, Leighton was a young, unknown artist, and he hoped that these two works would launch his career. As it were, *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna* brought Leighton near instant recognition and renown: that painting was purchased by Queen Victoria and has remained a prized part of the Royal Collection ever since. In contrast, *The Reconciliation*—which Leighton considered the better picture—faded into obscurity after it was purchased by an American private collector in 1858. As a result of its more successful opening exhibition and positive critical reception, *Cimabue's Madonna* has been frequently studied, while *The Reconciliation* is seldom discussed in art-historical literature. This thesis aims to address the paucity of scholarship on *The Reconciliation*, providing a comprehensive account of the painting's provenance, context, and place in Leighton's oeuvre.

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## Acknowledgements

My sincerest thanks to Dr. Linda Merrill for her unwavering support, patience, and guidance—not only on this project, but throughout my four years at Emory. As a first-year student in one of my first art history courses, I decided that I wanted to be just like Dr. Merrill when I graduated. Though my career plans have since changed, if I become only half the writer, researcher, and mentor that Dr. Merrill is, it will surely be one of my greatest accomplishments. I owe nearly all of my successes at Emory to Dr. Merrill's wisdom.

I would also like to express by deepest thanks and gratitude to Dr. Rebecca Stone for teaching me passion in academics and in life. Dr. Stone has been an incredible role model to me and nearly every student who has had the privilege to learn from her; I have not met a student who took one of Dr. Stone's classes and was unmoved by the brilliance and compassion she radiates. For nearly every semester during my time at Emory, Dr. Stone's classroom has felt like home. I have learned my most valuable lessons from her. She will certainly be missed by Emory (and by me) as she enjoys her well-deserved retirement.

I would like to thank the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library for the generous Bradley Currey, Jr. seminar grant, which allowed me to consult archival material in London that was instrumental to this project.

Finally, I would like to thank Isai Flores for his love and light, without which this project would not have been possible. You have my whole heart.

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## I. Introduction

In 1855, Frederic Leighton, who would later become the esteemed though enigmatic President of the British Royal Academy, completed two paintings while studying in Rome: *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna is Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence* (Fig. 1) and *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and the Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet* (Fig. 2). When Leighton exhibited these paintings—both large, densely populated, narrative scenes—he viewed *The Reconciliation* as equal, if not superior, to *Cimabue's Madonna*, which was purchased from the exhibition by Queen Victoria for 600 guineas (approximately \$51,075 in today's currency). As Leighton wrote to his mother, almost predicting the future of the two works, “As the picture [*Cimabue's Madonna*] is of a jovial aspect and contains pretty faces, male and female, I think the public will find *leur affaire*; the ‘Romeo and Juliet’ (also nearly finished) will, *though perhaps a better picture*, probably be less popular from its necessarily serious and dingy aspect” (my emphasis).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as Leighton predicted, *The Reconciliation* did not fare well in its own time, and since then it and *Cimabue's Madonna* have encountered remarkably different levels of popularity and renown. *Cimabue's Madonna* remained a prized part of the Royal Collection throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; since 1988, it has been featured in the National Gallery in London and has been frequently the subject of art-historical research. *The Reconciliation*, however, faded into obscurity after it was purchased by a prominent American collector in the late 1850s. For nearly fifty years, it hung in the library at

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Leighton to Augusta Susan Leighton (his mother), January 1854, in Mrs. Russell Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, 2 vols. (London: G. Allen, 1906), 176, accessed online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35934/35934-h/35934-h.html>.

Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia, and is now hidden away once again in the home of a private collector.

These two 1855 paintings effectively launched Leighton's long and successful career. With Queen Victoria's purchase of *Cimabue's Madonna*, Leighton entered the public eye, and critical responses to both works quickly transformed him from a relatively unknown artist, perceived by many as "foreign" despite his birth in the United Kingdom, to a household name throughout London. While he was painting *The Reconciliation* and *Cimabue's Madonna*, Leighton hoped for and even anticipated that these works would set his career in motion. Indeed, in 1854 he wrote to his mother, "With regard to the sale of it [*The Reconciliation*], I hug myself with no vain delusions. *I paint it for a name*; I could not have a finer field than is offered by the great International Exhibition [Paris Exhibition Universelle] in question."<sup>2</sup>

Since it was with these works that Leighton intended to make his name, *The Reconciliation* and *Cimabue's Madonna* suggest his views on art in the early years of his career, providing a foundation for much of his work to come. Furthermore, because Leighton viewed *The Reconciliation* as "a better picture" than *Cimabue's Madonna*, *The Reconciliation* is perhaps even more revealing of Leighton's identity as a young artist in the complex artistic climate of the 1850s, a period that saw the union of the academic and avant-garde across Europe. Yet *The Reconciliation* is seldom discussed in the literature, possibly because for more than a century it was a continent away from most scholars of Leighton's work, who are predominantly British. In light of the paucity of scholarship on this immensely important work, this thesis aims to accomplish two goals: first, to consider why Leighton painted this particular image at this moment in his career; and, second, to provide a comprehensive account of *The Reconciliation's* history, from Leighton's studio in 1855 to its home today.

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<sup>2</sup> Leighton to his mother, January 19, 1854, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 141.

## II. A Brief Biography

To understand why Leighton painted this image at this moment in his career, it is first necessary to consider his early life and training. Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) was born on December 3, 1830, in the small coastal town of Scarborough in North Yorkshire, England, to a prosperous family. Both his father and his grandfather were physicians; his grandfather had served as physician to the court of the tsars in Saint Petersburg, Russia, an appointment that provided the Leighton family with financial independence and would allow Frederic the freedom to pursue a career in painting and sculpture. In 1832, Leighton's family moved to London, where he enrolled at the University College School, although his education was frequently disrupted by his family's extensive European travels. During the late 1830s and early 1840s, the Leightons visited Paris, Florence, Berlin, Munich, and Rome, where Frederic first took drawing lessons. In 1842, he began his formal artistic training at the Academy of Art in Berlin; in 1843, he studied at Stellweg's Academy in Frankfurt; in 1845, he enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence; and, finally, in October 1846, he enrolled at the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt, where he worked for several years under the tutelage of Eduard von Steinle (1810-1886), who would remain Leighton's friend and mentor for all his life. Because he received artistic training in nearly every capital city of Europe, Leighton's early work reveals transnational influences—particularly in the early years before he developed a distinctive style of his own. His travels also exposed him to Western art history from antiquity through the Renaissance, providing a wealth of references for Leighton's work.

In 1852, Leighton set out for Rome, where he took his first studio. He adored Italy from the start, and many of his early works, including *The Reconciliation* and *Cimabue's Madonna*,

reflect this; he wrote to his sister in 1857, “If I’m as faithful to my wife as I am to the places I love, I shall do very well!”<sup>3</sup> (As it happened, Leighton never married.) While in Rome, Leighton forged many friendships that would influence the development of his style, among them the German Nazarene painters Peter Cornelius and Johann Friedrich Overbeck and the retired opera singer Adelaide Kemble Sartoris (1815–1879). It was through his friendship with Sartoris that Leighton entered the fashionable artistic circles in Rome, Paris, and London. In 1854, on his return to Rome from a trip to Germany and England, Leighton took a new studio in the Via Felice and began work on *The Reconciliation* and *Cimabue’s Madonna*. After exhibiting the two large history paintings, Leighton moved to Paris, where he remained for three years before finally settling in London. He remained a frequent traveler throughout his life.

Despite the success of *Cimabue’s Madonna*, Leighton faced strong opposition from the Royal Academy when he first arrived in London. The British artists John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Henry Stacy Marks all commented on the unfavorable placement of Leighton’s paintings at various exhibitions.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, however, Leighton earned the Academy’s favor. He was appointed an associate in 1864, a full member in 1869, and the institution’s president in 1878—an appointment that made him, as Christopher Newall has written, “the most respected and influential figurehead in the London art world.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Leighton to his older sister, Augusta Leighton, 1857, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 303.

<sup>4</sup> Leonée Ormond and Richard Ormond, *Lord Leighton* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1975), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Newall, “Leighton, Frederic, Baron Leighton, (1830-1896),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published September 23, 2002, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/16399>.

### III. Dueling Canvases

Leighton's first two major works, *The Reconciliation* and *Cimabue's Madonna*, reveal the influence of his time spent studying in Italy. Both exemplify his early commitment to painting scenes drawn from various moments of Italian culture—including subjects from the Italian Middle Ages, history, literature, and even the plays by Shakespeare that were set in Italy.

*Cimabue's Madonna* belongs to a series of works depicting scenes from the lives of Italian artists as told by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), an Italian painter, architect, and writer, often considered the father of modern art history. Leighton would doubtless have read Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550) during his formal training in Germany.

*Cimabue's Madonna* illustrates Vasari's account of the procession through the streets of Florence of Duccio's *Rucellai Madonna* (Fig. 3), which was misattributed until 1889 to the painter Cimabue (1240-1302):

[Cimabue] made for the Church of Santa Maria Novella the panel of Our Lady that is set on high between the Chapel of the Rucellai and that of the Bardi da Vernia; which work was of greater size than any figure that had been made up to that time. And certain angels that are round it show that, although he still had the Greek manner, he was going on approaching in part to the line and method of the modern. Wherefore this work caused so great a marvel to the people of that age, by reason of there not having been seen up to then anything better, that it was borne in most solemn procession from the house of Cimabue to the church, with much rejoicing and with trumpets, and he was thereby much rewarded and honoured. It is said, and it may be read in certain records of old painters, that while Cimabue was painting the said panel in certain gardens close to the Porta Santa Pierto, there passed through Florence King Charles of Anjou, and that, among the many signs of welcome made to him by the men of this city, they brought him to see Cimabue's panel; whereupon, for the reason that it had not yet been seen by anyone, in the showing it to the King there flocked together to it all the men and all the women of Florence, with the utmost rejoicing and in the greatest crowd in the world.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; originally published 1550), 11-12.

