

Basic Detail Report



Malin Head, Donegal

Date

1874

Primary Maker

Lord Frederic Leighton

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

26 x 28.7 cm

Description

Landscape painting was an intensely private activity for Leighton, an interest he tended to pursue in solitude when travelling abroad. He rarely showed his landscapes publicly but, in spite of this, the oil sketches and drawings he made recording the natural world were a vital component of his overall practice. Leighton approved of John Ruskin's view that the attentive observation of nature was an essential part of an artist's development and that this kind of study would have a beneficial effect on every aspect of a painter's work. As he grew older, Leighton began to spend more time exploring the landscapes of the British Isles, particularly the Scottish Highlands and the west coast of Ireland. His early landscapes from the 1860s were rigorously painted, often featuring sweeping panoramas and subtle atmospheric effects, but in later life he adopted a more relaxed approach and frequently used his landscape paintings as vehicles for the exploration of pattern and texture. This was sometimes accomplished by taking a close-up view of the subject, as in this image of Malin Head, thereby removing the more peripheral elements of the scene. Christopher Newall has described this sketch as a 'counterpoint of squares and oblique shapes, achieved by the careful manipulation of viewpoint'. Landscape painting allowed Leighton to free himself from the demands of his professional practice. His landscape sketches did not usually inform his full-scale figurative paintings in an obvious way - the sketches completed in the open air in front of the subject have a freshness which is absent from the generalized and idealized landscape backgrounds of his large history paintings. The following extract is taken from 'Frederic Leighton 1830 - 1896', the catalogue which accompanied an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 15th February - 21st April 1996. Cat. 67: Malin Head, Donegal, 1874 (p.173) Leighton was in Donegal at least twice, first in September 1874 and at the end of his life, in September 1895. On the first visit he made several sketches of cliffs in his notebook (Royal Academy, London), briefly describing his itinerary: 'To Donegal, Killibegs - Car to Ballyshee (?) - Carrick'. He recalled Malinmore and Malin Head in a letter to his sister, Alexandra Orr, whom he had persuaded to go to 'the melancholy, treeless wilds.... There is a bit not more than half a mile from Malinmore (to'ards Malinhead), that is, though small, quite Dantesque in its grim blackness', and a sketch of this rocky cleft was to provide the setting for 'Perseus and Andromeda' (cat. 111). He told her to go

towards Malinhead, 'where you must see every little bay, including the silver strand' (Barrington, II, p. 311). Another recommended expedition would take her to Glencolumbkille, site of an early monastery. From these details it is clear that when Leighton spoke of 'Malinhead' he did not mean the well-known peninsula, the most northerly point in Ireland. Apparently, he was referring to Rossan Point, a headland a mile or so outside the village of Malinmore on the west coast of Donegal. Leighton stayed at Mrs Walker's in Malinmore in 1895, telling Emilia Barrington that he was 'enjoying unsociable solitude keenly' in 'this wild and beautiful Ultima Thule' (Barrington, II, p. 325, and Barrington, 1903, p. 22). There are a number of pencil studies of cliffs in Leighton's Donegal notebook at the Royal Academy; an oil sketch of 'Rocks: Malin Head' was exhibited at the Mansion House in London in 1882, and a number of sketches of Malinmore were in the artist's sale (see cat. 105). This sketch reveals Leighton's delight in the effects of colour he found in Donegal, with its green grass, blue sea and stone-blue cloudy sky. The towering brown-grey cliffs, complete with a blow hole and stack, were evidently less threatening on the day when this work was painted than Leighton sometimes found them. The whole effect is brilliant and fresh rather than dark and malevolent. (Leonée Ormond)