

Blowing in the Wind:

Leighton and Drapery

Daniel Robbins, Senior Curator, Leighton House



In 1889, writing in *The Magazine of Art*, Annie Williams identified Frederic Leighton as ‘the great English master of drapery’. Partly this came as a response to his technical skill in representing every folded and rippled surface but it was also recognition that Leighton had found a method of fully exploiting the ‘expressive’ potential of drapery. That same year, Leighton exhibited *Greek Girls Playing at Ball* (1889; Dick Institute, Kilmarnock) at the Royal Academy. Depicting two women on a raised terrace in the act of playing catch, the picture was a striking example of the artist’s pronounced and particular treatment of drapery. Painstaking in the rendering of concerted folds, elaborate gatherings and flowing torrents of fabric, at the same time these draperies are at the very least ‘improbable’ in both their arrangement and in their relation to the figures they enfold and contain. They are the result of precise observation and yet products of the imagination. *Greek Girls Playing at Ball* was only the most recent and striking example of Leighton’s preoccupation with the representation of costume and drapery. Evident in his earliest pictures, it took on an increasingly expressive quality – a ‘life of its own’ – from around 1870.

◀ **Blown Away/light blue**

Paper and acrylic, 2011
26 x 62 x 8cm

▶ **Frederic, Lord Leighton**
Study for *Dædalus and Icarus*
composition

Black and white chalk on blue
paper, c1868
24.2 x 20.5cm

Leighton's *Daedalus and Icarus* (1870; Faringdon Collection) was one of his earliest works in this manner. Father and son are shown high on a cliff edge as Icarus prepares to launch himself into flight. The large dark blue length of fabric in which he was wrapped has been removed and caught by the wind. Trapped only by his left arm and the edge of his wing, it has flown into an improbable 'Q' shape behind him; a form that it could only hold for an imperceptible instant before the same wind that has lifted it clear of his body causes it to be pinned against his wing or to fly into the distance. As a wind-blown piece of fabric it is singularly unconvincing. Too heavy and solid, it is both animated and entirely motionless. The same could equally be said of the draperies in *Greek Girls Picking up Pebbles by the Sea* (c.1871, Private Collection). A second windswept location causes the draperies to lift and swell not behind or away from the four female figures, but vertically in loops and arches. In *Greek Girls Playing at Ball* the nearer figure, who has just released the ball, is encircled by a spiral of trailing fabric that defies any connection to a throwing action. There is a disconnect in the way her draperies relate to her body. An understanding of why these draperies appear as they do comes in part from an understanding of Leighton's practice.

In the 1880s, through a series of published interviews, Leighton provided detailed descriptions of his method and the processes that lay behind his pictures. To an extent he defined himself by these methods. Leighton would carefully arrange fabric on the floor and tease it into the desired arrangement. Folds were supported by wads of cotton wool beneath. Alternatively, fabric was dipped into a plaster mixture, draped around a lay figure and allowed to solidify once the forms and shapes had been arranged. Large expanses of fabric could be treated in this fashion, supported by the horizontal plain of the surface beneath. Once recorded through

drawn studies, Leighton then replicated the forms of the drapery with great care in the painting itself, but turned what had been a horizontal arrangement onto a vertical plain. This method explains why undulations in the fabric show little deviation from a single dimension and are predominately parallel with the picture plane, scarcely moving backwards or forwards in space. It also confirms that whilst the extravagant forms of Leighton's draperies are truthfully recorded, they are artificially created at the service of Leighton's imagination and the composition in hand.

A second contributory factor was Leighton's habit of making drapery studies and nude studies separately. In the 1880s, selections of his elaborate drapery studies were published for the first time. Previously seen only by callers to his studio in Holland Park, the appearance of these drawings drew attention



to the enormous efforts that Leighton devoted to the careful rendering of drapery. We know that for every nude study, there was apparently at least one corresponding drapery study, with the latter demanding the greater attention and application. This separation of figure and drapery continued into the painting of the picture itself. Figures were painted nude in monochrome and then the draperies added later, also in monochrome, before the application of colour began. So while in theory the pose of the figure should dictate the hang of the fabric, in Leighton's case, the use of lay figures and the treatment of drapery as an element in the composition in its own right, broke or certainly complicated this relationship. For paintings in which the drapery seems to have a life of its own, such as in *Icarus* or *Greek Girls Playing at Ball*, it is because this is how it was conceived and created. *Greek Girls Picking up Pebbles* would not work as a strange, remote, yet balanced and harmonious composition if the figures were indeed being dragged by their draperies across the beach or struggling to prevent them from flying into the distance.

Leighton's use of drapery in these works is then about a layering of truth and artifice in the service of his art. He is not asking us to believe that in these scenarios fabric would loop and flatten in the way it does. Through drapery he is communicating the *idea* of movement, the *idea* of wind certainly, but above all, every fold and form is evidence of his involvement, part of the myriad choices that result in a finished composition. Leighton was concerned less with mirroring nature and more about the creation of a work of art that was true to itself and to his own conception – a curiously modern notion.



- ◀ Frederic, Lord Leighton
Study of Drapery
Black and white chalk on
blue paper
23.6 x 30.9cm

- ▶ Frederic, Lord Leighton
*Study for Greek Girls Picking
up Pebbles by the Sea* (detail)
Black and white chalk on
blue paper, c1870

- ▶ Frederic, Lord Leighton
*Study for Hercules Wrestling
for the Body of Alcestis:
Drapery for Death*
Black and white chalk on
blue paper
40.5 x 28.4cm