*The Reconciliation*, on the other hand, derives from a work of English literature, *Romeo and Juliet* (1594–96), one of Shakespeare’s so-called Italian plays and evidently among Leighton’s favorite sources of subject matter: he had painted *The Duel between Romeo and Tybalt* (present location unknown) in Frankfurt in 1850, and would complete *The Feigned Death of Juliet* (Art Gallery of South Australia) around 1856.

Leighton’s dedication to Italian scenes resulted from several early influences. He was undoubtedly impacted by the tutelage of the Nazarene painter Eduard von Steinle. The Nazarenes, originally called the Brotherhood of Saint Luke (the patron saint of artists) and founded by Johann Friedrich Overbeck and Franz Pforr, aimed to regenerate German art by returning it to the purity of the early Renaissance. The Nazarenes were profoundly inspired by such early Italian masters as Cimabue. They often visited Rome, where Leighton met regularly with them, particularly with Overbeck and Peter von Cornelius. He was not particularly taken with Nazarene art, however, as he wrote of Cornelius to Steinle in 1855: “He has finished some works which have much beauty in the design, but, quite in confidence, they are nevertheless a trifle ‘solite cose’ [the usual things], and much too weakly drawn: from a man who makes claims to style, one expects something more of solidity.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Leighton did value the Nazarenes’ artistic philosophy, especially their “sincerity of emotion,” which he would later name, in a lecture to students of the Royal Academy, “an essential attribute of the true artist’s nature.”<sup>8</sup> In choosing to paint these scenes after living immersed in Italian culture and visiting both Florence and Verona, Leighton resolved to begin his career with what he knew best—even if doing so would label him an outsider to his native England. Indeed, so strong were Leighton’s

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<sup>7</sup> Leighton to Steinle, December 1, 1855, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 291.

<sup>8</sup> Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 40.

ties to Italy that at the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris, *The Reconciliation* was hung in the Roman, rather than the British, section.

*Cimabue's Madonna* and *The Reconciliation*, both history paintings, betray Leighton's youthful ambition. Considered the highest order of painting during Leighton's career, history painting draws subject matter from Classical (ancient Greek and Roman) history and mythology, the Bible, and (since the eighteenth century) modern history. History paintings were typically executed in a classicizing and idealizing style, and Leighton's early works in the genre are no exception; only later in his career would Leighton portray these subjects in an aestheticist style. Because history paintings were so highly esteemed in London and Paris, this genre allowed Leighton to demonstrate that he could paint even complex compositions like those that had proved most successful at the Royal Academy by such artists as Edwin Henry Landseer, John Constable, and J.M.W. Turner. But despite his willingness to conform to its standards, the Royal Academy remained hostile to Leighton for nearly a decade after the successful display of *Cimabue's Madonna*. There are many theories regarding the Academy's initial dislike of Leighton, the most popular being that "a clique within the Academy [was] hostile to his art and probably jealous of him personally." Another theory holds that because Leighton "was one of relatively few English painters to have been trained abroad, [and] the style he brought back with him aroused all their latent chauvinism."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps more consequential than Leighton's Italian subject matter was the style in which he elected to complete the two works. The composition of *Cimabue's Madonna* is bilaterally symmetrical: the left and right sides of the canvas are evenly divided on either side of the central figure of Cimabue. Cimabue, dressed completely in white and crowned with a laurel wreath, leads his pupil Giotto (1276-1337), still a child, by the hand. These two artists are visually and

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<sup>9</sup> Ormond, *Lord Leighton*, 49.

conceptually separate from the figures around them, emphasizing their importance. Neither artist makes eye contact with the viewer; both look ahead, in the direction of the procession, though each gazes off at a slightly different angle. This central detail may reveal Leighton's view of the mentor-pupil relationship, suggesting that the pupil need not follow directly in the path of his mentor. Like the figure of Giotto, Leighton was beginning to form his own identity distinct from his teachers, while still drawing on their legacies and the traditions they had established. On the far right of the composition appears Dante, watching the procession with his back to the viewer. The King of Naples, Charles of Anjou, brings up the rear on horseback. Leighton scrupulously situates the procession in Florence by including in the background the Church of San Miniato and lining the wall behind the procession with cypress trees, a distinctive feature of the Tuscan landscape. He was careful to capture every detail accurately, and his efforts did not go unnoticed; John Ruskin, the leading art critic of the century, wrote in a review of *The Reconciliation*: "In the background is the Church of San Miniato, strictly accurate in every detail; on top of the wall are oleanders and pinks, as carefully painted as the church; the architecture of the shrine on the wall is studied from thirteenth-century Gothic, and painted with as much care as the pinks."<sup>10</sup>

From Leighton's correspondence, it is possible to track the adjustments he made to the painting as he worked. He wrote to Steinle in 1854:

I have made the following alterations: first, those prescribed by you, viz. I have made the picture which is being carried larger, the chapel smaller, and have suppressed the flower-pots on the walls. A further alteration I have made by the advice of Cornelius; he said to me that the foremost group (the women strewing flowers with children) seemed to him somewhat to disturb the simplicity of the rest of the composition, and suggested that I should put in a couple of priests, especially as the portrait is of a Madonna and is being

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<sup>10</sup> John Ruskin in *The Principal Pictures Exhibited in the Royal Academy*, 1855, quoted in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 196n.



taken to a church; he further advised me, in order to prevent the picture from being too frieze-like, to allow this foremost group to walk up to the spectator.<sup>11</sup>

Leighton's willingness to take the advice of his mentors sets him apart from the Pre-Raphaelites, who were determined to strike out on their own. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one of the founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, was not sure what to make of Leighton's *Reconciliation*. Shortly after it went on display at the Royal Academy, Rossetti wrote to his friend William Allingham, "There is a big picture of *Cimabue*, one of his works in procession, by a new man, living abroad, named Leighton—a huge thing, which the Queen has bought, which every one talks of. . . . The choice of subject, though interesting in a certain way, leaves one quite in the dark as to what faculty the man [Leighton] may have for representing incident or passionate emotion."<sup>12</sup> The absence of "passionate emotion" that concerned Rossetti was exactly the quality that led one critic to consider it superior to contemporary works, "one of the finest pictures in the Exhibition—painted in the true, as distinguished from the modern, Pre-Raphaelite style."<sup>13</sup>

While Rossetti did not appreciate all Leighton's stylistic choices in *Cimabue's Madonna*, he still recognized the young artist's potential, comparing his use of color to that of Paul Veronese, and praising his masterful composition. "It was *very* uninteresting to me at first sight," he wrote to Allingham, "but on looking more at it, I think there is great richness in arrangement—a quality which, when *really* existing, as it does in the best old masters, and

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<sup>11</sup> Leighton to Steinle, 1854, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 173.

<sup>12</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, May 11, 1855, quoted in Ernest Rhys, *Frederic Lord Leighton: Late President of the Royal Academy of Arts* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1900), 105–6.

<sup>13</sup> M.M., "Fine-Art Gossip," *The Athenaeum Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts* 28, no. 1436 (May 5, 1855), 527.

perhaps hitherto in no living man—at any rate English—ranks among the great qualities.”<sup>14</sup>

Rossetti’s glowing praise of Leighton reveals the complexity of the artist’s relationship with the Pre-Raphaelites. Leighton wrote to his friend Emilia Pattison in 1879 that he was “wholly opposed” to the Pre-Raphaelites’ views. Nevertheless, as the art historian Leonée Ormond observes, he often sided with them: “Leighton’s conception of style was totally different from the laboriously realistic tenets of Pre-Raphaelitism, but he shared their passion for nature, and something of their poetic realism. Like them he was utterly opposed to most of the narrative conventions of early Victorian art, and eager to proclaim more significant aesthetic truths.”<sup>15</sup> Leighton himself summarized the paradoxical nature of this relationship in a letter to the poet Robert Browning: “I am hand-in-glove with all my enemies the Pre-Raphaelites.”<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to *Cimabue’s Madonna*, a celebratory festival that takes place outdoors in the bright Italian sunshine, *The Reconciliation* depicts the dark and somber Capulet burial vault, which has unexpectedly gained the bodies of Romeo and Juliet. Immediately before the scene that Leighton depicts, Romeo had ingested poison, believing Juliet to be dead; Juliet, on awakening and discovering Romeo’s lifeless body, had stabbed herself with Romeo’s dagger. *The Reconciliation* ostensibly represents the conclusion of this tragedy, an exchange between Montague and Capulet, the fathers of the deceased lovers:

CAPULET.                    O brother Montague, give me thy hand:  
    This is my daughter’s dowry, for no more  
    Can I demand.

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<sup>14</sup> Rossetti to Allingham, May 11, 1855, quoted in Rhys, *Frederic Lord Leighton*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> Ormond, *Lord Leighton*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Leighton to Browning, 1879, quoted in *ibid.*

MONTAGUE.           But I can give thee more:  
                           For I will raise her statue in pure gold;  
                           That while Verona by that name is known,  
                           There shall be no figure at such valuation  
                           As that of true and faithful Juliet.<sup>17</sup>

The focus of Leighton's painting, despite its title, is the lifeless bodies of Romeo and Juliet, not the reconciliation of their fathers. The bright white of Juliet's flowing dress immediately captures the viewer's attention, and Montague's gesture further directs the viewer to the bodies lying in the foreground of the painting. Romeo, his face already gray from death's touch, lies with his arm falling to his left side, leading the viewer's eye to the empty sheath that had housed the dagger Juliet used to end her life: "this dagger hath mista'en—for, lo, his house is empty on the back of Montague—and mis-sheathed in my daughter's bosom!" Juliet, only recently deceased, as indicated by the slight blush in her cheeks, lies with her arms wrapped around Romeo's head.

