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Review of *William Robinson Leigh: Western Artist* By D. Duane Cummins

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William Robinson Leigh: Western Artist. By D. Duane Cummins. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. 204 pp. \$19.95.

In 1979 the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, in collaboration with the University of Oklahoma Press, published Mildred Ladner's useful study of the Montana painter Olaf C. Seltzer, one of Charlie Russell's proteges. Gilcrease director Fred Myers, in a foreword, described this venture as "a harbinger of Gilcrease participation in the maturation of American art and art awareness."

Duane Cummins's *William Robinson Leigh* now follows quickly as the second volume in this series and attests to the seriousness of the Gilcrease commitment—if not to the maturation of American art, then at least to the enhanced understanding and appreciation of Western art and artists. Certainly any scholarly consideration of the life and work of both these men, as well as of others of similar accomplishment, must involve careful attention to the rich visual and archival material at the Tulsa institute.

For William Leigh (1866–1955), the Gilcrease Institute can offer his reconstructed New York studio, 923 of his works (easily the largest single collection), and the bulk of his papers. This remarkable lode has now been effectively mined for the first time by Duane Cummins, a sometime history professor who is presently associated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in St. Louis. All in all, he has done a most creditable job. In tracing the personal history and assessing the achievement of this western artist, he has given us what will be the standard work on Leigh for some time.

Cummins's task was not easy. It was made the more difficult by the fact that his experience

in the discipline of art history appears to be minimal. In consequence he presents a somewhat one-dimensional and untextured delineation of his subject against the artistic milieu of the early twentieth century. His efforts at aesthetic analysis (i.e., of the pictures as art objects as opposed to documents of this or that), when attempted at all, are uncertain and rudimentary.

Part of the problem is Leigh himself. He was a strange man—a loner and fatalist who, in the opinion of the author (whose judgments are graciously temperate), suffered from “an enormous inferiority complex and a near-certifiable paranoia.” Born in West Virginia to embittered parents who had lost nearly everything in the Civil War, he nonetheless managed twelve years of study at the Royal Academy in Munich. With this training, which was far better than that of most artists of the American West, he settled in New York in 1896 to make his career. There he found, to his chagrin and undying resentment, that he could not live off his art alone. For many years he earned his livelihood as a magazine illustrator—an experience among artists by no means unique to Leigh.

He was quick to find scapegoats not only for his private neglect but for what he saw as the general decline in contemporary art. American art was in the hands of the “czars of finance,” whose taste had been corrupted by dealers and critics (the latter merely being painters who had failed) perpetrating “sophisticate garbage and the philosophy of Parisian sewer psychology.” Other artists—among them Thomas Hart Benton and Edward Hopper—had lamented the deleterious impact of France on American art in the early decades of this century, but if it was true they had triumphed over it. And Leigh did, too—by going West. By then he was forty years old, and it is a tribute to his inherent ability and tenacity that he was able to turn his career around.

His West, of course, was not the Great Plains (though he did visit the Dakotas and the high Rockies beyond) but the Southwest. His

favorite subjects were the Native Americans whom he saw there—Navajos, Zunis, Hopis—and he took special satisfaction in depicting them in their habitats and in their daily activities. His goal in these pictures, rather consistently realized, was that which he set for all art: to achieve “force and poignancy . . . by virtue of accuracy.”

Leigh's interest in primitive peoples and unspoiled cultures was the underside of his bias against civilized man. In many ways, he was a latter-day romantic, a cultural primitivist who thought that the world was indeed too much with us and who yearned for a condition in which man could live simply with unabridged freedom in harmony with nature. Though he would have denied it, the impulse that drew him to the Southwest was essentially the impulse that drew supersophisticated French artists to rustic Brittany and that led one of them (Gauguin) to the South Seas.

As a professional artist, Leigh seems to have coveted a conventional success (acceptance by the East Coast establishment), but not until the end of an uncommonly long life did he find it. He was in fact a rather good artist: he always drew well; he knew how to compose a picture; he perceived instantly that the dark impressionism of the Munich school was not suited for paintings of the sun-drenched Southwest; and he keyed his palette accordingly. Quite possibly his best paintings are not his figure studies, which too often are vitiated by traces of late nineteenth-century Idealism, but his semi-abstracted landscapes. These are well represented among the generous sampling of pictures reproduced by Cummins.

The value of the book is augmented by full scholarly documentation, including the recording of abundant manuscript materials. Leigh also had literary aspirations and produced many stories, plays, poems, and essays—few of which were published. There is, however, no checklist of his pictures.

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