Object: Spirit fresco

Place of origin: South Kensington Museum (made)
London (Made)

Date: 1880

Artist/Maker: Leighton, Frederic Lord (artist)
South Kensington Museum (commissioners)

Materials and Techniques: Spirit fresco

Credit Line: Commissioned by the South Kensington Museum

Museum number: SKM.19

Gallery location: Leighton, Room 102, case WN

Public access description
The Museum was founded to promote the ‘industrial arts’ – designed and manufactured objects – by displaying the finest historical and contemporary examples. Leading Victorian artist Frederic Leighton was commissioned to paint two frescos on the theme for the South Court, a vast two-story glass roofed gallery which was then the centrepiece of the Museum. This is the first of two frescos completed by Leighton. The second was ‘The Arts of Industry as Applied to War’ (Museum no. SKM.20). Neither fresco tells a specific story, but both depict the importance of the industrial arts by showing their use during times of war and peace. In the fresco ‘The Arts of Industry as Applied to War’, Florentine noblemen and their servants prepare for battle. The industrial arts are represented by the making of banners, embroidered by a group of women in the foreground, and by the swords and armour made by blacksmiths and worn by the nobles.

Descriptive line
Spirit fresco, ‘The Arts of Industry as Applied to War’, by Frederic Leighton, 1880

Dimensions
Height: 4876.8 mm, Width: 10668.0 mm

Museum number
SKM.19

Object history note
Commissioned by the directors of the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) in 1868. Completed in 1880.

Historical context note
Frederic Leighton was born in Scarborough in 1830, but his family travelled extensively in Europe during his childhood. After receiving an all-round education, he studied art at Frankfurt under Steinle, and at Brussels, Paris and Rome. In 1852 he began to work independently and spent the next three years in Rome.

Leighton’s painting Cimabue’s Madonna carried through Florence (1853-55) was his first major work, and an immediate success. When it was shown at the Royal Academy in 1855, it was bought by Queen Victoria.

Leighton settled in London in 1859, though he frequently travelled abroad. His cosmopolitan knowledge of languages, literature and music marked him out as an exceptional figure in Victorian London, and he rose rapidly through the art establishment. He was elected ARA in 1864 and RA in 1868, and attained the Presidency of the Royal Academy in 1878. He was the most influential of the Victorian Classical painters, and an important exponent of the ‘subjectless’ painting associated with the Aesthetic Movement, in which pictorial narrative is suppressed in favour of beauty and atmosphere. Leighton died on 25 January 1896 and is buried in St. Paul’s Cathedral.

In the 1870s and 1880s Leighton was commissioned by the South Kensington Museum (as the V&A was then known) to paint two large lunette paintings for each end of the South Court of the museum. The Arts of Industry as applied to War was painted between 1878 and 1880, and The Arts of Industry as applied to Peace was painted between 1884 and 1886. The complex story of the commission is told in Richard Ormond’s book Leighton’s Frescoes in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1975, the full text of which is included here in the bibliographic field.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1331651/the-arts-of-industry-as-spirit-fresco-leighton-frederic-lord/