In the drapery of Juliet's sheer white dress, Leighton shows his mastery of form and color, an effect further heightened by the folds of mauve and yellow robes at Juliet's feet, which comprise the prostrate form of Juliet's mother, consumed by grief. Juliet's white dress reveals no blood, which places the emphasis on her purity and innocence rather than on her violent death. The red of the blood that the viewer might expect to see on her stabbed body is instead assigned to the costumes of the fathers and of Paris, suggesting their responsibility for the tragedy. On the left of the composition and almost hidden in the darkness, curious townspeople gossip about the tragic events. In front of them, Friar Laurence, wearing a brown cowl and a long, white beard,

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<sup>17</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act V, Scene III (Digireads.com publishing, 2015), 116. All quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* are from this act and scene, unless otherwise noted.

kneels on the ground and raises his hands in supplication; from the gesture we infer that it was his ill-considered solution to the plight of Romeo and Juliet that ultimately led to their deaths, for which he must now seek God's forgiveness. In the center of the composition, as the painting's title suggests, Montague and Capulet grasp hands. They stand before Escalus, the Prince of Verona, who is trying to get an accurate account of the night's sorrowful events. In the background, illuminated only by the soft light of the torches on the right, a grated window and a small opening allude to the space beyond the tomb. The use of light to selectively illuminate the scene recalls the tenebrist paintings of Caravaggio and his followers, which Leighton would surely have seen in Rome--although, as Christopher Newall observes, Leighton did not achieve the same success: "The obvious manipulation of the light source, as well as the too-carefully orchestrated range of gestures, have made the effect melodramatic."<sup>18</sup>

Although *Cimabue's Madonna*, clearly meticulously planned, appears to represent a spontaneous moment in the procession, *The Reconciliation* looks entirely artificial: the scene looks staged, like a play, with a dramatic architectural backdrop and a spotlight illuminating the leading characters. As Newall observes, "the artificiality of the lighting heightens the sense that one is witnessing a performance rather than a scene from life. The foreground figures seem to glow luminously, while the central group is seen in half-light, and the remaining part recedes into shadowy obscurity: the blocked-out and compositionally unimportant background is exactly like that of a stage set . . . Leighton has offered a finale to a play, with all the protagonists present for the final curtain fall, rather than a scene of human tragedy."<sup>19</sup> Leighton's decision to

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Newall, *The Art of Lord Leighton* (London: Phaidon Press, 1990), 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

construct such a stage for his *Reconciliation* was likely influenced by his friendship with the actresses Fanny Kemble (1809-1893) and her sister Adelaide Sartoris. As part of their circle in Rome, Leighton would have attended the theater often, which may have caused him to envision this scene not as an illustration of the play's content, but as a theatrical performance.<sup>20</sup>

In his conception of *The Reconciliation*, Leighton remains true to Shakespeare, as though reluctant to compete with the play he considered to be “an exhaustively finished work of art.” Shakespeare built the final scene in the Capulet tomb around the theme of light and darkness. He repeatedly employs language that emphasizes the contrast between light and dark, the seen and the unseen. Darkness represents ambiguity—all the questions the characters have about the occurrences in the tomb—and light represents clarity, which comes only at the end, when everyone has spoken. Drawn to an unexpected light in the vault, the Capulets, Montagues, Friar Laurence, and other parties have stumbled into the dark tomb. They are confused; they must, as the Prince states, “clear these ambiguities.” Leighton accordingly plays with light and darkness in his pictorial rendition, calling on the techniques of the old masters to attempt to overcome the challenges of portraying shadows and ambiguous space. The lighting of the foreground appears to radiate from Juliet's body rather than any natural light source, consistent with Shakespeare's text: on discovering the lifeless body of Juliet, Romeo says, “For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes this vault a feasting presence full of light.” Leighton's limited use of light creates a sense

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<sup>20</sup> A letter that Leighton wrote to his mother in 1854 testifies to his interest in Shakespeare and performance: “I don't remember whether I told you that some little time back Mrs. Sartoris gave some tableaux and charades in which your humble servant co-operated; the whole thing was, I believe, very successful. The greatest treat I have had lately has been hearing Mrs. Kemble read on different occasions Julius Cæsar, Hamlet, and part of Midsummer Night's Dream; I need not tell you how delighted I was.” While clearly interested in Shakespeare, it is unclear if Leighton ever heard Kemble read *Romeo and Juliet*. Leighton to his mother, April 29, 1854 in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 146.

of gloom, as Leighton was well aware, writing to Steinle, “The small picture is so dark in effect, that it would be impossible to photograph it.”<sup>21</sup>

In addition to referencing the major themes of the play, Leighton incorporates small details from the text. When Paris enters the tomb, for example, he brings flowers for Juliet: “Sweet flower, with flowers the bridal bed I strew.” Leighton shows these flowers on the floor of the crypt, in front of the marriage-bed turned death-bed. And if the handshake between the two fathers falls flat in *The Reconciliation*, that may also parallel the text: the gesture can do little to fix the wrongs that drove Romeo and Juliet to suicide, just as the statue of Juliet “in pure gold” that Montague promises to erect in her honor means little in the face of the girl’s tragic death.

A watercolor of the same scene completed in 1854 (Fig. 4) shows that Leighton spent at least a year working out the style and composition of this painting. This smaller version was probably a study for the oil, though it is executed in an entirely different color palette; it also includes more details and looks more like a fresco than a watercolor painting. Like the oil painting, the sketch focuses on the deceased bodies of Romeo and Juliet, with her bright white dress drawing the viewer in, and his father directing the viewer to the bodies with his arm. The arrangement of the figures is almost identical in the sketch and the painting, as is the combination of indoor and outdoor space. But if the composition is the same, the lighting in the sketch is completely different: it looks like daytime in the tomb rather than minutes before dawn. In the morning light, the ambiguity and confusion featured in the Shakespearean text is lost; instead, the viewer can make out nearly every detail in the work without effort. By changing the lighting and brilliance in the final version, Leighton forces the viewer to struggle to put the scene together, just as Shakespeare’s characters must work to clear their confusion. Additionally, the

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<sup>21</sup> Leighton to Steinle, March 1, 1855, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 188.

brightness of the sketch did not afford Leighton the opportunity to display his mastery of light and shadow, which was clearly important to him in the final oil painting as it mirrored the play's wording and themes.

Leighton also completed at least three surviving pencil sketches for *The Reconciliation*, and one other color sketch, according to a letter he wrote to Steinle: "Since I last wrote to you I have been fairly industrious on an average. I have now under-painted 'Romeo and Juliet' in grey (grau untermalt), *made both the colour sketches*, and have now fairly got into the over-painting, or rather second under-painting, of 'Cimabue'" (my emphasis).<sup>22</sup> The three pencil sketches allow us to track some of the changes Leighton made between the watercolor and the final oil painting. In the nude chalk study for the bodies of Romeo and Juliet (Fig. 5), the head of Romeo matches the watercolor; however, a later study for that head, based on Vincenzo, a popular Roman model, more closely resembles the one in the final version. The pencil sketches also reveal Leighton's meticulous concern for accurate draftsmanship and perspective: he carefully constructed his composition, from the overall arrangement of the figures (Fig. 6) to the positioning of the bodies (Fig. 5). Even though the interior of the tomb is dark in the final oil painting, making it difficult to discern all the details, Leighton made sure that they were accurate.

Taken together, *Cimabue's Madonna* and *The Reconciliation* represent the range of Leighton's talent. In *Cimabue's Madonna*, the artist demonstrates his ability to paint a light-filled exterior setting, including a natural background and Gothic architectural details. In *The Reconciliation*, Leighton flaunts his ability to play with effects of light and shadow. Ambitious in his youth, Leighton does not avoid challenges—such as how to illuminate a tomb—but tries to use the techniques of the earlier masters to overcome them. Both *Cimabue's Madonna* and *The Reconciliation* reveal Leighton's extensive formal training in the treatment of drapery and the

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<sup>22</sup> Leighton to Steinle, May 29, 1854, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 151.

use of color and demonstrate Leighton's skill, as Newall describes it, in "manipulating and drawing together the elements of a composition by carefully controlling the linear dynamics as well as the spatial distributions."<sup>23</sup> Further, both paintings reference earlier models, such as the processional paintings of Carpaccio and Gentile Bellini for *Cimabue's Madonna*, and Caravaggio's nocturnal scenes in *The Reconciliation*, displaying Leighton's art-historical knowledge, since history paintings were expected to make allusions to great works of the past. Another possible allusion is to Masaccio's fresco *The Tribute Money* (1427), in the Brancacci Chapel of Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, which Steinle had specifically asked Leighton to study.<sup>24</sup> Both works feature a handshake (though in one the gesture is conciliatory and in the other represents a betrayal) and a group of spectators framed by architectural details. The figure of Friar Laurence also recalls earlier art-historical models such as Saint Paul in Titian's *Saint Anthony and Saint Paul the Hermit* (1634) or Saint Jerome in Jusepe de Ribera's *Saint Jerome and the Angel* (1621). For Leighton, it was important to show the fruits of his academic training.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Newall, *Art of Lord Leighton*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 226.

