

Spot the differences

Countess Brownlow 1879, by Sir Frederic Leighton President of the Royal Academy



Left is Leighton's preparatory sketch for Adelaide's portrait in the Little Marble Hall.¹ She holds a bunch of crimson roses with imaginably a dog prancing at her feet. She might wear the *white embroidered with gold regular toga sort of thing* as reported by Mrs Gladstone in 1875.

Leighton describes how he would first sketch his figures both clothed and unclothed in black and white chalk.² Then he upscaled those drawings into a single canvas-sized gridded outline on brown paper using nude models, *posed as nearly as possible in the attitude desired ... a true transcript from life.*

Compositional form completed, the faceless sketch in oil colours was created, here around 35.5 x 28 cm, *because the placing of the colours is, of course, of as much importance as the harmony.* Next Leighton laboriously traced the unclothed figure(s) to canvas in monochrome.

Every muscle, every joint, every crease is there, although all this careful painting is shortly to be hidden with the draperies ...

The draperies are now laid with infinite care on to the living model, and are made to approximate to the arrangement given in the first sketch ... then, I have nothing to think of but colour ...

One potential model for this full length portrait is Dorothy Dene, whom Leighton met in 1879 and had a relationship with.³ George Bernard Shaw allegedly took that liaison for his play, *Pygmalion*, later a musical, *My Fair Lady*. Leighton much admired Dorothy's neck; she modelled for his *Bianca*, below, with Adelaide.



Lastly, Leighton added Adelaide's face to the near complete canvas, but not from a photograph. Although he often circulated photos of his work as early as 1855, Leighton believed, *From the moment an artist relies on photography he does no good.*

One striking difference between sketch and canvas is the black object lower right. In the sketch, this resembles a dog complete with shadow. On the completed canvas it moves proper left and is a large black hat with a feather. An 1890 letter to his friend, George Frederic Watts (artist of the 2nd & 3rd Earls Brownlow) implies that Adelaide appreciated her portrait.

¹ Research by Ian Ross, Volunteer, Belton Research Group. Photographed by Ian Ross at The Leighton House Museum, 12 Holland Park Rd, London W14 8LZ

² Barrington R. (1906) *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*. [Volumes I](#) & [Volume II](#)

³ The Telegraph (2014) *Dorothy Dene: Lord Leighton's secret lover?*