<sup>25</sup> Thanks to Drs. Jean Cambell and Sarah McPhee, Art History Department, Emory University, for suggesting these prototypes.



#### IV. Leighton in a Pre-Raphaelite Context

Leighton's calculated effort to demonstrate his academic training likely resulted in part from the complex artistic climate of the late nineteenth century. Artistic trends in London and Paris (where Leighton exhibited his first two paintings) surely influenced the subject matter and style of *The Reconciliation*. In both cities, academic art, which drew on ancient Classical art, the European tradition, and historical subjects, had long dominated the contemporary art world. The Royal Academy in London and the Salon in Paris were considered the ultimate authorities on public taste and high culture.

Yet perhaps the most important development in British and French painting during the mid-nineteenth century was the emergence of avant-garde movements to counter the authority of these longstanding institutions. In London, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood made its debut in 1849 with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (Tate Britain). As the Pre-Raphaelites entered the public spotlight and gained approval from John Ruskin, a fashionable alternative to the Academic tradition became available. Pre-Raphaelite art is characterized by an obsessive attention to detail, a high color palette, and abundant symbolism. Originally a society of seven men, the Pre-Raphaelites strove to emulate art before the time of Raphael, which they perceived as more genuine than the academic art of their own time. They believed art ought to truthfully represent nature rather than follow academic formulae. In the words of Ruskin:

As far as I can judge of their aim . . . the Pre-Raphaelites intend to surrender no advantage which the knowledge or inventions of the present time can afford to their art. They intend to return to early days in this one point only – that, as far as in them lies, they will draw either what they see, or what they suppose might have been the actual facts of the scene they desire to represent, irrespective of any conventional rules of picture making; they have chosen their unfortunate though not inaccurate name because all artists did this before Raphael's time, and after Raphael's time did not this, but sought to paint

fair pictures, rather than represent stern facts: of which the consequence has been that, from Raphael's time to this day, historical art has been in acknowledged decadence.<sup>26</sup>

In Paris, Gustave Courbet had ushered in a similar rebellion against the Salon with his Realist works, as exemplified by *A Burial at Ornans* of 1849-50. Like *The Reconciliation*, Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* is a large-scale painting (124 by 260 inches)—a size typically reserved for history paintings. However, Courbet challenged the tradition by using that scale to instead depict a scene from ordinary life. Critics did not take kindly to Courbet's subversion of Academic conventions: they detested his elevation of ordinary people to the status of revered figures from classical history and mythology. Before Ruskin came to their defense, the Pre-Raphaelites had endured similar criticism: *The Times* referred to Millais's 1849-50 *Christ in the House of His Parents* (Fig. 7) as "revolting," and Charles Dickens maligned the painting in his *Household Words*:

In the foreground of that carpenter's shop is a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-headed boy, in a bed-gown, who appears to have received a poke in the hand, from the stick of another boy with whom he has been playing in an adjacent gutter, and to be holding it up for the contemplation of a kneeling woman, so horrible in her ugliness that (supposing it were possible for any human creature to exist for a moment with that dislocated throat) she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin shop in England.<sup>27</sup>

This was the artistic world that Leighton hoped to enter when he exhibited *The Reconciliation* at the Exposition Universelle in 1855.<sup>28</sup> As he had not yet found his artistic identity when the Pre-Raphaelites and Realists came onto the scene, Leighton faced a decision

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<sup>26</sup> John Ruskin, quoted in Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 39.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Dickens, *Miscellaneous Papers from 'The Morning Chronicle', 'The Daily News', 'The Examiner', 'Household Words', 'All the Year Round' and Other Sources* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1908), 237.

<sup>28</sup> Courbet's monumental canvas *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life* was rejected by the jury of the 1855 Exposition Universelle, where Leighton's *Reconciliation* was shown.

with their emergence—and even success (by 1855 Millais was already an Associate of the Royal Academy and by 1845 Courbet had won a gold medal at the Salon): would he pursue the Academic tradition perpetuated by the Royal Academy and the Salon and the artistic excellence that it stood for, or would he resist the academic tradition and join the avant-garde movements of London and Paris?

To situate Leighton on this continuum of avant-garde to academic, it is helpful to consider how Shakespearean scenes were treated by mainstream British and French painters and by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, as well as to consider why Leighton decided to paint a scene from Shakespeare at all. By the nineteenth century, Shakespeare had become a national institution, familiar to virtually everyone in England; even children read storybook versions of his plays. According to Jane Martineau's *Shakespeare in Art*, Shakespeare's rising popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries resulted from "a combination of the spread of literacy, the revival of the theatre as a form of entertainment after the Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, and pride in Shakespeare as a national poet and dramatist." It was further increased by the emergence of the actor David Garrick, famous for his roles as Lear, Hamlet, and Richard III, and the rise of illustrated editions of Shakespeare's texts.<sup>29</sup> All this transformed Shakespearean scenes into common subjects for British painting during a period of popularity that began in the early eighteenth century and lasted for nearly one hundred years. During that century, artists could "select, clarify, and elaborate" on specific moments in Shakespeare's works in order to bestow "moral instruction and improvement," as Stuart Sillars remarks.<sup>30</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, Shakespearean subjects in art were in decline due to

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<sup>29</sup> Jane Martineau, et al, *Shakespeare in Art* (London: Merrell Publishers, 2003), 23-25.

<sup>30</sup> Stuart Sillars, *Painting Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 7.

artistic tastes largely prescribed by the Royal Academy. Leighton had his own reservations about painting a scene from Shakespeare, writing in 1854 to his teacher von Steinle that he was reluctant to compete with his viewers' preconceptions:

I must candidly confess that I cannot agree about a complete illustration of the Shakespearian plays, those masterpieces already in existence as exhaustively finished works of art; it seems to me that in literature only those subjects lend themselves to pictorial representation which stand in written work more as suggestion. Subjects perhaps which are provided in the Bible or in mythology and tradition in great variety, or are not already generally in the possession of the minds of the spectators of living plays. (e.g. The Greek Tragedies.) It is for the most part a struggle with the incomparable, already existing complete—which is quite intimidating to my capabilities.<sup>31</sup>

Leighton's decision to paint a scene from Shakespeare is thus more complicated than the mere desire to represent a popular subject. Aware of how his foreign training alienated him from the Royal Academy, Leighton may have wanted to paint a distinctively British scene—few subjects could parallel Shakespeare for such a purpose—even though he ultimately decided to display *The Reconciliation* in Paris rather than London. To appeal to a British audience, Leighton likely looked to the works of Britain's most esteemed artists—the Royal Academicians—for inspiration.

Two Royal Academicians, John Opie (1761-1807) and James Northcote (1746-1831), painted scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* comparable to Leighton's in subject and scale. All three works illustrate the final scene of the play, a "far less popular subject," as Stanley Wells has observed, than the happier, more romantic, early scenes.<sup>32</sup> Northcote's *Romeo and Juliet* (1790) takes place in the burial vault, with Romeo and Paris lying dead and Friar Laurence entering just before Juliet's suicide. Opie chose an earlier scene: Count Paris finding Juliet's apparently

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<sup>31</sup> Leighton to Steinle, 1864, quoted in Lucy Oakley, "Words into Pictures: Shakespeare in British Art, 1760-1900," in *A Brush with Shakespeare, The Bard in Painting: 1780-1910*, ed. Ross Anderson (Montgomery, AL: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1986), 19.

<sup>32</sup> Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare Survey* 49 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 125.

lifeless body in the house of the Capulets. (Leighton would also depict this scene in *The Feigned Death of Juliet* of 1856-58.) If Leighton desired to emulate the style of these Royal Academicians in order to appeal to a British audience, he failed miserably, as even a cursory glance at Opie's or Northcote's paintings suggests. While Opie focuses on the overall emotional effects, ignoring minor details and blurring the faces and drapery in the background, Leighton obsesses over every detail, much in the manner of the Pre-Raphaelites. To remain true to Shakespeare, Leighton rejects the outright theatricality of Opie's version of the scene, instead maintaining the solemn tone of the play's conclusion.

Northcote's *Romeo and Juliet* maintains the same solemn tone but differs from Leighton's in composition and style. Northcote selected a scene of clarity: having discovered Juliet in the Capulet tomb, Friar Laurence holds up his torch, illuminating her white form and the fallen bodies of Romeo and Paris. Although Northcote and Leighton both depict the Capulet tomb, Northcote's interior is small and plain, occupied by only three figures, whereas Leighton's is crowded with figures and expands into the space outside the tomb. Ultimately, Leighton elected to paint a scene distinct from his predecessors, forging his own interpretation rather than conforming to the expectations imposed by older Royal Academicians.

Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), a French Romantic painter whom Leighton had not yet met in 1855, also painted a scene set in the Capulet tomb that was exhibited at the 1855 Exposition Universelle, along with Leighton's *Reconciliation*. Delacroix's *Romeo and Juliet at the Tomb of the Capulets* (Fig. 8) portrays the scene just before the fathers' reconciliation: Romeo discovers Juliet's body and, believing her dead, is driven to suicide. Like *The Reconciliation*, Delacroix's painting received mixed reviews. Théophile Gautier was moved by the work: "The surprise of the tomb can be perceived in the bloodless pallor and staring eyes of

the revived girl who, alas, is soon to sleep the everlasting sleep on Romeo's dead body."<sup>33</sup>

Maxime du Camp, however, was not similarly affected: "The only thing of interest in the painting is a white drape around the young woman's knees. The rest is barely sketched, and fades before the excessive glare of this white patch."<sup>34</sup> That the painting was "barely sketched" could not have been said of *The Reconciliation*, for Leighton took pains to bring his work to a high state of finish. Furthermore, where Delacroix blurs his composition to imbue it with a dreamlike quality, Leighton dramatizes his and maintains a sense of Renaissance order. Peter Whitefield, in *Illustrating Shakespeare*, observes that Delacroix seems to have had "no interest whatsoever in theatrical settings or conventions, only in the expression of inner energy."<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the dramatic setting and theatrical staging are the very things that attracted Leighton to the subject.

While not the most popular source for Pre-Raphaelite subjects, Shakespeare ranked high on the Brotherhood's list of "Immortals"; they even called for his birthday to become a national holiday. But as might be expected, Pre-Raphaelite paintings with Shakespearean themes diverge from those of their academic predecessors in style, if not in subject matter. Because the Pre-Raphaelites drew their primary inspiration from nature, they preferred to depict outdoor scenes, as in John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851–52; Tate Britain) or William Holman Hunt's *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from the Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1851; Birmingham Museum and Gallery). Leighton's *The Reconciliation*, then, despite a similar inspiration, boldly departs from the Pre-Raphaelite model. Leighton creates an artificial, stage-like setting, and emphasizes the dark

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<sup>33</sup> Théophile Gautier, *Le Moniteur*, July 25, 1855, quoted in "Romeo and Juliet at the Tomb of the Capulets," *Musée National Delacroix*, <http://www.musee-delacroix.fr/en/the-collection/paintings/romeo-and-juliet-at-the-tomb-of-the-capulets>.

<sup>34</sup> Maxime du Camo, "Les Beaux Arts à l'exposition universelle de 1855," quoted in "Romeo and Juliet at the Tomb of the Capulets," *Musée National Delacroix*, <http://www.musee-delacroix.fr/en/the-collection/paintings/romeo-and-juliet-at-the-tomb-of-the-capulets>.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Whitefield, *Illustrating Shakespeare* (London: The British Library, 2013), 43.

interiority of the scene by relying on torches for his primary light source, with only one small window to the outdoors.

In 1848, Millais made a sketch of a scene similar in subject to *The Reconciliation* titled *The Death of Romeo and Juliet* (Fig. 9). He never completed the oil painting (or if he did, it has not survived), but the sketch indicates his intentions for the work. Like *The Reconciliation*, Millais's oil sketch shows the lovers dead in the Capulet tomb, but Millais's version lacks the driving action between the two fathers that gives *The Reconciliation* its name. Both Leighton and Millais emphasize the confusion of the scene: in Millais's painting, the figure in the red cap grasps Juliet's neck as if trying to find a pulse, uncertain whether she is dead or alive, and the kneeling figure holds up a vial of poison, apparently piecing together the tragedy that has unfolded. In Leighton's painting, Juliet's cheeks are still rosy with life and the blood from her wound is concealed; the cause of her death is intentionally left unclear. Leighton and Millais heighten this sense of confusion with crowds of onlookers attempting to make sense of the strange light and shouts coming from the Capulet tomb: "The people in the street cry Romeo, some Juliet, and some Paris; and all run, with open outcry toward our monument." Each artist finds a different solution to the problem of representing a chaotic, tragic scene, but in the end their approaches are not so far apart.

Leighton and the Pre-Raphaelites were all Victorian outsiders, although the Pre-Raphaelites chose to challenge the Academy, while the Academy chose to reject Leighton, presumably because of his European training and cosmopolitan background. Yet they were all *fashionable* outcasts, as Tim Barringer explains, veering "between bourgeois and Bohemian."<sup>36</sup> Leighton sought to be accepted by the Academy, yet his work declares independence from both

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<sup>36</sup> Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 21.

academic and Pre-Raphaelite style. A letter of 1855 reveals Leighton's refusal to be pigeonholed in any one genre: denouncing the practice of copying an artistic movement or historical period, Leighton insists that "by dwelling constantly on *an idea of excellence* (not *ideal*, I hate such stuff) irrespective of the *specific mode* in which it is manifested, I have chosen the *juste milieu*," the happy medium.<sup>37</sup> When he finished *The Reconciliation*, Leighton was still young—only twenty-five—and had yet to figure out exactly how his paintings fit into the contemporary art world. Defying classification, Leighton had adopted features of both the academic and the avant-garde to create what Jason Rosenfeld, a prominent historian of Victorian art, has called "novel classicism."<sup>38</sup>

In addition to allowing Leighton to evade categorization, the term "novel classicism" also reflects his views on art. Leighton valued art that was faithful to the art-historical tradition, hence "classicism," yet firmly situated in the present, hence "novel." It was exactly this quality that Leighton admired in Giotto's art. In an 1887 address to the Royal Academy, he said:

The production, both in sculpture and painting, of the middle period of the thirteenth century has a character of transition. In painting, the works, for instance, of Cimabue and of Duccio are still impregnated with the Byzantine spirit, and occasionally reveal startling reminiscences of classic dignity and power, to which justice is not, I think, sufficiently rendered. . . . I see in it, indeed, the tokens of a new life in Art, but little sign of a new artistic form—it is not a dawn; it is an after-glow, strange, belated, and solemn. In the Art of Giotto and the Giottosques, the transformation is fulfilled. It is an art lit up with the spirit of St. Francis . . . . an art fresh with the dew and tenderness of youth, and yet showing, together with this virginal quality of young life, a simple forcefulness prophetic of the power of its riper day. Within the outline of these general characteristics individuality found sufficient scope.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Leighton to his mother, December 1852, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 107.

<sup>38</sup> Jason Rosenfeld, "The Salon and The Royal Academy in the Nineteenth Century," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/sara/hd\\_sara.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/sara/hd_sara.htm) (October 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Leighton to the Royal Academy, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 227-8.



## V. History

Despite the importance of *The Reconciliation* to gaining an understanding of Leighton's early philosophy—his “novel classicism”—the painting is seldom discussed in the literature. The paucity of art-historical scholarship on *The Reconciliation* stems in part from its unusual history. Originally, Leighton created *The Reconciliation* to exhibit at the great Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855, and *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna* at the Royal Academy in London that same season. He discovered, however,

on more accurate calculation, that in order to paint my Cimabue of such a size as to be admissible to the London Exhibition, the figures would be far smaller than my eyes could tolerate: I have therefore reversed the order of things, and am painting it on a large scale for the great Exhibition of Paris (spring, '55), in which all nations are to be represented, and where size is rather a recommendation than an obstacle. My “Romeo” I shall send to London in the same year.<sup>40</sup>

By October 22, 1854, Leighton had changed his mind once again and sent *The Reconciliation* to Paris, perhaps having been misinformed about the Royal Academy size restrictions. Although he considered *The Reconciliation* to be the superior painting, as he had written to his mother in 1855, he acknowledged that *Cimabue's Madonna* would probably prove the more popular.<sup>41</sup>

Ultimately, Leighton's decision to exhibit *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna* at the Royal Academy proved to be the right one, for the work was an immediate success in London. It was purchased on the very first day of the Royal Academy exhibition by none other than Queen Victoria who, like much of the Victorian public, had been immediately drawn to the painting: “There was a very big picture by a man called Leighton,” she wrote in her diary. “It is a beautiful painting, quite reminding one of a Paul Veronese, so bright and full of light, Albert was

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<sup>40</sup> Leighton to his mother, January 19 1854, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 140.

<sup>41</sup> Leighton to his mother, February 19, 1855, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 176.

enchanted with it—so much so that he made me buy it.”<sup>42</sup> Not everyone was as impressed. Among its critics were Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s brother, the art critic William Michael Rossetti, another founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who wrote: “The picture has largeness, but not greatness; style, but not intensity; design rather than thought; arrangement rather than conception: it is individual, not especially original.”<sup>43</sup> More importantly, John Ruskin, the most influential judge of Victorian art, gave the painting a mixed review. Though Ruskin conceded that *Cimabue’s Madonna* was “a very important and very beautiful picture,” he complained that “it seems broken up into bits,” and concluded, “it seems probable to me that Mr. Leighton has greatness in him, but there is no absolute proof of it in this picture; and if he does not, in succeeding years, paint far better, he will soon lose his power of painting so well.”<sup>44</sup>

Much to Leighton’s dismay, Ruskin declared Millais’s Pre-Raphaelite painting *The Rescue* (National Gallery of Victoria) “the only great picture exhibited this year; but this is very great.”<sup>45</sup> Leighton wrote to his mother about Ruskin’s unfavorable comparison:

What Ruskin means by Millais’ painting being “greater” than mine, is that the joy of a mother over her rescued children is a higher order of emotion than any expressed in my picture. I wish people would remember St. Paul on the subject of hateful comparisons: “There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars, for one star differeth from another star in glory.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Cimabue’s Celebrated Madonna Carried in Procession, 1853-55,” *Royal Collection Trust*, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/401478/cimabues-madonna-carried-in-procession-0>.

<sup>43</sup> William Rossetti, *Fine Art, Chiefly Contemporary: Notices Reprinted, with Revisions* (London: MacMillan Company, 1867), 392.

<sup>44</sup> John Ruskin, *The Principal Pictures Exhibited in the Royal Academy* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1855), 26, 28.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Leighton to his mother, 1855, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 234.

Nevertheless, the public seemed to agree with Prince Albert's judgment; as one critic wrote in 1897, the year after Leighton's death, the painting "took the art world by storm in 1855, and has since then more than maintained its reputation."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna* launched Leighton's career and paved the way for many successes to come.

In Paris, *The Reconciliation* fared less favorably. From the start, the fate of the painting had been challenged: because of some blunder by the hanging committee, the painting was exhibited in the Roman section of the gallery instead of the English section, presumably because it had been painted in Rome.<sup>48</sup> Once the exhibition opened, the critical reaction was mixed. Édouard Thierry, reviewing the history paintings at the exhibition, found that the color of the drapery "was lost in the overall darkness of the work."<sup>49</sup> On the contrary, E. de Valette "found harmony in the dominant dark tones and skillfulness of arrangement" but noted "that the principal action of the painting—the fathers' reconciliation—lacked power."<sup>50</sup> The British *Art Journal*, however, reviewed the work kindly: "The subject for this, and it is a fine one, is the reconciliation of the houses of Montague and Capulet over the bodies of Romeo and Juliet. . . . Let us hope that his native country may hear and see more of so promising an artist as Mr. Leighton."<sup>51</sup>

Following its ultimately unsuccessful showing in Paris, Leighton sent *The Reconciliation* to Colnaghi's art gallery in London in hopes that Victoria and Albert might want to buy it, too.

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<sup>47</sup> J. Lection, *The Athenaeum*, Part 1 (New Jersey: Princeton University, 1897), 53.

<sup>48</sup> Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 235.

<sup>49</sup> Édouard Thierry, "Exposition Universelle de 1855," *Revue des Beaux Arts*, 1855, quoted in Steven Kendall, "From Gothicism to Classicism: Transnationalism and the Early Art of Frederic Leighton," PhD diss. (University of California Santa Barbara, 2011), 93.

<sup>50</sup> E. de Valette, *Exposition Universelle de 1855* (Paris: Dubuisson et C., 1856), quoted in Kendall, "From Gothicism to Classicism," 92.

<sup>51</sup> "Exposition Universelle des Beaux Arts' at Paris," *Art Journal* (London) 17 (1855): 202.

Henry Greville, an English aristocrat who was a friend and patron of Leighton, reported to Leighton that

at my suggestion Ad [Adelaide Sartoris] and I rushed off yesterday again to Colnaghi to find out if the Queen or Albert knew of your picture being at his shop; and if not, to ask him to let them know it, if he could do so with propriety. He said he would at once send the picture to B[uckingham] Palace, as he was in the habit of doing other works; though he did not think that it was likely they would buy another picture of yours, he admitted that it might be advantageous to you that they should see it. He again praised the picture greatly, and told us that it was universally admired. My sister prefers it infinitely to “Cimabue” in all respects, but the fact is, the subject is more attractive to English people than the other.<sup>52</sup>

As it happened, Albert appreciated the painting, but did not purchase it, and Greville continued to consult Leighton on the proper course of action. He urged Leighton to leave *The Reconciliation* at Colnaghi’s gallery and not to exhibit it at the Crystal Palace (which had been reconstructed at Sydenham since the Great Exhibition of 1851 and was used as a venue for popular exhibitions). He argued that “a better order of people go to him [Colnaghi] than those who frequent the Crystal Palace,” and Leighton heeded his advice.<sup>53</sup>

*The Reconciliation* did not find a buyer at Colnaghi’s gallery, so it was displayed at the autumn exhibition of the Royal Institution in Manchester in 1856. Greville helped ensure that the painting was well placed there, urging the hanging committee to position *The Reconciliation* favorably: “I have had an answer from Ellesmere’s [Greville’s sister and wife of the Earl of Ellesmere] secretary, to whom I wrote to go and see if your pictures were well hung, to say that the Exhibition only opens in first week of September, but that he has a friend who is an influential member of the hanging committee, and that he will speak to him in favour of yours being put into a good light.” Greville wrote at least twice more to Lady Ellesmere’s secretary to advocate on Leighton’s behalf. While Leighton’s painting was apparently hung well in the end, the gallery

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<sup>52</sup> Henry Greville to Leighton, April 25, 1855, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 252-3.

<sup>53</sup> Greville to Leighton, April 26, 1855, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 254.

lighting was unflattering to the work: after visiting the exhibition in Manchester, Lady Ellesmere wrote that Leighton's pictures were "pretty well placed, but the 'Romeo' is so dark a picture it is difficult to see."<sup>54</sup> Leighton acknowledged these challenges, writing to his mother, "There is, however, not the remotest change of my selling them at Manchester, and I am considering where to show them next. . . . My picture, though not well *seen*, is not particularly badly *hung*, but it can only be seen from a distance, so that the expressions are almost entirely lost; it does not look so well as in my studio."<sup>55</sup>

Even though it did not find a buyer, *The Reconciliation* met with some acclaim in Manchester. One critic described Leighton's depiction of flesh as an "enchancing creation of his mind" that "glows with the rich warm hues of life."<sup>56</sup> Another declared the painting to be "one of the very best, if not the best picture in the exhibition."<sup>57</sup> As in Paris, the *Art Journal* gave the painting a positive review: "Although not an agreeable theme, it has been treated with masterly skill. The faces of the hapless lovers are exquisitely painted. The composition has been carefully and well considered; the drawing is indisputably good."<sup>58</sup>

After Manchester, Leighton tried to sell *The Reconciliation* in Rome, along with *Venus and Cupid* (Private Collection), without success. The painting then traveled to the United States for the *American Exhibition of British Art*, organized by Captain Augustus A. Ruxton, a retired British army officer who, as William Michael Rossetti explained, "had no sort of connexion with fine art or its professors; but felt a liking for pictures, and, having all his time to himself, [had] a

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<sup>54</sup> Greville to Leighton, 1856, 258-9, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 264.

<sup>55</sup> Leighton to his mother, October 14, 1856, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 287.

<sup>56</sup> Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 68n.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> "Royal Manchester Institution: Exhibition of Pictures," *Art Journal*, vol. 2, new series (1856): 319.

wish to come forward in any way that might ultimately promote his fortunes.”<sup>59</sup> Ruxton planned to begin the tour in New York, at the National Academy of Design, and then to take the exhibition to Philadelphia and Boston. The British exhibition included works by Henry Williams Pickersgill, Richard Redgrave, and Joseph Mallard William Turner—all highly regarded Royal Academicians.<sup>60</sup> Though it had a promising opening (at least according to Ruxton, who wrote that he “was congratulated by everyone upon the successful start”), within a week it encountered numerous obstacles that jeopardized its success, among them “bitterly cold” weather with an “unceasing pour of rain.” In addition, an exhibition of French art opened in New York at the same time, drawing potential buyers away from the British exhibition.<sup>61</sup>

*The Reconciliation*, despite having “the best place in the Exhibition,” received harsh reviews from critics in New York, much as it had in Paris.<sup>62</sup> One critic declared it “a frantic and cadaverous ‘disfigurement’ of ‘Romeo and Juliet,’” exhibiting “false sentiment and odious coloring.”<sup>63</sup> Another deemed the work “on the whole a failure from lack of unity and disagreeable color in the principle figures, for the well-painted company of the Capulets and Montagues can add no interest to the group upon the bier.” Nevertheless, this critic acknowledged potential in Leighton’s work: “So noble a failure is better than a trifling success. It is easy to see how reverently that group has been conceived and contemplated. Around these peaceful relics still lingers a tender light from the flame of passion that has fled and left them

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<sup>59</sup> William Michael Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti* (London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906), 264.

<sup>60</sup> N.R. and Rose Madder, “Sketchings,” *The Crayon* 4, no. 10 (October, 1857), 314, accessed March 13, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25527637>.

<sup>61</sup> Roger W. Peattie, ed., *Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2010), 88n.

<sup>62</sup> Leighton to his mother, 1857, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 289.

<sup>63</sup> “Foreign Art: The Exhibitions of the British and French Paintings in New York,” *New York Times* (1857-1922), November 7, 1857, 2.

cold. Over them, if you listen with the same reverence, you will hear no funeral knell, but the sweet ringing of happy marriage bells.”<sup>64</sup>

Ruxton was urged to cancel the exhibition’s showings in Philadelphia and Boston, but when the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Boston Athenaeum offered to pay the expenses, he decided to proceed. Ultimately, Ruxton’s perseverance (or stubbornness) paid off: sales in Philadelphia numbered roughly fifty-six (compared to three in New York), with *The Reconciliation* among them. This arrangement was especially favorable to Leighton, as he wrote to his mother: “Romeo and Juliet and Pan and Venus are by this time exciting (let us hope) the admiration of the citizens of America at the town of Philadelphia. It costs me nothing at all either to send or to fetch, and the percentage is ten per cent. I sent them off the end of last month. . . . Tom Taylor [art critic for *The Times*] is on the committee, and I think the speculation may turn out good, particularly if Mrs. Kemble, who is in America now, takes an interest in them.”<sup>65</sup> The “speculation” did indeed “turn out good”: an American engineer named Joseph Harrison bought *The Reconciliation* for £400, an exceedingly large sale: the second highest price, for R. B. Martineau’s *Spelling Lesson*, was £80, and a version of William Holman Hunt’s acclaimed *Light of the World* sold for just £40.<sup>66</sup> But if Harrison had not bought the painting, Leighton told his mother, it would have still have found a buyer: “Since I last wrote I have had a note from [W. M.] Rossetti, the Secretary of the American Exhibition, giving me a piece of information about my ‘Romeo’ which can’t fail to gratify you. He said that, had my picture not been bought by Mr.

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<sup>64</sup> Brownlee Brown, “Letters on Art: No. XXV. The French Gallery and the Horse Market,” *The Independent* (New York) 9, 465 (October 29, 1857), 1.

<sup>65</sup> Leighton to his mother, September 29, 1857, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 300.

<sup>66</sup> Peattie, *Letters of William Michael Rossetti*, 88.

Harrison, a public subscription would have been opened to procure it for the Academy of Arts at Philadelphia.”<sup>67</sup>

Joseph Harrison (1810-1874), who spent most of his life in Philadelphia, was an unlikely buyer for a painting by a still relatively unknown British artist. Nearly twenty years before he purchased *The Reconciliation*, Harrison had earned a small fortune from developing a new locomotive engine for his firm, Eastwick and Harrison. His design attracted the attention of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, and Harrison traveled to St. Petersburg in 1843 under a contract with the Russian government to engineer a railway between St. Petersburg and Moscow.<sup>68</sup> In St. Petersburg, Harrison’s supervisor was Major George W. Whistler, the consulting civil engineer for the project, and father of the artist James McNeill Whistler, who was at the time training at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts.

Upon returning to Philadelphia with his fortune in 1852, Harrison began purchasing art to decorate the enormous house he had built in Rittenhouse Square, inspired by a palace in Moscow, which, according to Whistler’s mother, Anna, launched the Harrisons “into the fashionable world.” An entire wing of the house, she noted, served as an art gallery.<sup>69</sup> Although the house no longer stands, surviving photographs show “its walls covered with paintings, many of them extremely large, rising in tiers toward the lofty ceilings of large rooms.”<sup>70</sup> While it is impossible to know definitively why he purchased *The Reconciliation*, Harrison probably

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<sup>67</sup> Leighton to his mother, 1858, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 46.

<sup>68</sup> Coleman Sellers, “An Obituary Notice of Mr. Joseph Harrison, Jr.,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 14, no. 94, (1875), 348.

<sup>69</sup> Anna Whistler to James McNeill Whistler, March 23, 1858, in *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, 1855-1903*, edited by Margaret F. MacDonald, Patricia de Montfort and Nigel Thorp; including *The Correspondence of Anna McNeill Whistler, 1855-1880*, edited by Georgia Toutziari, online edition, University of Glasgow, <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence>.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas B. Wainwright, “Joseph Harrison Jr., a forgotten art collector,” *The Magazine Antiques* 102 (October 1972): 660.



intended to hang it in his home. According to the Philadelphia historian Nicholas Wainwright, Harrison had “commissioned paintings of scenes from Shakespeare and English history, all of them large, for he enjoyed dramatic pictures that told a story over broad expanses of canvas,”<sup>71</sup> so *The Reconciliation*, a large, narrative scene from Shakespeare, would certainly have fit Harrison’s tastes. Harrison also purchased works relating to American history: his collection included, among other masterworks, a Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington (now in the National Gallery of Art) and an important work by Benjamin West, *William Penn’s Treaty with the Indians* (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts).<sup>72</sup>

During the 1850s, Harrison further immersed himself in the Philadelphia art world by serving on the Board of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, which may be how he encountered *The Reconciliation*. In 1860, he was elected Director of the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, which suggests that as Harrison settled in Philadelphia, he became even more active in the art scene.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, Harrison was invested in making art more accessible, believing it to have advantageous effects on the public. According to an obituary notice published in 1875:

During Mr. Harrison’s residence abroad he seemed to have noticed with interest the effect of the art galleries on the working people, and when he returned home he at all times advocated the foundation of public art museums open to people at all times, and was active in the establishment of one in our park [The Philadelphia Museum of Art]. He frequently expressed his opinion of the need of art culture in improving the taste of artisans and rearing among us competent designers. An appreciation of the beautiful prompted him to collect about him many paintings and other works of art, which served to beautify the home he soon built for himself in his native city.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Wainwright, “Joseph Harrison,” 660.

<sup>72</sup> “Joseph Harrison,” biographical text in *Correspondence of Whistler*. For more information on Harrison’s collecting, see Wainwright, “Joseph Harrison.”

<sup>73</sup> “Philadelphia School of Design for Women, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 27, 1860.

<sup>74</sup> Sellers, “Obituary Notice,” 349.

Leighton shared Harrison's interest in increasing the availability of art to the public, writing to his friend T. C. Horsfall in 1881, "I desire nothing more deeply than to see love and knowledge of art penetrate into the masses of the people in this country—there is no end which I would more willingly serve."<sup>75</sup>

After Joseph Harrison's death in 1874, control of his extensive art collection shifted to his wife, Sarah. By this time in England, Frederic Leighton had become a full member of the Royal Academy and had begun to establish a reputation as a leading figure in the London art world. Possibly aware of Leighton's rising acclaim, Sarah held on to *The Reconciliation* until her own death in 1906. Six years later, forty-two paintings from the Harrison collection—including *The Reconciliation*—were sold from the estate at auction.<sup>76</sup> The identity of the purchaser is unknown, but after the sale, *The Reconciliation* seems to have fallen into the obscurity of an American private collection. Over the next fifty years, while Victorian art remained unfashionable, the painting was all but forgotten. It did not resurface until 1963, when it was donated to Agnes Scott College by an alumna, Neva T. Nelson of Alpharetta. How Nelson

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<sup>75</sup> Leighton to Horsfall, 1881, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 274.

<sup>76</sup> According to *Treasures of American Art*, cited in "Harrison, Sarah, 1817-1906," *The Frick Collection Archives for the History of Collecting in America*, accessed March 13, 2018, <http://research.frick.org/directoryweb/browserecord.php?-action=browse&-recid=6967>, Sarah Harrison owned paintings by: Joseph Ames, A. Bierstadt, Thomas Birch, C.G. Blauvelt, H.J. Boddington, G.R. Bonfield, H. Borgognone, J.G. Brown, John Carlin, Pietro Carlini, J.W. Casilear, J. Cawse, V. Chuilly, Thomas Cole, Sidney Cooper, J.F. Cropsey, D. Cunliffe, W. Davis, A.F. De Braekeleer, Laurent De Buel, M.F.H. De Haas, Henri Delattre, F. De Vos, K. Dorner, Thomas Doughty, H. Dupray, J. Duvaux, T.E. Duverger, William Etty, A. Everson, J.P. Fauvelet, William H. Furness, S.R. Gifford, R. Gignoux, A. Gryef, J. Hamilton, W.M. Hart, Charles Herbsthoffer, G. Hertzfel, F. Hiddemann, Ernest Hildebrandt, Angelica Kaufmann, William C. Knell, W. Koekkoek, C. Krieghoff, C.J. Kuwassig, Jr., C.J. Juwassig, Sr., G.C. Lambinet, Louis Lang, Anna M. Lea, Sir Frederic Leighton, E. Leutze, Emile Levy, Edmund Lewis, J.W. Lindlar, Charles Lucy, E. D. Merchant, W. Sanford Mason, Edward H. May, H. Merius, A. Miller, C. Monginot, J.C. Montalant, Frantz Moormans, Edward Moran, Thomas Moran, W. Moritz, Gustav Muller, James Nasmyth, V. Nehlig, Jules Hoel, B. Nordenberg, Karel Ooms, T.P. Otter, William Page, C.W. Peale, Rembrandt Peale, J.P. Pool Milne Ramsey, W. Ranney, T.B. Read, H.E. Reyntjens, F. De B. Richards, W. F. Richards, John Robertson, H.D. Roszczewski, P.F. Rothermel, C. Schermer, Ad. Schreyer, Christian Schuessele, Willam Shayer, J. Russell Smith, Xanthus Smith, C. Springer, Gilbert Stewart, Thomas Sully, A.F. Tait, J. Van Der Waaden, Emile Van Marcke, Eugene Verboekhoven, Otto Von Thoren, Vraken, Otto Weber, Paul Weber, E.H. Wehnert, Richard Westall, Sir David Wilkie, B. Wittkamp, A. Woodside. Sculpture included works by Sarah Ames, Edward S. Bartholomew, A. Carrier, K. Froschel, J.A. Houdon, and Joseph Mozier.

acquired the painting is yet to be discovered. Born in 1914, she may have bought the painting herself from the collector who had acquired it in Philadelphia; it is also possible that her parents purchased the painting from the Harrison estate and bequeathed it to their daughter.

Once at Agnes Scott, *The Reconciliation* hung for some time at Rebekah Scott Hall, a student residence for juniors and seniors, and was later moved to the western wall of the McCain Library Reading Room. In 1969, when the director of the Tate Gallery in London, Sir John Rothenstein, came to Agnes Scott as a visiting professor, he recognized the painting as Leighton's lost masterpiece. Having confirmed the painting's identity, Rothenstein revealed the work's market value to the College, which had been completely unaware of the painting's worth. From 1963 to 1999, students, faculty, and visitors to Agnes Scott became acquainted with *The Reconciliation*. While in the possession of the college, the painting was once lent to a traveling exhibition, *Victorian High Renaissance* (1978-79), organized by the Manchester City Art Gallery and shown in Manchester, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and The Brooklyn Museum.<sup>77</sup> By then, Victorian paintings were being avidly sought by collectors, and *The Reconciliation's* value had risen steadily. According to Donna Sadler, an art history professor at Agnes Scott, the College was not prepared to house and secure such a valuable asset. While at Agnes Scott, the painting had been insured for \$200—an absurdly small amount for a work with an estimated value in 2002 of \$1,600,000 to \$3,200,000.<sup>78</sup>

In 1999, Agnes Scott College decided to sell *The Reconciliation*, ostensibly to raise funds for the Department of Art and Art History. “As much as I wanted to see the College build a

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<sup>77</sup> The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, *Victorian High Renaissance* (London: Lund Humphries, 1978), 100-101. *The Reconciliation* is no. 38 in the catalogue.

<sup>78</sup> Personal interview with Donna Sadler, October 17, 2017. The estimated value of the work was provided in Mark Lewis, Charlotte Seifen, and Kimberly Schmidts, “Treatment Report, Lord Frederic Leighton, *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and the Capulets Over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet*, 1853-55,” High Museum of Art Regional Conservation Center, Atlanta, GA, February 19, 2002, 1.

museum to properly house the original,” wrote Sadler, “I also knew that this just wasn’t feasible. That’s essentially when we decided to prepare the painting for sale.”<sup>79</sup> Christie’s, the auction house entrusted with the sale, provided a different reason, claiming that “following the recent renovation and expansion of the library there is no longer an appropriate setting to display the painting.”<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, Christie’s provided Agnes Scott with a high-quality, full-scale, framed copy to hang in its place—a copy that hangs there still, and from a distance can easily be mistaken for the original.

Sadler sent *The Reconciliation* to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta for an evaluation, and the painting then traveled to the Williamstown Art Conservation Center in Massachusetts, where the conservation took place. The conservation report reveals that the painting suffered from several tears and discolored patches, which were repaired; fortunately, the overall damage was not extensive, and a new support system for the painting was fabricated to prevent future harm.<sup>81</sup> Afterward, the painting returned to New York, where it had made its debut in the United States almost one hundred and fifty years earlier. There, *The Reconciliation* was displayed at Christie’s in Rockefeller Plaza before being shipped to London, where the dealers thought it was more likely to find a buyer.

The first auction in London, “Important British Art,” took place on November 27, 2002. It was unsuccessful: *The Reconciliation* did not reach the minimum sale price of £1 million (\$1,600,000). As a result, the work was lent to an exhibition, *Shakespeare in Art*, appropriately held at the Palace of the Sixteen Diamonds in Ferrara, just fifty miles southeast of Verona, where

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Lee Dancy, “The Mystique of the ‘Lord Leighton,’” *Agnes Scott: The Magazine* (Fall 2003), 29.

<sup>80</sup> “British Art Week at Christie’s,” *Artdaily.org*, accessed March 13, 2018, <http://artdaily.com/news/2979/British-Art-Week-br-at-Christie-s#wmqumd--mui>.

<sup>81</sup> Lewis, Seifen, and Schmidts, “Treatment Report,” February 19, 2002.

Leighton had set his scene. In that exhibition, which ran from February 16 to June 25, 2003, *The Reconciliation* was once again displayed in a Pre-Raphaelite context, hanging among works on Shakespearean themes by Millais and Holman Hunt. Upon its return to London, *The Reconciliation* was included in another exhibition, *Leighton in Focus: The Canvas of Many Feet*, at the Leighton House Museum. Coming full circle, *The Reconciliation* was displayed there beside *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna*—Leighton's first great masterpieces reunited, having traveled drastically different paths to arrive at Leighton's former home. Just after Leighton sent his introductory works to London and Paris, he had predicted they might return someday. "Your letter reached me just as I was driving the last nail into the coffin of my large picture," he wrote to his father, "the small had been disposed of in like manner the day before. Delighted as I am to have got them at last off my hands, yet I felt a kind of strange sorrow at seeing them nailed up in their narrow boxes; it was so painfully like shrouding and stowing away a corpse, with the exception, by-the-bye, that my pictures may possibly return to my bosom long before the Last Judgment."<sup>82</sup>

Immediately after *Leighton in Focus* closed, *The Reconciliation* was purchased by an unidentified private collector in London for over one million dollars, and removed from the public eye once more.<sup>83</sup> The collector was described by Mary Brown Bullock, then president of Agnes Scott College, as "a merchant in Britain who prefers to remain anonymous at this time. . . . We understand he will display the painting in his home."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Leighton to his father, Dr. Frederic Septimus Leighton, March 2, 1855, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 181.

<sup>83</sup> Christie's, *Important British Art*, Sale 6666, London, November 27, 2002, lot 21.

<sup>84</sup> Dancy, "Mystique of Leighton," 28.

## VI. Conclusion

In *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and the Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet*, Frederic Leighton attempts to reconcile the academic and the avant-garde. As a result, the painting defies easy classification. He was experimenting with this work, as young artists do, drawing on a universally accessible scene: what could have been more crowd-pleasing than a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*? Although he was eager to develop his own style, separate from that of his mentors and predecessors, he recognized the importance of learning from their successes: to become great, Leighton believed, an artist must first understand the old masters. “In order to reach the same altitude, the young artist must proceed in the same manner as his exemplars, and must endeavor so to direct his studies that he, according to his gifts, may achieve a similar result. He who would fill his threshing-floor must not *glean*, but rather he must *sow* that he may richly harvest; he who would have rare fruits all his life must plant and cherish the tree; even so should the young artist seek to plant a tree the normal fruit of which is called ‘artistic perfection.’”<sup>85</sup>

Even that early in his career, Leighton’s paintings and letters reveal his views on art, which remained relatively stable for the duration of his career. For Leighton, art was constantly evolving. As times changed, he believed, art should adopt to its new environment. These developments, however, should not be radically different from the successful art of earlier periods. Instead, the new generation of artists was challenged to modify the techniques and styles of the old masters to suit their own times. In this way, Leighton conceptualized art as “a living thing,” as he wrote in 1879: “It is still the corner-stone of my faith that *Art* is not a corpse, but a living thing, and that the highest respect for the old masters, who are and will remain supreme,

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<sup>85</sup> Leighton to Steinle, October 22, 1854, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 156.

does not lie in doing as they did, but as men of their strength would do if they were now (oh, derisim!) amongst us.”<sup>86</sup> This summation of art-historical traditions and contemporary influence defines Leighton’s “novel classicism,” which is easily observed in *The Reconciliation*’s combination of early sources and contemporary theatrical style.

The emphasis that Leighton places on the academic training of his predecessors separates his views from those of the Pre-Raphaelites, his main rivals. While Leighton created beauty through academic discipline and the selection of important details, the Pre-Raphaelites sought truth from nature in general effects and the inclusion of nearly *every* detail: they did not selectively capture nature as Leighton did, but tried to depict it exactly as it appeared, in every particular. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, however, Leighton looked to nature for inspiration. He wrote to his friend John Hanson Walker, “I think you will do wisely in going to the Isle of Wight to paint landscape; the danger of copying the old masters too exclusively, as you have been forced to do lately, is that one is apt to fall into mannerism by trying to see Nature with the eyes of others; painting landscape direct from Nature is the best possible corrective against this tendency.”<sup>87</sup>

The artistic philosophy of both Leighton and the Pre-Raphaelites, though made manifest in different styles, is perhaps best described in one word: faithfulness. In *The Reconciliation*, Leighton did not conform to either the Pre-Raphaelite or the academic style. Instead, he was faithful to Shakespeare’s text, which Leighton considered the supreme authority for this subject, just as he considered nature the ultimate authority when painting landscape. Although Leighton’s style evolved as his career advanced—with his election as President of the Royal Academy, Leighton was free to experiment, no longer pressured to conform to the Academy’s standards of beauty—he remained true to the principle of faithfulness.

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<sup>86</sup> Leighton to an unnamed friend, 1879, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 230.

<sup>87</sup> Leighton to John Hanson Walker, undated, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 274.

While not as successful as *Cimabue's Madonna* by conventional standards—that painting, after all, was purchased by the Queen of England—*The Reconciliation* does succeed in faithfulness. It may have been for this reason that Leighton favored the painting, as did the critic John Ruskin, who shared Leighton's appreciation for artistic truth. Leighton wrote to his father in 1856, "Ruskin does not much like the picture, and prefers the 'Romeo' considerably."<sup>88</sup> It is within this context that the art critic Brownlee Brown's review of *The Reconciliation* is best appreciated. In 1857, Brown wrote of the painting that "so noble a failure is better than a trifling success."<sup>89</sup> Even though *The Reconciliation* may not have received the same level of popularity and renown as *Cimabue's Madonna*, Leighton's faithfulness to the subject renders the painting "noble" at worst, and, at best, one of the greatest works of his career.

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<sup>88</sup> Leighton to his father, 1856, in Barrington, *Life, Letters of Leighton*, 248-9.

<sup>89</sup> Brown, "Letters on Art," 1.



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## VIII. Figures



Figure 1. Frederic Leighton, *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna is Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence*, 1855. Oil on canvas, 87 x 205 inches. The National Gallery, London; on loan from Her Majesty the Queen.



Figure 2. Frederic Leighton, *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet*, 1855. Oil on canvas, 70 x 91 inches. Private collection.





Figure 3. Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Virgin and Child enthroned, surrounded by angels* (known as Rucellai Madonna), ca. 1285. Tempera on wood, 117 x 114 inches. The Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 4. Frederic Leighton, *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets Over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet*, 1854. Watercolor, 15  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 20  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches. Yale Center for British Art; Paul Mellon Fund, B1976.1.56.



Figure 5. Frederic Leighton, *Study for the figures of Romeo and Juliet*, c. 1854. Chalk, approximately 16.5 x 22.5 inches. Royal Academy Library, London.



Figure 6. Frederic Leighton, *Composition study*, c. 1853-54. Pencil and color, approximately 15 x 21 inches. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt, Germany.





Figure 7. John Everett Millais, *Christ in the House of his Parents*, 1849-50. Oil on canvas, approximately 34 x 55 inches. Tate Britain, London; purchased with assistance from the Art Fund and various subscribers 1921, N03584.



Figure 8. Eugène Delacroix, *Romeo and Juliet at the Tomb of the Capulets*, 1855. Oil on canvas, approximately 14 x 10 ½ inches. Musée Delacroix, Paris.



Figure 9. John Everett Millais, *The Death of Romeo and Juliet*, 1848. Oil on millboard, approximately 6 ½ x 10 ½ inches. Manchester Art Gallery, England, bequeathed by George Beatson Blair, 1947, 1947.89.